Transcript for “Knowing Nature through Religion: A Focus on Christianity” Chapter of Podcast

Total Audio Length: 8 minutes, 12 seconds

Transcript:

Play Music: Charles Gounod, Ave Maria (Mediation) fades in at 0:00; music gradually becomes louder and than fades out at 0:16, light and relaxing melody of string instruments

Bethany: Hello and welcome to Knowing Nature Through Religion. My co-host, Michael, and I, Bethany, will discuss how nature is involved in every aspect of religion including scripture, spiritual values, and the actions of spiritual organizations.

Michael: Today we will focus on whether or not humans are a part of nature or separate from it. We will be looking at this issue from a Christian prospective. Personally, I think that religion is a great avenue through which to know nature. Our first relationship between Christianity and nature can be found in the Bible. In Genesis, the Bible talks about how God made the Garden of Eden for man and how man was supposed to care for that paradise.

Bethany: I disagree. The Garden of Eden is one connection between nature and religion, but what about God’s destruction of nature in the story of Noah and the Ark? In the novel, A Moral Climate, the author Michael Northcott says that it is a tale of “human survival in the face of climate related catastrophe, but also a moral tale in which the flood is seen as divine punishment”. So tell me Michael, why would God want to destroy the nature that he created?

Michael: It has to do with man’s involvement in nature. I know what you are going to say.

Bethany: What? What am I going to say Michael?

Michael: You’re going to say that Roman Catholicism, according to Nature in Roman Catholic Tradition, is firmly “rooted in a dualistic worldview…this tradition conceptually separates nature, humankind, and the divine.”

Bethany: Okay, you read my mind, in fact, that text also states that there is a “sharp conceptual distinction between “nature” and “society””. There you have it, religion and nature are separate. Typical western ideals of nature are “dominated by a rigid conceptual separation between mind and matter, and nature and society.

Michael: Sure, some Catholics believe that “mankind should dominate nature” and “that man has absolute rule.” However, “humankind’s rule over nature must contain a moral element and be governed by reason and respect. Nature is understood to be vulnerable; it is not insensitive to the destructive activity of man. Nature is part of God’s creation and has a specific purpose in his
plan for mankind and the world, therefore nature should be respected. The earth belongs to God, not to man. Nature is viewed as a concrete and ubiquitous reminder of his power and wisdom. Nature is a very important part of Christian tradition. Christianity regards wild and untouched nature as an abode of divine presence. In fact, some Christian imagery depicts a type of paradise where humans and animals live in perfect harmony.

*End music: Charles Gounod, Ave Maria (Mediation) fades out at 2:30*

*Play music: Nature sounds, composed by Bethany Rack fades in at 2:32, music consists of flutes, birds chirping and waterfall*

**Bethany:** Alright, you have ONE good point, I’ll admit, St. Francis stressed that nature, as God’s creation, is a place where human beings can become close to God. Unspoiled nature brings humans closer to nature than written texts. But if nature is such an important and intricate part of Christianity, then how can we explain natural disasters and the destruction of nature?

**Michael:** There are a few ways to explain natural disasters. Christians believe that human beings should repair all the damage that they have caused because they defied God. In the case of Noah, humans angered God so he punished them with 40 days of rain and flooding. The same idea holds true today; Christians think that it is their moral duty to repair the earth from the effects of global warming.

**Bethany:** Michael, do not forget about the question of if global warming is an effect of overall climate change or if it is an act of God. This is a question of Darwinism. Some of Darwin's followers were attracted to Darwin's theory precisely because they saw it as helping overthrow the Christian case for divine creation.

**Michael:** But Christianity thinks of nature, as more than some theory of Darwinism, it is a spiritual connection to the environment. Wendell Berry said in his book *Christianity and the Survival of Creation* that religion “honors nature as a great mystery and power, as an indispensable teacher, and the inescapable judge of all work of human hands.”

**Bethany:** Okay, you could agree with Berry and see the connection between God and nature when he says “We will discover that God made not only the parts of Creation that we humans understand and approve but all of it”.

**Michael:** Thank you! See! Nature is part of religion. Even Thoreau expresses this idea of connection in Walden when he says “The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history” Thoreau expresses that nature is alive, part of everyday life, and still connected to every person, just as religion is.

**Bethany:** With the idea that the earth is ever changing and very alive, it’s obvious that Christians have a very large voice in preventing climate change. Christians realize that “In exercising guardianship we must ever be mindful of the capacity of human beings to damage, defile and destroy,” as said in the book Evidence of Denial: The Case of Climate Change. This
“guardianship” is shown through a relationship with nature that has merged with environmental concerns and that form what is commonly called “ecotheology”.

**Michael:** Exactly! “Fundamental to ecotheology are the two notions that God has a certain presence in nature and that mankind has an affinity with all of God’s creatures. Ecotheology has two main ideas, the first is that “the world faces a major ecological crisis that seriously threatens God’s creation and the existence of mankind,” the second is that Christians should act “to solve environmental problems”.

**Bethany:** Well I guess, in a way, nature doles out its own forms of punishment for destruction. Nature rewards those who respect it and “strikes devastating blows” to people who abuse it. “[N]atural phenomena, such as violent storms, hail-showers, landslides, and earthquakes, are menacing to humans. Such phenomena have been related to the supernatural in two principal ways. “According to one view, they are directly governed by God in order to punish human beings for their sins or disobedience, or to put their faith on trial.”

**Michael:** Sure, but natural disasters are not just caused by the supernatural. “A more modern view, expressed today by the Roman Catholic Church, is that certain natural catastrophes are caused by man’s misuse, and thus betrayal, of the God-given purpose of nature.” This view supports the idea that religion, nature, and humans are all intertwined.

*End music: Nature sounds, composed by Bethany Rack fades out at 5:45*

*Play music: Charles Gounod, Ave Maria (Mediation) fades in at 5:48*

**Bethany:** The answer lies on who has power in our universe. Humans have a certain kind of rule over the rest of the earth. We have a powerful influence over plants, animals and their habitats, both locally and globally. We exercise it daily through agriculture, urban development, resource-use and other forms of manipulation characteristic of modern, industrial civilizations.

**Michael:** Christians fulfill a moral obligation to God by caring for the environment. By knowing nature, Christians are able to reflect on their lives and work towards self-enhancement.

**Bethany:** The movement toward caring for the environment has brought up the issue of how man is related to nature. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that God created everything for human beings. This may suggest that human beings have ultimate power, leading them to control and treat other parts of nature without much regard. Thus ignoring the fact that the entire creation, humans and non-humans, have their intrinsic values, purposes, and integrity. This abuse of power could have caused the ecological crisis that we face today.

**Michael:** However, you have to admit that “beginning with the early 1990s, Christians of all persuasions have become increasingly involved in caring for the earth.” “In recent times Christianity has emphasized the stewardship of human beings in their relationship with other creatures.”
Bethany: The main argument of many of the environmental movements is that we need to re-think how we live in a world that is God’s creation.

Michael: Yet, some still believe that religion diminishes nature by stripping the “mystery from nature.” However, I think that the creation of nature by God only adds to the sublime feeling that nature can evoke.

Bethany: Right, even though some people believe that religion and nature are totally separate and should stay that way, many people believe that the connection between nature and religion can help strive for environmental progress. I totally see where you’re coming from now Michael.

Michael: Well Bethany, I hate to say it, but I told you so. If you know nature through religion, particularly Christianity, you will know it from a variety of perspectives. In fact, Reverend Hendrinkson challenged us to find any religion that accepts the destruction of nature by man.

Charles Gounod, Ave Maria (Mediation) starts getting louder at 7:43

Bethany: Religion brings us closer to nature. We are part of it. I don’t think we have time for EVERY religion but one thing is clear: nature, Christianity, and humans are all deeply connected.

Michael: Thank you for listening to Knowing Nature Through Religion!

End Music: Charles Gounod, Ave Maria (Mediation) proceeds to fade out at 8:05

End: 8:12