**Lesson Plan 8: Alternatives to Stewardship**

This lesson requires the students to undertake a homework activity in advance.

**Lesson aims**

* To set out some alternative views of humanity's relationship to, and responsibility for, the earth
* To show how different biblical texts can be used to support some of these alternative perspectives
* To invite consideration of how scientific and religious perspectives relate to one another

**Resources**

* Information sheets (one per group)
* Students will need access to computer facilities in order to complete the homework activity before the lesson

**Pre-lesson group homework**

Divide the class into four small groups. Give each group a different information sheet. In preparation for the lesson on alternatives to stewardship, each group must use their information sheet to produce a PowerPoint presentation consisting of up to five slides, which conveys the information in a helpful and interesting way. During the lesson, each group will show their presentation to the rest of the class.

**Starter Activity**

Show the introductory video from the ‘Alternatives to Stewardship’ section of the Beyond Stewardship website. Invite the students to respond to the key question posed at the end of the video. See: **[http://ex.ac.uk/beyondstewardship](http://ex.ac.uk/beyondstewardship" \t "_blank)**

**Whole class work**

Each group is to present their PowerPoint to the rest of the class. Students need to take notes and after the lesson, copies of each PowerPoint may be sent to all the students.

**Discussion**

After the presentations, the teacher leads a whole class discussion of the following questions:

* Which of the models of human relationship to the earth do you find most compelling, and why?
* What alternative models might you suggest?
* To what extent is there a distinction between religious and scientific reasons for holding a certain view? Can these be integrated, or do you see them as opposed?

**Information sheets**

**(One per group)**

## 1. James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis

James Lovelock is a scientist whose hypothesis about the nature of the earth has become widely known and influential. His proposal is a scientific hypothesis, not a religious perspective, but it has been regarded by some as a quasi-religious viewpoint.

Lovelock views the earth as a kind of superorganism, 'a planetary-sized ecosystem called "Gaia"'.1 This complex system automatically self-regulates in ways that maintain an environment in which life can flourish.

Lovelock finds the idea of stewardship unhelpful. He writes: '...it requires us to be wise enough to regulate the environment for the common good and to be better at doing this than the evolved system that has kept the Earth fit for life for nearly four billion years'.2

He argues that instead of regarding ourselves as the responsible managers of the earth, we should instead acknowledge our dependence on the care with which Gaia supports life. 'We must learn to live with the Earth in partnership'.3 Otherwise, Lovelock warns, the Earth system may move itself into a state which no longer supports human life.

1James Lovelock, 'The Fallible Concept of Stewardship of the Earth', in R.J. Berry (ed.), *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 106-111 (p. 107)

2Lovelock, 'Fallible Concept', p. 108

3Lovelock, Fallible Concept,', p. 111. Among Lovelock's recent publications is *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2006),

## 2. The Earth Bible

An important approach to reading biblical texts from the perspective of Earth has been developed in the Earth Bible project. This project is based in Adelaide, Australia, and was initiated by Norman Habel, a biblical scholar.

The project's studies tend to be critical of anthropocentrism and to reject the idea of stewardship. They treat Earth (with a capital E) as a character, not unlike Lovelock's Gaia ecosystem. Their use of the term 'mutual custodianship' expresses the idea that the earth sustains humans just as humans should try to sustain the earth.

The project has produced a set of six ecojustice principles. These were formulated in dialogue with ecologists and again include some similarities with Lovelock's proposals. For example:

**The principle of interconnectedness:** Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.

**The principle of mutual custodianship:** Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners, rather than rulers, to sustain a balanced and diverse Earth community.

**The principle of resistance:** Earth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.1

1Norman Habel (ed.), Readings from the Perspective of Earth (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 24

**3. Humans as priests of creation**

Stewardship has been particularly prominent within Protestant denominations. Other Christian traditions, however, have offered alternative ideas about relations between God, humans, and the world.

For example, Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas highlights the idea of humans as priests of creation. Instead of simply giving people new ethical duties, Zizioulas thinks that we need a new 'culture'. He sees this as potentially growing from the liturgical life of the Church, and particularly from its central ritual, the Eucharist.

In such liturgies, creation's gifts are offered to God. Humans serve as the crucial link between creation and God, bringing nature into communion with God and sanctifying it. Humans therefore serve as the priest of creation, offering it to God. This, Zizioulas suggests, can help to reawaken a sense of the sacredness of nature, without turning to what he terms 'paganism', with its view of the sacred presence within nature itself.1

1Part of Zizioulas's lectures on 'Preserving God's Creation' is reprinted as 'Priest of Creation', in R.J. Berry (ed.), Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 273-290.

**4. Humans as part of the 'community of creation'**

Biblical scholar and theologian Richard Bauckham has also been critical of the stewardship idea. However, he does not want to reject the idea but rather to qualify it and set it alongside other important themes.

Bauckham argues that Christians have neglected the Bible's view that humans, as well as being stewards over creation, are also members of what he calls the 'community of creation'.6 The 'vertical' idea of stewardship - stressing humanity’s role to lead and be responsible - needs to be balanced with a 'horizontal' one, stressing humans as fellow-creatures with all other creatures. He argues that:

* Humans are called and equipped to be stewards over creation.
* But humans are also part of the community of creation, with all other creatures.
* Like all creatures, humans are under God's authority and dependent on God.
* All creatures, not just humans, are called to worship God.

In developing these ideas, Bauckham draws attention to biblical texts other than Genesis 1-2. These alternative texts offer different perspectives on the relationship between humans and the rest of creation. For example:

**Job 38-41:** here God responds to Job's sufferings not with an expression of care and concern but with speeches that stress all the diverse wonders of creation, among which Job looks rather insignificant.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." (Job 38.1)

"Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?..." (Job 39.1)

**Psalm 148:**here, among many other texts especially in the Psalms,there is a depiction of all things joining together in praise of God:

Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! (Ps 148.7-10).

Bauckham, along with others, suggests that these depictions of all creation's praising God are important for Christian environmental ethics. They imply that all creatures participate in the worship of God and so that all have intrinsic value. This places humans among - rather than distinct from - all the other creatures.

6Richard Bauckham, The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation. Waco, TX/London: BaylorUniversity Press/DLT, 2010