

**Christian Rural Concern
and The John Ray Initiative**

Ripon College, Cuddesdon (nr. Oxford)

**Certificate in Christian Rural and
Environmental Studies**

Module 9

**Rural and Environmental
Theology**

Rural and Environmental Theology- CONTENTS

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About the CRES Certificate course

The purpose of this course is to lead participants to explore the rural world and the natural environment from a Christian perspective. The process is `bottom up`, discovering and deepening a faith-based understanding of this world by reflecting on experience. The course provides signposts, background information, and relevant texts. It also requires students to do their own investigating, and poses key questions that arise from each topic. Each student will learn from investigation of the issues in his or her own way. Local tutors are provided to discuss the work in progress. The tutors can call upon the author of each module, and the co-directors monitor everyone's progress.

Six essays are needed for Certificate accreditation. This work occupies the first 15 months of the course. Then the last third of the course can be devoted to a Project (about 5,000 words) for presentation at a Consultation during the residential event in the September of the second year.

About this module

This module was the idea of Revd. John Whitehead, who is the Chair of Christian Rural Concern. John wrote most of the rural theology. His co-author was Mrs. Lizzie Rushton, the Honorary Secretary of CRES, who contributed most of the environmental theology. It is intended that this module will follow on from "The Living World" module, and will form the second part of the core of the CRES course.

Assessment

We suggest that students start by going through the booklet and making notes on their activities, reading and thoughts in a work diary. Activities and questions are suggestions and are not mandatory. The discipline of writing a short essay on a subject arising from each module `beds in' the learning process. The title of each essay arises from discussion between student and tutor. It is best to set up titles in the form of questions. Usually participants offer a first draft before presenting a completed essay of about 1,500 words in length.

1. PREFACE

This module has been introduced into the CRES course to meet a need and concern identified by our examiners. Students have produced good work, but often they have not shown themselves aware of the theological dimension. The course is Christian as well rural and environmental, and the application of Christian faith to the subjects studied is an essential feature of the course. Understandably some students have limited background knowledge of Christian theology. What this module attempts to do, therefore, is to explain in brief summary Christian *and Christ-like* theology, and to relate it to today's rural and environmental context. This includes basic issues, such as the authority of the Bible, Darwin's legacy, Christian environmentalism, and rural spirituality. A short module can only introduce these major subjects; the reference books and other resources will need to be pursued for fuller coverage. Our aim is to identify theological threads which you, the student, can weave into your studies as you progress with the course.

Theology is not only essential for its application to course material, it is also an exciting project, and continues to attract creative writing from all around the world. And we have 'in house' theologians and Christian environmentalists, too. As the main author of this core module, I bring to it half a century's enthusiasm for theology, and a longstanding involvement in the Rural Theology Association, which will become apparent as you read on. I think back to a book called *Theology and Joy* (1973) where Jürgen Moltmann says: 'What is the use of God? We go to church because it is a joy to do so when the Service is enjoyable. We study theology properly because we are curious and find pleasure in the subject' (p. 82). So hopefully, enjoy!

2. INTRODUCTION

Christian Theology in a Rural Context

These days Theology comes in different shapes and sizes – Systematic Theology, Urban Theology, Situation Theology, Ordinary Theology, and here Rural Theology. A very thoughtful lay friend once said to me: surely there is only one theology? Hence in this module we have not prefixed 'theology' with 'rural', but nevertheless context is all-important. It is now understood that theology is a practical activity as well as an intellectual exercise. This became clearly apparent 20 years ago at the Rural Theology Association (RTA) Conference at Scargill House in Yorkshire, when speakers used the term 'doing theology', applying it in ordinary life situations. The RTA later published an account of the conference in *The Rural Church Towards 2000* (1989), in which I made clear that doing theology involves us all (p. 12):

John Whitehead wrote an explorative piece on 'doing theology', using a number of case studies on his theme. He worked out his piece with a local group (in the parish of Betley) and allowed others to speak. His key text is: 'The Mission is God's and it happens within the world through the ministry of all the baptised.'

Furthermore, Christian Theology should not forget its roots in the piercing simplicity of teaching and events in the Galilean countryside, and the impassioned letters of a missionary in the villages and cities of Asia Minor. Says Paul to the Christians at Corinth:

*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
(I Corinthians 1, 22 – 24)*

3. WHAT IS CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY?

i) The Scriptural Basis

A theology of present situations has the obvious danger that it can cease to be a word of God, the God of Abraham, of Jesus and Paul and the Christian tradition handed down from the first believers. It can become instead subjective talk bearing no vital relation to Scriptural roots. To start with it is important to agree as well as possible a consensus on the authority of the Bible. In Peake's *Commentary on the Bible* (1962), a standard reference for ministry students, Archbishop Michael Ramsey wrote:

The familiar English word (Bible) comes from the Greek through the Latin. The Greek original, *biblia*, meant simply 'the books'.....The books were described by the early Fathers (of the Church) as 'holy scriptures', 'sacred books', 'divine scriptures', and as written by divine inspiration – the Holy Spirit both prompting the authors to write and directing their minds to write as they did..... The most debated questions concerning the Bible have been the various modes in which it conveys truth (such as literal, or symbolic, or allegorical).... It would, however, be wrong to infer from the exalted place of the Bible in every form of Christianity that Christianity is a religion of a Book. The central fact of Christianity is not a Book but a person – Jesus Christ, himself described as the Word of God. (p. 1)

As a more recent authority states – Raymond E. Brown in *An Introduction to the New Testament* (1997) - 'one should be cautious of claiming the Bible says....even as one would not state 'The public library says....' when one means to quote from Jane Austen or Shakespeare'. The better phrasing names a specific book or author: "Isaiah says", or "Mark says", thereby recognising that individuals from different periods of time with different ideas wrote the individual books of the Bible' (p. xxxiii). So, as Paul would say, there are differences of expression but the same Holy Spirit, that of Jesus the Son of God. Scripture, then, is a portal for the believer's relationship with the person of Jesus Christ; the record is the root from which the relationship grows.

Exploration of historical and literary context - which would matter to the reader of any other kind of record - unveils the nature of the Scriptures, and the reasons for its varying forms of expression. By penetrating Scripture thoughtfully and sympathetically, using the resources both of intellect and experience at our disposal, we can better understand how words from very different times speak to our own situations. The more we give ourselves to the messages of the Bible and its central Person at all levels of our being – intellectual, reflective, emotional and contextually aware – the more we can receive Scripture through a relationship, a relationship which is both a strange and compelling, and yet also intimate Word to us.

ii) A Definition

Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.

Principles of Christian Theology – John Macquarrie (1966) p. 1

War and conflict in the name of religion continues to ravage lives and communities in the 21st century, and there are theological reasons why people are prepared to perpetrate devastation and to die as martyrs. It is no longer convincing to suggest, with the secular mind-set, that the theology is really just a subset of nationalist, racial or cultural strife, or a sort of ‘icing on the cake’. Theology matters a great deal to the world as well to the church. The spiritual hosts, the principalities and powers, as St Paul alleges when writing to the Galatians, are the real enemy - not flesh and blood. If theology is very much at stake in world as well as church, what are its key components?

Macquarrie defined Theology as a ‘study’. In a more recent summary of working definitions – *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (2001) - Alister McGrath quotes Karl Rahner: ‘Theology is the *science* of faith. It is the conscious and methodical explanation and explication of the divine revelation received and grasped in faith.’ Though theology must be a logical and analytical process in order to communicate its findings effectively, it relies on intuition as well as ratiocination, and seeks to transmit what enters the mind as insight, beyond the borders of ‘normal’ reasoning.

The second key word in Macquarrie’s working definition is ‘participation’. Particularly in an age of global media, which instantly makes available private context as well as public pronouncement, “do as I say (but not as I do)” no longer screens the private from the public. People want the whole story behind the holy words, in other words a lived theology. While at Betley as vicar I became friendly with a remarkable Christian scholar who lived in the parish, Professor Donald Nicholl. So when I read his book *Holiness* (1981/1987) I could observe his living example. In the opening chapter he re-tells this well-known story of Gandhi:

The story goes that a troubled mother one day came along to Gandhi with her daughter and explained to Gandhi that her daughter was in the habit of eating far more sweet food than was good for her. Please, she asked, would Gandhi speak to the girl and persuade her to give up this harmful habit? Gandhi sat for a while in silence and then said, ‘Bring your daughter back in three week’s time, and I will speak to her’. The mother went away as she was told and came back after three weeks. This time Gandhi quietly took the daughter aside and in a few simple words explained to her the harmful effects of indulging in sweet food and he urged her to abandon the habit. Thanking Gandhi for giving her daughter such good advice the mother then said to him in a puzzled voice, ‘Still, I would like to know, Gandhi-je, why you did not say those words to my daughter three weeks ago when I first brought her to you?’ “But,” explained Gandhi, in his reply: “Three weeks ago I myself was still addicted to eating sweet foods!”