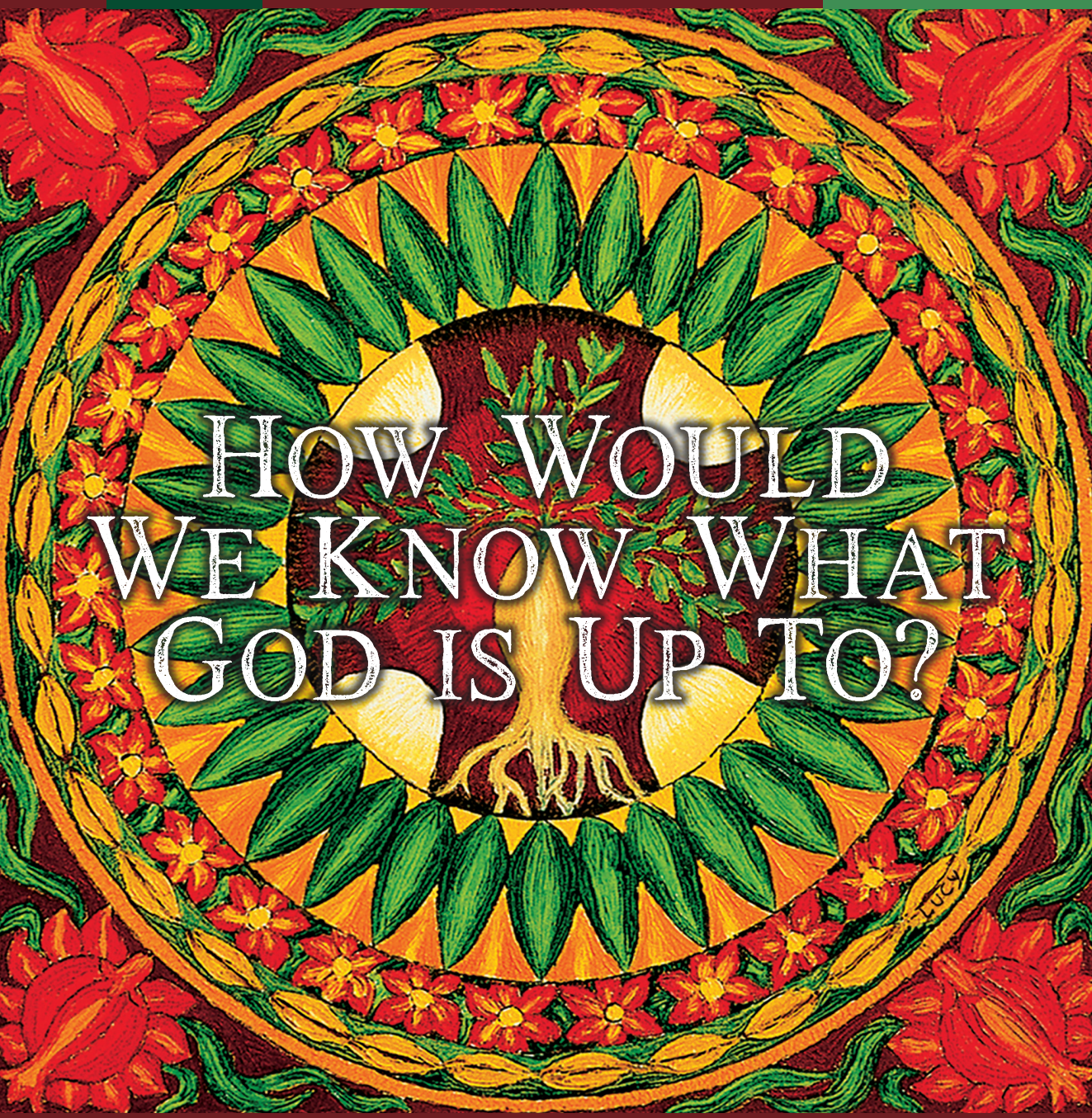
AOSIS

AN EARTHED FAITH:
Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene"

Volume 2



How Would We Know What God is Up To?

Edited by
Ernst M. Conradie & Cynthia Moe-Lobeda

AN EARTHED FAITH:
Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene"
Volume 2

How Would We Know What God is Up To?

Published by AOSIS Books, an imprint of AOSIS Publishing.

AOSIS Publishing
15 Oxford Street, Durbanville, 7550, Cape Town, South Africa
Postnet Suite 110, Private Bag X19, Durbanville, 7551, Cape Town, South Africa
Tel: +27 21 975 2602
Website: https://www.aosis.co.za

Published in 2022
Impression: 1

ISBN: 978-1-77995-242-4 (print)
ISBN: 978-1-77995-243-1 (epub)
ISBN: 978-1-77995-244-8 (pdf)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295
How to cite this work: Conradie, EM & Moe-Lobeda, C (eds.) 2022, *How Would We Know What God is Up To?*, in An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town.

An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene"
ISSN: 2790-4288
Series Editor: Ernst M. Conradie

Printed and bound in South Africa.

Listed in OAPEN (http://www.oapen.org), DOAB (http://www.doabooks.org/) and indexed by Google Scholar.

AN EARTHED FAITH:
Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene"
Volume 2

How Would We Know What God is Up To?

Editors
Ernst M. Conradie
Cynthia Moe-Lobeda

AOSIS

Peer review declaration

The publisher (AOSIS) endorses the South African 'National Scholarly Book Publishers Forum Best Practice for Peer Review of Scholarly Books'. The manuscript underwent an evaluation to compare the level of originality with other published works and was subjected to rigorous two-step peer review before publication, with the identities of the reviewers not revealed to the editor(s) or author(s). The reviewers were independent of the publisher, editor(s), and author(s). The publisher shared feedback on the similarity report and the reviewers' inputs with the manuscript's editor(s) or author(s) to improve the manuscript. Where the reviewers recommended revision and improvements, the editor(s) or author(s) responded adequately to such recommendations. The reviewers commented positively on the scholarly merits of the manuscript and recommended that the book be published.

Research Justification

This is the second volume in a series entitled "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'." The series builds upon an international collaborative project (2007–2014) on "Christian Faith and the Earth" that involved more than 100 leading scholars in the field of Christian ecotheology. Because Christianity is widely regarded as complicit in ecological destruction, a crucial part of any response to the impact of the "Anthropocene" has to include a critique and constructive reinterpretation of the Christian faith. The series addresses this challenge through ecumenical collaboration between the leading scholars in the field, together with some emerging voices. The ambitious aim is to capture the state of the current debate on twelve core themes and then take the debate forward through a set of constructive contributions that optimize diversity in terms of geographical contexts, confessional traditions, theological schools, and issues of gender, race, language, and age. The contributors for each volume have been handpicked accordingly. Each volume includes an introductory essay that seeks to capture the current state of the debate and then outlines a core, unresolved question that has to be addressed in order to take the debate forward. The rest of the volume is structured in the form of ten constructive responses to this question, engaging with each other through cross-references. Such engagement is made possible through a series of meetings between contributors to critique each other's work and through a concluding conversation between the authors on the difference that this volume has made to the state of the scholarly debate.

For the second volume, this question is formulated as follows: Given what we know about the "Anthropocene," how does one even begin to answer the question: What is this God up to? And how would we know how to respond to that? These are questions of theological method, including the sources and interlocutors of Christian theology, its aims and starting points, social theories shaping it, and presuppositions grounding it. There is no consensus on the appropriate method for Christian ecotheology, as the editors demonstrate in the introductory essay. The contributors come literally from around the globe, namely Ernst Conradie (South Africa), Heather Eaton (Canada), Guillermo Kerber (Uruguay/Geneva), Loreen Maseno (Kenya), Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis (Panama), Cynthia Moe-Lobeda (USA), Jea Sophia Oh (Korea/USA), Maina Talia (Tuvalu), and George Zachariah (India/New Zealand). Each of them has a remarkable record of publications and builds on that by offering a constructive attempt to address the question. It would be arrogant to claim that this volume could resolve the question that is addressed here, but any future scholarly contributions in ecotheology on issues of method would arguably need to be on the basis of and with reference to this volume. In this way, the ambitious aim is to shape the future of the debate by identifying "current paths" and suggesting "emerging horizons" in the field. Although each contributor necessarily builds upon previous work in the field and is invited accordingly, each contribution is original. Self-plagiarism is avoided through careful referencing to such previous work. The volume is written by leading scholars and aimed at other scholars, primarily in the fields of Christian ecotheology and systematic theology.

Ernst M. Conradie, Department of Religion and Theology, Faculty of Arts, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa.

Artist statement

Lucy D'Souza-Krone was born in 1949 in a village in Goa on the Western coast of India. Her family later moved to Dehra Dun at the foothills of the Himalayas. Childhood in a village on the shores of Goa and then her life within sight of majestic Himalayan mountains left impressions which appear frequently in Lucy's paintings: earth, water, the sky and trees.

From 1976 onwards Lucy was a member of the spiritual community of the "Kristsevikas", who were active for the education of women in rural India. In 1983 she joined INSCAPE (Indian School of Art for Peace), an Ashram near Bangalore founded by the Christian painter Jyoti Sahi. This Ashram, whose members live and work in community, is a house of encounter between Indian culture and Christianity. In 1996 she married and has since then lived in Germany with her husband. She is invited to exhibitions and workshops around the world.

Lucy says: "For me, painting is my spiritual path to God, my prayer, my sadhana, as we say in India. For me, it is a path of self-knowledge and self-awareness, a way to stay in touch with my inner self and to come close to God. I usually take my motifs and themes from the Bible and relate them to spiritual, social, cultural and environmental concerns of our time. I also try to build a bridge between biblical themes and the scriptures of the Indian religions Hinduism and Buddhism. My special interest and commitment is the promotion of women and their creativity, but also peace and environmental issues, as well as inter-religious dialogue. India is a country whose great holy women and men have respected and loved nature and lived in harmony with it for centuries. I would like to follow in their footsteps and become more creative in every way. Perhaps I can inspire people of other cultures and peoples to do so."

The Tree and Cross Mandala

"From the beginning of my painting career I have been fascinated by trees and the elements (earth, water, fire, air and space). These creep up in most of my paintings in different forms. Here, in this mandala, a seed is sprouting in the center. The red cross has three different shades of red, representing the three days of death of Christ. His resurrection is depicted by the yellow behind the cross.

"The seed that dies bears abundant fruit. The green leaves around the cross are a sign of hope and new life. The red-orange flowers stand for the joy of life and fruitfulness together with the circle of wheat. In some Eastern churches the sprouting cross is an image often used to express the power of resurrection and the life forthcoming from it. This could inspire us in these days of climate change to care for our earth."

Contents

Abbreviations and Acronyms and Figures Appearing in the Text and Notes

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

COP	Conference of the Parties
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
HRAF	Human Relations Area Files
IKS	Indigenous Knowledge Systems
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
ISCP	International Society of Chinese Philosophy
JPIC	Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation
LA	Latin American
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual and more
NGOs	non-governmental organizations
PLTS	Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
ROOTS	Retracing Our Own Traditions
SACP	Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SOUL	Save Our Unique Landscape
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
WCC	World Council of Churches
WMO	World Meteorological Organization

Figure List

Notes on Contributors

Ernst M. Conradie is Senior Professor in the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. He works in the intersection between Christian ecotheology, systematic theology, and ecumenical theology and comes from the Reformed tradition. He is the author of *The Earth in God's Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective* (2015), *Redeeming Sin? Social Diagnostics amid Ecological Destruction* (2017), and *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene: What's Wrong with the World?* (2020). He was the international convener of the Christian Faith and the Earth project (2007–2014), the leading editor (with Sigurd Bergmann, Celia Deane-Drummond, and Denis Edwards) of *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* (2014), and co-editor with Hilda Koster of *The T&T Clark Handbook on Christian Theology and Climate Change* (2019). He is responsible for registering the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'" at the University of the Western Cape.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0020-6952
Email: econradie@uwc.ac.za

Heather Eaton is Professor of Conflict Studies at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada. Her current research includes ecological, gender / feminist, and religious dimensions of peace and conflict studies; theories of conflict, social justice, nonviolence, and animal rights. Her publications include A*dvancing Nonviolence and Social Transformation*, with Lauren Levesque (2016); *The Intellectual Journey of Thomas Berry* (2014), *Ecological Awareness: Exploring Religion, Ethics and Aesthetics*, with Sigurd Bergmann (2011); *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies* (2005); and *Ecofeminism and Globalization* (2003), with Lois Lorentzen. She is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1722-0769
Email: heaton@ustpaul.ca

Guillermo Kerber, originally from Uruguay, currently teaches at the *Atelier Oecuménique de Théologie* and collaborates with the Adult Faith Formation Service of the Catholic Church in Geneva, Switzerland. In his home country he taught at the Public and Catholic Universities for more than ten years, having published his first essays on ecology in the late 1980s. In 2001 he joined the World Council of Churches in Geneva where he coordinated the work on Care for Creation and Climate Justice from 2007 to 2016. Some of his recent articles include "The case of ecology in contextual and inter-contextual political theology" in *State, Religion, Church in Russia and worldwide* (2021 in Russian),

"*Laudato Si'*, the Amazon Synod and ecology: Some interpretation keys" in *Misiones Extranjeras* (2021, in Spanish), "Everything is interrelated: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Integral Ecology" in *The Ecumenical Review* (2020) "From integral ecology to deep ecology? A critical insight" in *Voices* (2020 in Spanish). He is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8645-502X
Email: guillermo.kerber@cath-ge.ch

Loreen Maseno is a senior lecturer in the Department of Religion, Theology and Philosophy, Maseno University, Kenya, since 2013. She is a research fellow in the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa. She was appointed a Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) Global Scholar of Yale University, United States, in 2021. She is an Ambassador Scientist of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Her research interests include Gender and Theology, Feminist Ecology, African Theology, Religion, and Media. She is co-editor of *Women within Religions: Patriarchy, Feminism and the Role of Women in Selected World Religions* (Wipf and Stock, 2019) and *The Bible and Sociological Contours: Some African Perspectives: Festschrift for Professor Halvor Moxnes* (Peter Lang, 2018).

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3141-3898
Email: loreenmas@gmail.com

Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis, from the Gunadule indigenous nation in Panama, is a theologian, activist, and the Director of *Memoria Indígena*. She holds a Masters in Interdisciplinary Theology for Holistic Mission and is pursuing a PhD in Theological Studies from An Indigenous Learning Community (NAIITS). She is part of the *Fraternidad Teologica Latinoamericana* steering committee and is member of *Red de Teólogas, Pastoras, Activistas y Lideresas cristianas*. She has been a youth delegate for the Summit of the Americas in Panama and a Panamanian observer and delegate for Panama for the UN Climate Change Conferences. She is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3125-3452
Email: jocabed@memoriaindigena.org

Cynthia Moe-Lobeda serves as Professor of Theological and Social Ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS), Church Divinity School of the Pacific, and the Graduate Theological Union. She is Founding Director of the PLTS Center for Climate Justice and Faith. She is author or co-author of six volumes, and over 50 articles and chapters, and has lectured on six continents

in theology, ethics, and matters of climate justice and climate racism, moral agency, economic justice, public church, ecofeminist theology, and faith-based resistance to systemic oppression. Her *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (2013) won a Nautilus Book Award for social justice. Her other volumes include *The Bible and Ethics: A New Conversation* (co-authored, 2017), *Public Church: For the Life of the World* (2004), *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (2002), *Say to This Mountain* (co-authored, 2002), *St. Francis and the Foolishness of God* (co-authored, 1993 and 2015). She is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8588-8018
Email: cmoelobeda@plts.edu

Jea Sophia Oh is Associate Professor of Philosophy at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Her research is primarily in the fields of Asian and comparative philosophies, religion and ecology, and postcolonial theory. Her book *A Postcolonial Theology of Life: Planetarity East and West* (2011) is a path-making work in Korean ecofeminist theology and comparative philosophy. She is the editor and co-author of *Nature's Transcendence and Immanence: A Comparative Interdisciplinary Ecstatic Naturalism* (2017), *Suffering and Evil in Nature: Comparative Responses from Ecstatic Naturalism and Healing Cultures* (2021), and *Emotions (Jeong/Qing 情) in Korean Philosophy and Religion* (2022). She is the chair of the "Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy" (SACP) at the Central division and the "International Society of Chinese Philosophy" (ISCP) at the Eastern division of APA. She is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1429-5674
Email: JOH@wcupa.edu

Maina Talia was born and brought up on the island of Vaitupu in Tuvalu. He is currently completing his doctoral research at the Charles Sturt University in Sydney. As part of his research he has focused on the issue of "tuakoi" (neighbor), climate change related sea-level rise, *muna o te fale* (Indigenous knowledge), biblical and geopolitical issues. He is the Tuvalu Climate Action Network Secretary, a position he held for over 12 years. He was elected Pacific Co-Chair for the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change in 2017 and a Pacific Alternate Member of the UN Temporary Committee. He is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7032-2812
Email: mtaliafua@gmail.com

George Zachariah serves Trinity Methodist Theological College, Auckland, New Zealand, as Wesley Lecturer in Theological Studies. His theological perspectives are informed by his long-standing association with different social movements. He has also served the United Theological College, Bangalore, and Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, India. He has published several articles and books on ecotheology, climate justice, and earth ethics. He is the co-editor (with Lily Mendoza) of *Decolonizing Ecotheology: Indigenous and Subaltern Challenge* (Wipf and Stock, 2022). He is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6347-2943
Email: gzachariahk@gmail.com

An Earthed Faith: Envisaged Volumes in the Series

The following twelve volumes are envisaged in the series entitled "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'":

■ *Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin* . . . (An Earthed Faith Volume 1)

This volume will address the following question: How does the story of who the Triune God is and what this God does relate to the story of life on Earth? Is the Christian story part of the earth's story or is the earth's story part of God's story, from creation to consummation? This raises many issues on the relatedness of religion and theology, the place of theology in multidisciplinary collaboration, the notion of revelation, the possibility of knowledge of God, hermeneutics, the difference between natural theology and a theology of nature, etc. The word "breath" in the title suggests the Spirit of God as a source of inspiration for the story, already present in any further deliberations. It hints at an Air of anticipation, indicated by the three dots in the title.

■ *How Would We Know What God is Up to?* (An Earthed Faith Volume 2)

This volume will address the following question: Given what we know about the "Anthropocene," how does one even begin to answer the question: What is this God up to? How would we know how to respond to that? These are

questions of theological method, including the sources and interlocutors of Christian theology, its aims and starting points, social theories shaping it, and presuppositions grounding it. Addressing this question is the classic task of doing contextual theology, namely to describe and analyze the particular context that is addressed and to consider how this may best be addressed theologically. This question highlights the need for prophetic theology to discern the "signs of the time" to recognize a "moment of truth" (Kairos) and to discern counter-movements of the Spirit. Such methodological questions are necessary in order to tell the story of who God is and what God does amid the "Anthropocene." In terms of narrative / rhetorical theory a focus on method requires attention to the plot upon which the narrative hinges; the sense of crisis that will draw together the characters; the exigencies that invite passion, reflection, and persuasion. Theological method is inherently a theological question about sin and salvation, creation and redemption, God and God's world—and it shapes where the story may lead and how it may be told.

■ *The Place of Story and the Story of Place?* (An Earthed Faith Volume 3)

This volume will address the following question: "What difference does it make to the story of cosmic, planetary, human, and cultural evolution to re-describe this as the creative work of God's love?" Inversely, what difference does it make to the story of God's love to describe it in evolutionary terms? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on creation and cosmic, biological, hominid, and human evolution (the story of place). Such reflection on the beginning is of course not situated "in the beginning" but entails a narrative reconstruction of the story where current interests, positions of power, and fears are necessarily at stake (the place where the story is being told). This is a contested space, indeed a "site of struggle," often dominated by issues of race rather than by grace. How, then, is this story to be told given a sense of place? It will not be possible to avoid questions around suffering, sin, evil, and the tragic (the theme of the next volume), but the focus will be on why on earth a loving God would deem this story to be "very good"—despite the prevalence of suffering, injustice, and oppression?

■ *Making Room for the Story to Continue?* (An Earthed Faith Volume 4)

This volume will address the following question: How could the suffering of God's creatures in the "Anthropocene" be reconciled with trust in God's loving care? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on

the classic themes related to the doctrine of providence, including *creatio continua*, *conservatio*, *gubernatio*, and *concursus*. For some, God's providence (common grace) is a necessary requirement to allow (to make room for) the history of salvation to proceed. For others, the suffering embedded in God's "good" creation requires responses to the theodicy problem: Why would a loving God allow creatures to suffer so much? What is the relationship between so-called natural evil and social evil? Is the underlying problem human sin, or is it the inadequacies, the tragic dimension, indeed the violence embedded in God's world? Again, this last question is hinted at in the question mark after the title.

■ *The Saving Grace of the Story?* (An Earthed Faith Volume 5)

This volume will address the following question: How is the Christian message of salvation to be interpreted given the current ecological destruction and apocalyptic fears associated with the "Anthropocene"? Is this message plausible given the failure of Christianity to address so many other urgent problems over 20 centuries? This will require theological reflection on Christological symbols such as atonement and Pneumatological symbols such as liberation, healing, reconciliation, regeneration, moral guidance, justification, and sanctification—insofar as these may be pertinent in the Age of the "Anthropocene." The title is ambiguous and ironic to indicate that the story is highly contested but is at best to be understood as good news for the whole Earth.

■ *The Keepers of the Story?* (An Earthed Faith Volume 6)

This volume will address the following question: What is the place and significance of the church in God's "household," now situated in the destabilizing context of the "Anthropocene"? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on the formation, upbuilding, and very nature of the church, on its many ministries and missions. Presumably, the question is no longer whether there is salvation outside of the church, but indeed whether there is salvation to be found within the church. Can it still be said that the church is God's main (even only) instrument (sign, sacrament, icon) to bring salvation given the challenges posed by the "Anthropocene"? Or is the task of the church the monastic one of "keeping" the story, that is, to maintain the inner secret to the mystery of history, amid dark clouds looming and despite few outsiders taking any notice? Does this not sound as if it is the church that needs to come to God's rescue or is the inverse true?

Where the Story Ends and its Ends . . . (An Earthed Faith Volume 7)

This volume will address the following question: How should the content and significance of Christian hope be understood in the context of the "Anthropocene"? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on the eschatological symbols of the final judgment as a sign of hope, on the resurrection of the dead, on the coming reign of God, and on eternal life. It will also have to assess whether such hope is to be understood as the restoration (neo-Calvinism), elevation (Roman Catholicism), replacement (Anabaptism), recycling (liberalism / secularism), or divinification / theosis (Eastern Orthodoxy) of this world. Does the meaning of the story lie in its end, or in the journey / pilgrimage toward that end? Any answer to such questions will remain provisional, hinted at in the three dots in the title.

Being Blessed as the Inner Logic of the Story? (An Earthed Faith Volume 8)

This volume will address the following question: Can the notion of being God's chosen people / instrument be retained in a religiously plural world under the threat of the "Anthropocene"? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on the themes of divine election and vocation. Can "being blessed" by God be understood as the inner logic of the story? Is such blessing not often experienced as a curse? What about divine reprobation, punishment, and justice for the victims and perpetrators of history? How is a theology of religions to be understood in a context characterized by common threats, the need for tolerance and compassion across religious divides? How can Christians move beyond the options of exclusivism and relativism in the context of the "Anthropocene"? What does it mean to be blessed for the whole of creation to receive God's blessing?

The Spirit of the Story? (An Earthed Faith Volume 9)

This volume will address questions around the identity and character of God's Spirit. It will require theological reflection on how the very notion of spirit should be understood in relation to person, matter, ideas, force, energy, and related concepts. What does it mean that this Spirit is "holy" and makes things "holy"? Is this Spirit able to overcome what is "demonic" in the "Anthropocene"? Is it money or love that makes the world go round? Or is this Spirit the spirit that makes matter move, even if this movement is not all that obvious and requires discernment?

■ *The Letter of the Story?* (An Earthed Faith Volume 10)

This volume will address questions around the identity and character of Jesus of Nazareth, proclaimed to be the Christ, anointed by God's Spirit, the One who would inaugurate God's coming reign. It will require theological reflection on the significance of all six Christological symbols, namely (deep) Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, Ascension, Session, and Parousia, as these may relate to the coming of the "Anthropocene." If the cross is a concrete symbol of the history of imperialism and oppression, can the (bodily?) resurrection still function as an equally concrete symbol of hope in the "Anthropocene"? How is the interplay between the letter and the spirit of the story to be understood given long-standing ecumenical divides on the *filioque* controversy—that still divides the East and the West, the North and the South, over whether the Spirit works (only / primarily) on the basis of the Letter (as most so-called mainline churches assume)? Or should the relative independence of God's Spirit be emphasized (as many others emphasize)?

■ *In Communion with the Story Teller(s)?* (An Earthed Faith Volume 11)

This volume will address questions around the doctrine of the Trinity as the inner secret / apophatic mystery / doxological culmination of the Christian faith. It will offer theological reflection on how the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity are related by exploring God's identity and character. The question is which of God's characteristics need to be foregrounded in the Age of the "Anthropocene." In particular, how is God's mercy related to God's justice given the interactions between God as Father, Son, and Spirit? Can these (patriarchal) symbols be maintained in the "Anthropocene"? Should one favor the social analogy (emphasizing communion) or the psychological analogy (perhaps allowing for a more generic notion of God) for understanding the Trinity? What difference does faith in such a God make (if any) in the Age of the "Anthropocene"? Moreover, who is telling the story? Are we (Christians?) the ones responsible to tell the story or are we characters in a story ultimately told by Godself? Given these reflections, what does it mean to believe in "God" (a God, any God) in the world in which we now live? Note that this (philosophical) question is not addressed upfront but penultimately. For Christians the question remains whether this Triune God can be regarded as the ultimate mystery of the world?

■ *What, then, is the Moral of the Story?* (An Earthed Faith Volume 12)

This volume will address questions around the relationship between Christian doctrine, Christian ethics, Christian spirituality, and Christian praxis—between the ultimate and the penultimate, between the indicative of God's grace and the imperative of ecological gratitude. Such relatedness has been there implicitly in all the other volumes but needs to be made explicit here. In dealing with climate change (for example), there is a need to find common moral ground with those standing in other religious traditions and with organizations in civil society. This has implications for all the relevant ethical categories—such as moral vision, virtues, duties, rights, responsibilities, values, middle axioms, action steps, etc. For Christians the question will be whether and if so how such common moral ground is deeply rooted in the story of who God is and what God has done, is doing, and will be doing.

Telling the Story *en route*: On This Road (*hodos*) and Its Logic (*logos*)

Ernst M. Conradie[1] & Cynthia Moe-Lobeda[2]

"I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"—Exodus 20:2 (Jerusalem Bible)

"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways through the prophets, but now, ultimately, God has spoken to us through Christ who was appointed heir of all things, the Sophia / Wisdom through whom God also created the world" —adapted from Hebrews 1:1–2.

1. Ernst M. Conradie is Senior Professor in the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa.

2. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda serves as Professor of Theological and Social Ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS), Church Divinity School of the Pacific, and the Graduate Theological Union. She is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

How to cite: Conradie, EM & Moe-Lobeda, C 2022, "Telling the Story *en route*: On This Road (*hodos*) and Its Logic (*logos*)", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?*, An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 1–29. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.01

What Is God up to . . . in the "Anthropocene"?

Christian confession holds that the Triune God is a God of life who gives life, a God of history, who acts within cosmic and human history. What this God is doing in the world is typically creative and surprising, often troubling and disrupting. God acts differently in different times, overturning the ways things are, re-orienting people into new directions—for example, in the time of Noah, Sarah, Abraham, Hagar, Moses, Miriam, Ruth, David, Bathsheba, Elijah, Jeremiah, Mary of Nazareth, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Paul, Lydia, the apostles, and many others. What God is doing is never blatantly obvious; perceiving it requires revelation, discernment, and a willingness to see in new ways. The hiddenness of God is as significant as God's revelation. This is epitomized by the cross of Jesus of Nazareth: In what senses was God revealed or obscured, one may well ask!

The question addressed in the series on *An Earthed Faith* is who this God is; what God may be doing in the context of an epoch that is named by some as the "Anthropocene," a name contested by others;[3] and to what this God is calling human creatures. Given what we know about the "Anthropocene," this is an ominous question. There is no need or possibility here to review a multidisciplinary discourse on the "Anthropocene."[4] It suffices to say that what is at stake includes devastating anthropogenic disturbances in the earth's system (in the singular), more precisely in the interaction between the geosphere, the hydrosphere, the atmosphere, and the biosphere, each with multiple sub-systems. Climate change and its multiple impacts, ocean acidification (climate change's "equally evil twin"), a loss of biodiversity, increased ferocity of disastrous storms and wildfires, and the spread of zoonotic diseases (of which COVID-19 is but one) are all related as symptoms of such underlying disturbances. The impacts on the world's most climate vulnerable people—who are disproportionately people of color, Indigenous people, and economically impoverished people—are horrific.

Indeed, what on earth may God be up to in the context of disruptions at such a scale? Who, then, is this God and what is this God doing at this moment in history? And, to what is this God calling human beings in our times and places?

3. An increasing number of scholars in various disciplines raise questions about the use of this term because it obscures the particularity inherent in anthropogenic causation and in responsibility. By suggesting "humans" as the causal factor, the term may cloud over the reality that some humans are far more implicated than others in historic and contemporary greenhouse gas emissions, and that the lines of causation are highly racialized and class dependent. For the *An Earthed Faith* series it was decided to use the term "Anthropocene" always in quotation marks to indicate the contestations over naming it as such. Doing ecotheology "amid" the "Anthropocene" is then not only a reference to disturbances in the Earth system but also signals resistance to dominant ways of interpreting the "Anthropocene".

4. Besides multi-disciplinary discourse on the "Anthropocene" there is a rapidly expanding corpus of literature on the "Anthropocene" in the fields of religion and theology. A significant early contribution was the volume *Religion in the Anthropocene*, edited by Deane-Drummond, Bergmann and Vogt. See also Conradie, *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene.*

Seeking to discern the "finger" of God in cosmic, planetary, and human history is a treacherous undertaking. The same applies to attempts to see God's hand in one's own life, in one's family history, organizations, congregations, communities, or countries. All too often want-to-be prophets merely read their own vested interests into such history, or claim God's will to justify their own exploitative endeavors. Consider the baptism by force of so-called heathen nations, the crusades to conquer the holy land, the conquest of colonized lands and peoples, genocide in the lands called "America," the transatlantic slave trade, and the claim by slave owners to spread the gospel to enslaved people—all in the name of God, *in hoc signo*. Also consider the extension of the British Empire in the name of Christian civilization, Afrikaner self-talk about keeping the flame of such "civilization" alive in "deep dark Africa," or American assumptions about "our manifest destiny." It comes as no surprise, then, that many would opt to leave God out of the picture altogether.

The problem deepens. A profound epistemological challenge resides at the heart of the theological method at this point in history, a time when the epistemologies, disciplinary methodologies, and "shared fictions"[5] that not only have shaped Western consciousness, but, through colonization, have shaped and reshaped the world are being exposed as dangerous. Horrors upon horrors have been rooted partly in assumptions and ideological coding that structure theological inquiry, assumptions that have gone largely unrecognized as human constructs and live instead as presupposed conditions of reality. For example, the assumed superiority of whiteness, wed to the superiority of Christianity, that produced terror and unspeakable suffering, is an often unacknowledged building block of Western intellectual paradigms and theological method. So too are forms of knowing based on the alienation of the human mammal from the rest of creation, with the latter assumed to exist for the sake of the former. Certainly, the epistemologies and disciplinary methods of modernity are not only dangerous; epistemologies, intellectual frameworks, and disciplinary methods of the last five centuries also have wrought tremendous good. Here is not the place to elaborate those goods, nor the damages rendered, or to weigh them against each other.

Rather, the point is to raise up and blaze into our consciousness the astounding and challenging conundrum: The deadly trajectory on which humanity races—a trajectory toward almost unimaginable climate catastrophe imbued with racism and economic violence—has been forged by assumptions and ways of knowing that are foundational to Christian theology and how it is done (method). How, then, is theology itself—where grounded in such foundations, composed of elements that have rendered death and destruction—to do and redo itself (form and reform itself, recognizing the dangers of malformation)

5. See Harari, *Sapiens*.

in ways that counter and dismantle those elements? That is the question. If theology is to help us see and heed a God who is creating, healing, liberating, and life-saving, it would seem that the very doing of theology must eschew processes of learning and knowing that have bred the opposite. This question, this challenge, is at the heart of this volume. It is joined by another. How can theologians formed by the epistemological assumptions that undergird historical and contemporary colonization, white supremacy, male supremacy, and hetero-supremacy authentically perceive the hand of a God who is liberating creation from those very prisons? The question is even more complex for theologians (such as ourselves, this essay's authors) who are material "beneficiaries" of trajectories of exploitation along those axes of power.

Nevertheless, the profound claim at the heart of Christian traditions at their best remains: God loves this world with a love more magnificent, life-giving, and powerful than any force in heaven or earth, and this God is liberating and healing creation toward a life abundant for all (John 10:10) and is calling humans (and perhaps all creatures and elements) to join in that work. Moreover, even from an entirely secular perspective, there is a need to discern the "signs of the time." For Christians, reading the signs of the times means both seeing ever more clearly what is going on—especially where structural evil may be parading as good—and seeking to discern where the Spirit of God is at work and at play so that we may participate in and with that Spirit. This implies the need to diagnose what is wrong with the world, and developing policies and strategies for moving toward more just, compassionate, and ecologically sane alternatives, alternatives more in line with God's promise of life in its fullness for all. Indeed, ignoring the question of what is going on and what God is doing in the world and continuing to live our lives oblivious to what is happening around us, may be more dangerous than giving a blithe answer to that question. The task of Christian theology, more specifically ecotheology, is to contribute to what is necessarily a multidimensional collaborative effort to make sense of what is happening in the so-called "Anthropocene" and how we are called to respond, from the particular perspective of God's identity and character, as God is revealed in—but not only in—the dark-skinned Palestinian Jew known as Jesus of Nazareth and through the life-giving and life-nurturing Spirit. This task can only be approached in "bold humility" (David Bosch), with fear and trembling, *fascinans et tremendum*, and a spirit of on-going awareness of the obstacles imposed by dominant perspectives.

How Could We Even Begin to Answer This Question?

The task of this second volume in the series on *An Earthed Faith* is not yet to offer any answer to the question stated in the heading of the previous section. Instead, it is to reflect on *how* such a question could be addressed

in the first place. This need emerges precisely as a result of the conflicting plurality of attempts to answer the question. In times of confusion and crisis, there is a need to stop for a moment to reflect on how this question can best be approached. Methodological reflection becomes necessary when doing theology becomes clouded with controversy, fruitless conflict among multiple approaches, and systematic distortions such as white supremacy, patriarchy, consumerism, class and caste privilege, and many other orientations to life that truncate flourishing. Attention to how we interpret the signs of the times is also crucial as we realize the beauty and goodness in the plurality of views and the potential of that plurality to either enhance or confuse human knowing. The contestations around the advent of the "Anthropocene" (and naming it as such) is clearly one such time.

Each contributor to this volume has been asked to address the following question: "Given what we know about the 'Anthropocene', how does one even begin to answer the question: What is this God up to and how ought humans respond?" This is indeed a question of theological method. "Method in any discipline refers to the disciplined and intentional way in which one goes about an inquiry using the resources of that discipline."[6] Theological method includes the sources and interlocutors of theology, its aims and starting points, social theories shaping it, hermeneutical lenses and epistemologies employed consciously or not, and presuppositions grounding it. Method plays a decisive role in determining the outcomes of theological inquiry. Those outcomes may have life and death implications. Thus, explicit attention to method matters, and it matters much.[7]

Addressing the aforementioned question is the classic task of doing what is commonly called "contextual theology,"[8] namely to experience, describe, and analyze a particular context and to consider how this context may best be addressed theologically and practically. The question highlights the need for prophetic theology to discern the "signs of the time," to recognize a "moment of truth" (Kairos), and to discern counter-movements of the Spirit. The question of method opens the door to constructive critique of how theology has been done, and to creative and faithful reimaging of how human creatures ought to know and respond to God in each new time and place. In terms of narrative theory and rhetorical theory, method and context account for the

6. Moe-Lobeda, "Globalization and Planetary Ethics," 8.

7. For explicit treatment of method in ecotheologial ethics, see Moe-Lobeda, "Christian Ethics Toward Earth-Honoring Faiths," 132–33, "Globalization and Planetary Ethics."

8. While "contextual theology" is commonly used to refer to theologies explicitly arising out of specific contexts, in fact *all* theology is contextual and dominant theological streams that presupposed themselves to be universal were in fact universalizing their own unacknowledged particularities. The danger in using the term uncritically becomes obvious with the recognition, for example, that apartheid theology was certainly highly contextual too!

compelling plot upon which the narrative hinges; the sense of crisis that will draw together the characters; the exigencies that invite passion, reflection, and persuasion. Method in theology is an inherently theological question that has to do justice to the subject matter, namely who God is and what God has done and is doing, to the drama of sin and salvation, creation and redemption, God and God's world, and how creation (including human beings) is called to respond. How, then, does one find an appropriate "method" for nothing short of knowing God? Often clarity on the logic (*logos*) of such method (*meta* meaning quest for, reflection on, or alongside + *hodos* meaning the way or road or path) emerges in hindsight (reflecting on the road that was traveled) and not only as foresight (planning for the road ahead).

The purpose of this introductory essay is not to offer a summary of the various contributions included in this volume. Each author may speak for her-, him-, or themself. The aim is to optimize a rich diversity of perspectives on the same basic question, in the process crossing geographical, confessional, and theological divides and addressing issues of gender, race, language, class, caste and age. The volume itself came into being through a process of ongoing conversation between the contributors. Instead of summarizing, this introductory essay seeks to offer a provisional roadmap for further reflection on method in the context of Christian ecotheology.

At least six provisos need to be noted from the outset: (a) Any such mapping of the terrain can easily assume the possibility of an outside "objective" eye that hides the power embedded in representation and modeling. Such dangers cannot be avoided (maps may be useful) but distortions have to be recognized each step of the way, and the map must be constructed on the basis of multiple perspectives from varied positions in relevant axes of power. (b) Such a mapping of the terrain will always remain provisional, open to re-direction, and *en route*. (c) Given the context of the "Anthropocene" it is best to see such an exercise as the mapping of unchartered territory where there is no paved road but a confusing mesh of faint footpaths and animal tracks in the wilderness. The road ahead is all but clear. (d) Mapping cannot be an aim in itself; at best it can be done while traveling on the road, stopping for a moment to look back on where we came from, and the direction ahead. (e) Walking along the way requires not only a map but also some discipline and a sense of spirituality. (f) It is at best a journey together with various companions (literally those who share their bread) and is much easier if following in the footsteps of others. For Christians as People of the Way[9] it means to follow that way in taking the next step.

9. Early Christian communities, especially as depicted in the Gospel of Mark, were known by some as "People of the Way" (*hodos*).

On Method in Christian Theology: A Map of Paths Trod

Volumes have been written on method in Christian theology. There are as many methods as there may be schools of theology—even though methodological reflection is aimed partly at finding common ground. Theology is hardly a hard science. It may be best to regard it not as a science but as a disciplined art, a disciplined and experiential way of thinking and perceiving among disciples (learners, not teachers), People of the Way, on the way. The limitations of a single essay preclude engaging in a discussion of theology and science, or theology as a science, or with issues such as knowledge, rationality, disciplinarity, or trans-disciplinarity—important as these certainly are.

Instead, it may be helpful to unpack the various aspects of method embedded in the core question addressed in this volume. Again: "Given what we know about the 'Anthropocene', how does one even begin to answer the question: What is this God up to and how ought humans respond?" Note the emphasis on knowledge and epistemology, on science and social sciences, on the recognition of change and therefore on contemporary experiences, on God's identity as expressed in Scripture and how this has been perceived in Christian traditions, on critique, and reconstruction. All these and more have to be held together in discerning an appropriate response to what God may be doing in this moment.

Most Christian theologies recognize the need to juggle four sources of theological knowing. Expressed in the so-called Methodist quadrilateral these may be named as (a) the biblical roots of Christianity, (b) subsequent Christian traditions in their many forms, (c) contemporary experience within a particular context, and (d) other bodies of knowledge such as science, art, philosophy, the humanities, and the social sciences. All are to be engaged through both faith and reason including critical reflection.

However, there is no consensus on how these are related to each other. Methodists, together with other evangelicals, Lutherans, and Reformed theologians would typically insist on the priority of Scripture so that references to tradition, experience, and other bodies of human knowledge are subject to Scripture as the "primary norm" (as the motto of *sola Scriptura* is often understood). Theology is then based on exegesis; the task is to listen anew to the Word of God, for us, today, as mediated through the Scriptures. Whether or not such priority is indeed maintained is contested by others who eagerly demonstrate how, in practice, Scripture is read through the lens of particular confessional traditions (i.e., doctrines, ecclesial structures, rituals, etc.), or theological schools (which constitute new traditions), and through the lens of experience and context and the vested interests embedded in such contexts. Orthodox and Catholic Christians typically recognize the role of the ecclesial tradition and the stability that it provides, the former highlighting the relevance

of the church fathers in the first millennium, the latter including developments of the second millennium, while recognizing the possibilities for the renewal of the tradition. Modernists focus on the role of reason and seek ways to relate the knowledge of God with what we can and do know from other sources. This prompts debates on "natural theology" —which is welcomed by some as necessary and critiqued by others as dangerous. Some scholars working in ecotheology draw inspiration from contemporary science, including climate science and, in the "Anthropocene," Earth system science, but also a range of other natural sciences, so that their positions are shaped by an evolutionary worldview, while others seek to retrieve a more traditional, "primal" worldview.[10] An emphasis on contemporary experience is found in diverse movements—in the pietist emphasis on the heart, in classic Western phenomenologies of religious experience (Eliade, Otto, Schleiermacher, Tillich, Van der Leeuw), in Pentecostal notions of Spirit baptism, in prophetic theologies discerning the "signs of the time," and in a wide array of forms of spirituality. In ecotheology, attention is drawn to a fifth source, namely other-than-human voices of mountains and hills, plants, and animals, of the Earth itself.[11] This move hearkens back to the ancient theological claim that God reveals Godself in two books—the book of creation and the book of scripture. How these two books are related to each other remains deeply contested.[12]

The deeper question is not whether these sources of doing theology are each relevant or which one should be prioritized, but how they are interpreted, and how they may be juggled in relationship to one another. One finds a conflicting plurality of attempts to map the terrain—so that there are not only many aspects to map but also many different maps. The following examples may simply be listed here, noting ongoing contestations in each case:

- In early monasteries, the classic Greek trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric was adapted to suggest that the task of theology requires reading (the Scriptures), meditation (on the significance of what was read), and prayer (responding to that, first to God and then to others). In Benedictine monasteries this was followed by manual labor in the community and service in the world.
- In emerging cathedral schools there was a scholastic return to the Greek trivium of grammar (biblical exegesis), logic (disputation on the Christian faith), and rhetoric (public speaking on the significance of that). This moved theology outside of daily devotion into the public sphere and prepared the way for the emergence of studying theology at universities. Luther

10. See, for example, Balcomb, *Journey into the African Sun*.

11. See Birch et al., *Bible and Ethics*, 174–77.

12. In Volume 1 of this series on *An Earthed Faith* this is framed as the relationship between the Christian story of who God is and what God has done and the universe story. See Conradie and Lai, *Taking a Deep Breath.*

recognized a fourth element of theological reflection alongside, grammar, logic, and rhetoric, namely *tentatio*, the role of affliction, doubt, and fear.

- The rise of universities under conditions of modernity allowed for far-reaching specialization and fragmentation. It became harder to defend the place of theology at research-driven universities. At the Humboldt University in Berlin, Friedrich Schleiermacher nevertheless defended the role of theology given the need to study the phenomenon of religious experience. He distinguished three aspects of this task, namely biblical theology, historical theology (both studying past experiences), and practical theology (training professionals for service in the church). In this mode, systematic theology was primarily regarded as an ecclesial discipline. If this is added, this leads to the "fourfold paradigm" that is widely followed in theological training across the world. There are numerous sub-divisions and further fragmentation but the same basic pattern remains in place, up to this day, in many schools of theology.[13]
- These four theological sub-disciplines could still be held together under the rubric of hermeneutics, the discipline that reflects on interpretation. It gradually became clear that interpretation is not merely a theoretical understanding of the meaning of something but also a practical appropriation of such meaning in the life of the interpreter and the interpreting community. Moreover, such appropriation does not necessarily follow but typically precedes theoretical reflection. This suggests a process of interwoven action and reflection, not explication first and application second. If so, one may speak of interpretation as the interpretation of Scripture, the tradition as the tradition of interpretation, experience as the context within which interpretation is situated and reason as the search for relatively adequate interpretation. Admittedly, confusion emerged over the object to be interpreted: is that the biblical texts, or God's revelation, or the gospel, or the historical Jesus, or Godself, or the Christian tradition, or oneself, or the world, or the meaning of history—in light of all the others. Moreover, it became clear that any act of interpretation is made complex by the historical distance between the historical texts and changing contemporary contexts and by radical distortions caused by various ideologies (e.g., white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, elitism, anthropocentrism). The recognition of such ideologies requires what is termed a hermeneutics of suspicion instead of a naive hermeneutics of trust. Others call for a spiral moving from trust to suspicion to a hermeneutics of critical retrieval.[14] Plurality in interpretation is boundless, and is seen by some as undermining interpretation and by others as enhancing it.

13. See especially Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*.

14. Literature on theological hermeneutics could fill volumes. The role of the Earth Bible series and the Exeter project on *Ecological Hermeneutics* (edited by Horrell et al.) deserve special mentioning. We draw here on South African attempts to map the field, such as in Conradie, *Angling for Interpretation.* See also his essay in this volume.

- Such a hermeneutical understanding of theology is sometimes formalized as an act of correlation, establishing similarities and differences (analogies, contrasts, paradoxes, consensus) between, for example, text and context, God and world, gospel and culture, Christ and culture, church and society, theology and science, faith and reason, revelation and experience, between a social analysis of the contemporary situation and the message of God's salvation. Paul Tillich famously suggested a correlation between the questions that people have about the world around them and answers derived from faith.[15] David Tracy proposed mutually critical correlations so that "answers" can also be found in the contemporary context while "questions" can also be put regarding faith.[16] Likewise, in many contextual theologies a critical analysis of problems in the contemporary context is related to an equally critical retrieval of the Christian faith. This recognizes the danger of addressing theological problems that do not pertain to realities at hand so that the reflection becomes irrelevant to what is needed for well-being within a particular context.
- Liberation theologies introduced an important corrective in this regard. While hermeneutic theology recognized the role of preunderstanding shaped by traditions of interpretation, there was a tendency to describe such preunderstanding in noetic and conversational terms. Liberation theologies insisted that such a preunderstanding is embedded in praxis and that theoretical reflection is itself a form of praxis. If so, then theological reflection needs to be assessed in terms of its impact, for example as reinforcing systems of oppression or as dismantling them. This builds on the Marxian motto that there is not only a need to understand the world, but also to transform it. Likewise, there is a need not just for liberation theology, but for the liberation of theology itself (Juan Luis Segundo).[17] The question is therefore whether theological positions are liberating or oppressive, enhancing peace or inciting violence, Earth-honoring[18] or not (to use the categories of the Conciliar process toward "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" as three relevant criteria). This suggests a model of ongoing action and reflection that yielded an understanding of Christian theology as critical reflection on Christian praxis, with social analysis and other forms of reflection on the world as integral to that critical reflection. Gustavo Gutiérrez maintains that such critical reflection takes place "in the light of the Word."[19]

15. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology I,* 59–68.

16. See already Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 43–87.

17. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology.*

18. See, e.g. Rasmussen, *Earth-honoring Faith*; Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics.*

19. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.

- This emphasis on praxis yielded a method for what has become known as contextual theology[20] often described in terms of three "steps" or dimensions, namely Seeing, Judging and Acting.[21] Seeing, requires far more than the social analysis commonly equated with "seeing" in this paradigm. Rather, seeing calls for cultivating self-critical awareness of the "eyes through which we see [...] demystifying what is hidden from view by the blinders of privilege" that shape perception of reality for people in positions of privilege.[22] In the words of womanist theo-ethicist Katie Cannon, seeing entails "unmask[ing], debunk[ing], and disentangl[ing] [...] the ideologies, theologies and systems of value operative in a particular society."[23] Judging requires an assessment of that context, the role of religion (Christianity) in it, and discernment of what constitutes faithful response. The criteria for judging include but are not restricted to the Bible or Christian faith traditions, and the cries and constructive proposals of people on the underside of power and privilege. Such seeing and judging needs to lead to emancipating acting. This suggests an ongoing praxis or spiral of action and reflection so that the method may best be described as Act–See–Judge–Act. Some would add that seeing does not necessarily come before judging but that they are simultaneous processes. The danger would otherwise be that the methods adopted for contextual analysis determine the outcome of theological reflection. Praxis-oriented theology has developed in many forms, and a wide variety of sophisticated methods and models is proposed in the literature.[24]
- Perhaps the most significant development in theology of the last five and a half decades has been the rise of theologies—including black, womanist, feminist, *Minjung*, Mujerista, queer, decolonial, postcolonial, Dalit, and other such forms of theology—that take a critical and prophetic approach to matters of social justice as it pertains to particular groups of people who have been oppressed by dominant culture and have been resisting that oppression. These typically build on but also radicalize and contextualize the insights of classic liberation theologies and praxis-oriented methods. Sometimes Christian praxis is understood more narrowly as ecclesial praxis, sometimes more broadly as the struggle for emancipation (in society). Often the phrase "in the light of the Word" is subjected to the suspicion that the "Word of God" is used to maintain ecclesial authority and current systems of oppression, and that it served as a fundamental building block

20. See note 6.

21. The best example here remains the *Kairos Document* (see ICT 1986).

22. Moe-Lobeda, "Climate Change as Climate Debt."

23. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 138.

24. Among numerous examples two widely used references may suffice, namely Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*; Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*.

of the logics of domination that undergird Western modernity and its colonizing project. Written largely by elite classes, biblical texts and the history of interpretation come under scrutiny for their use in legitimizing patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and more. In short, the Bible is a product of struggle, a record of past struggles, and a site of ongoing struggle. Its interpretation has become a similar "site of struggle" between oppressors and oppressed, exploiters and exploited, while intersectional awareness reveals that some people reside in both camps at the same time.[25] In response, the starting point for theology and interpretation becomes the experience of marginalized people. Itumeleng Mosala, for example, insists that, "The social, historical, political and economic world of the black working class and peasantry constitutes the only valid starting point for a black theology of liberation."[26] According to womanist scholar Renita Weems, womanist interpretation as a "hermeneutics of liberation shares with feminist hermeneutics of liberation the goal of changing consciousness and transforming reality," but adds the goal of "empower[ing] African American women as readers, as agents, and as shapers of discourse," decentering "the privileged status of the dominant readings and the dominant community of readers," insisting that women of color have the "right to read and interpret sacred texts for themselves and should not have to defend or apologize for their interpretations."[27] This may well yield a form of inverse hermeneutics,[28] that is one where the focus is no longer on the meaning of the text for the context but on the implications of a particular social analysis for a critique of the text itself.

- Missionary Christianity typically denounced Indigenous cultures as barbarism and Indigenous religions as idolatry. In response, Indigenous theologies have emerged in multiple contexts—in Africa, in the Andes region, in Pasifika, in Native American environments, in the Nordic region, and so forth. Three features of such Indigenous theologies are of particular methodological significance: First, there is a widespread retrieval of Indigenous ecological wisdom as a response to imperial, colonial, and modernist forms of extractive capitalism and resource exploitation. Second, there is an appraisal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as a valid source for theological reflection and as an alternative research methodology.[29] Calls for epistemic justice join with existing calls for economic, gender, and racial justice. Third, there is an emphasis on the

25. Mosala, "The Use of the Bible," 196.

26. Mosala, "The Use of the Bible," 181.

27. Weems, "Re-Reading for Liberation," 57.

28. See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 420–32.

29. Two standard references in this regard are Chilisa's, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*; Smith's, *Decolonizing Methodologies.*

continuity between, for example, African traditional notions of the Supreme Being and the Christian proclamation of God as Triune.[30] In some cases, this yields a radical rejection of Christianity as irredeemably colonial or at least a far-reaching hermeneutics of suspicion. However, where Christianity has become deeply entrenched in the hearts and minds of believers, this more typically requires reflection on hybrid identities and on processes of social and religious transformation.

- Some may be concerned that such proposed methods for theological reflection cannot do justice to the subject matter. They warn that the focus on God, God's revelation, the Bible, and the Word of God is replaced by human experience, by Christianity or Christian spirituality, by religion in general and even by culture, society, or the world as such. At worst, they caution, theology is reduced to running journalistic commentary on political trends. We would respond that this is not typically the case. As articulated in South African Kairos theology, the need to recognize the "signs of the time," a specific kairotic moment in time, is vital to perceiving God's activity in such times. And, as noted, reading the signs of the times includes discerning the counter-movements of the Spirit. As the South African ecumenist, activist, and politician Frank Chikane insists, "theology is and can only be a reflection on the continuing activity of God in the world."[31] For African theologian Gabriel Setiloane, theology entails "a verbalization of the experiences of the divinity at work."[32] To perceive who God is and what God is doing in human and planetary history requires deep commitment not only to see the world ever more clearly and especially to perceive systemic evil disguised as good by the blinders of privilege, but also to recognize God's transformative activity to bring justice and joy for all creatures.
- Many contemporary forms of theology emphasize the necessity of not only critique but also of retrieval and reconstruction as vital tasks of theology. Retrieval refers to searching for and identifying voices long ignored, repressed, denigrated, or never recorded in the history of Christian reflection and experience. This builds on the early feminist insistence on hearing the voices of women who were present in the contexts about which biblical texts were written but went largely unacknowledged in the texts. More recently, queer theologians have demonstrated the presence and significant influence of queer people in biblical texts, in the legion of saints canonized by the Catholic Church, and throughout the church for two millennia. This movement of retrieval is also the basis of the Earth Bible

30. This is especially evident in African Christian theology, following the pioneering role played by John S, Mbiti throughout his oeuvre. See also Conradie and Sakupapa, "Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity."

31. Chikane, "Doing Theology," 99.

32. Quoted by Chikane, "Doing Theology," 99.

series, led by Norman Habel, which retrieves the voices of Earth's creatures and elements other than human in biblical texts.[33]

- Along with the tasks of critique and retrieval, reconstruction or construction constitutes a third task of theological reflection. In the African context, the need to supplement liberation theology with a theology of reconstruction in order to sketch a viable alternative to the logic of domination is proposed by scholars such as Jesse Mugambi.[34] Likewise, decolonial theologies avoid replacing colonial oppression with other masters and seek ways of thinking and living no longer determined by the colonial past. Feminist theologies typically recognize the need for a constructive contribution by emphasizing relationships that are not based on domination but on mutual respect, mutual support, and reciprocity. In some liberal theologies in the West such a constructive task is radicalized to suggest that theology has been and remains a form of creative and imaginative construction.[35] We are called to deconstruct, retrieve, and reconstruct images of God in order to offer a critique of but also guidance for human societies.

One question for the constructive or reconstructive task of theology is how it will proceed without re-inscribing the very epistemologies and other aspects of method that inhere in the DNA of theological reflection as shaped by the worldviews and logics of domination and dualism that undergird the cultures in which Christian theological reflection has formed over two millennia.[36] Black theologian, Willie Jennings argues that theological education has been profoundly "distorted" by being "born in white hegemony" that idealizes and promotes the ideal of "white self-sufficient masculinity." This term "is not first a person or a people; it is a way of organizing life with ideas and forming a persona that distorts identity and strangles the possibilities of dense life together." This formation mitigates against "communion," by which he means "the deepest sense of God-drenched life attuned to life together."[37] What Jennings claims about theological education also holds for theological reflection. Herein lies a profound challenge for method in ecotheology.

Another question for such a constructive task is what Christians will contribute based on their traditions, beliefs, sacred texts, historical movements and figures, rituals and institutions that no other tradition can. This also applies to Christian ecotheology: What will it contribute that is distinctive and crucial to environmental awareness, praxis, ethos, and spirituality? It would

33. The Earth Bible project was launched with the volume *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (2000), edited by Norman Habel. Numerous further volumes and commentaries have been published since that time.

34. See especially Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*.

35. See, for example, Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery.*

36. Moe-Lobeda, "Faith and #BlackLivesMatter."

37. Jennings, *After Whiteness,* 5, 6, 8, 8–9, 10, 13–14.

amount to a failure of courage and imagination to merely reiterate what others say. It would suggest that Christians no longer believe in their own message.[38]

On the Emergence of Ecotheology as an Academic Discourse

Several direct and indirect prompts for the emergence of Christian ecotheology are noteworthy. One is the rise of postcolonial and decolonial thinking and the process of decolonization following World War II, especially in India and throughout Africa. Another is the famous speech by Joseph Sittler at the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) (1961) and his many other writings.[39] The impact of the widely-read essay by Lynn White (Jr.) on "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967) is usually mentioned as a polemic source of much ecotheological reflection. One may also mention Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) on toxic pollution, the rising concerns over the nuclear arms race sparked off by the Cuban missile crisis (1963), the Geneva conference on "Church and Society" hosted by the WCC (1968), and soon afterward the famous report to the Club of Rome on *Limits to Growth* (1972).

In the Western academy, Christian ecotheology arguably emerged as an ecumenical scholarly discourse in 1970. This is marked by Frederick Elder's *Crisis in Eden*, Hugh Montefiore's *Can Man Survive*?, Paul Santmire's *Brother Earth* and Joseph Sittler's *The Ecology of Faith*, all published in that year. This was soon followed by John Cobb's *Is it Too Late?,* Francis Schaeffer's *Pollution and the Death of Man*, and Sittler's *Essays on Nature and Grace,* all in 1972. Notably each of these early books was written in English and mostly by American men. This would change significantly in the subsequent decades. Yet, the field—as an academic discipline—is still dominated by English so that other languages with a significant corpus of ecotheology (including Afrikaans, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish) remain largely side-lined in the Euro-Western academy. Here arises an immense challenge to method in ecotheology. The academy in the Western world is notorious for prioritizing voices that are written or translated into English. Yet this means that profoundly important clues and insights into method, coming from ecotheologians who are not translated into English, are likely to be ignored as the field develops unless commitments are made to centralize voices that have been marginalized. To illustrate, ecotheologies coming from the Global South more commonly emphasize intersectionality and insist on

38. See Conradie, "(How) Are We Doing Ecotheology," 295, an essay from which we draw here.

39. See Sittler, "Called to Unity" in the collection of Sittler's essays edited by Bakken and Bouma-Prediger, *Evocations of Grace*, 38–50.

linking ecological concerns to matters of social justice. The significance of this move cannot be overstated.

Contributions to ecotheology generated by people or peoples not recognized or heard at all in the Western academy are vitally important for the conscious development of method. This includes ecotheology that does not go by that name or by the nomenclature of "theology" in any form—reflections on the presence of the sacred in lived experience of people and their relationships with and perceptions of the other-than-human world. These may be the reflections of people whose work is not published in academic venues, including some of the work by Indigenous scholars and activists. Again, the loss to the development of ecotheology and its method would be immeasurable.

Thus, one potentially fruitful challenge to method in ecotheology is that of learning from and crediting voices from multiple languages and from contexts not regularly heeded by academic theology. Here the limitations of this essay become glaringly evident. In the confines of a single section of one essay, we have undertaken a summary of ecotheology's emergence as an academic discipline. That is a valid task. Yet, two limitations of that task must be acknowledged. First, by focusing on Western academic discourse, it inherently emphasizes the English corpus. And second, it does not include trajectories outside the boundaries of academic theology. A comprehensive global history of ecotheology—both within academic worlds and outside of them—is far beyond the scope of this essay, and would be an invaluable contribution, especially in light of efforts to de-center the Euro-Western world in theology.

From its beginnings Christian ecotheology arose throughout the world, one may say wherever an ecological awareness was prompted by a diverse range of threats. It is not possible to narrate the story in full here as it would fill volumes. Ecotheology has become a major, if somewhat amorphous discourse that is found in a wide variety of confessional traditions, geographic locations, theological schools, cultures, languages, and social locations. Often it is regarded as a transversal or a dimension of other discourses, for example in womanist, feminist, process, liberation, and Indigenous theologies. One now has to say that everything is ecological while ecology is (perhaps) not everything—in the same way that everything is political but politics is not everything.[40] The same applies to language, hermeneutics, gender, culture, space, and the like—each constituting a "turn" in the humanities and social sciences.

In addition, a wide variety of intellectual movements outside of theology have shaped the emergence and subsequent history of ecotheology. One may mention the role of womanist literature, other black feminist social theory,

40. The phrase is derived from Kuitert, *Everything is Politics*.

critical theory in its many forms, various natural sciences, contestations over neoliberal globalization, different approaches to environmental ethics (biocentric, ecocentric, the land ethic, social ecology, deep ecology, ecofeminist, etc.), legal discourse on animal rights and the rights of nature, the rise of ecofeminism around the world, postcolonial and decolonial theory, the retrieval of IKS, and many more. The boundaries between such intellectual movements and Christian ecotheology are often fluid. Where, for example, do ecowomanist and ecofeminist theory become ecowomanist and ecofeminist theology? Critical theory and critical ecotheological reflection, likewise, are interlacing.

The development of ecotheology has been and continues to be influenced not only by intellectual movements but also by related social movements and activist trajectories around the world. Foremost among them are the movements for food justice, water justice, climate justice, and related issues in terms of land, race, and gender. While some exponents of ecotheology count these movements as primary sources of theological reflection and interlocuters, others seem untouched by them.

It suffices to mention some early exponents of academic ecotheology before the turn to the twenty-first century in various schools. This illustrates that there is no one method in Christian ecotheology. Scholars adopt—or critique and reform—the methodological strategies of the confessional traditions and theological schools to which they belong:

- Indian theologians and economists such as M.M. Thomas, Paulose Mar Gregorios, S.L. Parmar, and C.T. Kurien were instrumental in initiating an ecumenical engagement with economics, development, technology, and sustainability in the 1960s and 1970s.[41] In subsequent contributions an emphasis on linking environmental and economic concerns in the face of massive poverty ensured that ecotheology remained intersectional and justice-oriented, as illustrated in the work of K.C. Abraham, Geevarghese Mar Coorilose, Aruna Gnanadason, Paulos Mar Gregorios, Sebastian Kappen SJ, and Samuel Rayan SJ.[42] Another early contribution to ecotheology from South Asia was by Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya in *Planetary Theology* (1984).
- The earliest contributions to ecotheology from the perspective of process theology were by John Cobb Jr.. This was soon followed by John Haught, Catherine Keller, Jay McDaniel, and indeed many others.

41. J.C. Kumarappa, an Indian Christian economist and a close associate of Gandhi developed Gandhian economics into a systematic economic system, for example in Kumarappa, *Christianity: Its Economy and Way of Life* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1945; with gratitude to George Zachariah for the reference).

42. With gratitude to George Zachariah for the references in this paragraph. See also his contribution in this volume.

- One of the first contributions to ecofeminist theology in the North Atlantic context was by Rosemary Radford Ruether, namely *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975) while Mary Daly published *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaphysics of Radical Feminism* in 1978. Other such early contributions were by Mary Grey, Catharina Halkes, Grace Jantzen, Catherine Keller, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Anne Primavesi, and Dorothy Sölle.
- In ecumenical theology, the Nairobi Assembly (1975) of the WCC with its motto of "Towards a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society" and the Conciliar Process toward "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation," following the Vancouver Assembly (1983) and leading toward the World Convocation on JPIC in Seoul (1990)[43] prompted widespread further reflection.
- Indigenous scholars from around the world made contributions to ecumenical reflection on the Integrity of Creation and retrieved Indigenous ecological wisdom in this regard. In the Native American context Vine Deloria's *God is Red* (1973) and many subsequent essays by George Tinker may be mentioned. Contributions from elsewhere in the world soon followed.
- Lutheran and Reformed scholars such as Günter Altner, Hendrikus Berkhof, Calvin DeWitt, Philip Hefner, Dieter Hessel, Ole Jensen, Christian Link, Klaus Meyer-Abich, Jürgen Moltmann, Ted Peters, Larry Rasmussen, Holmes Rolston III, Paul Santmire, Joseph Sittler, and Loren Wilkinson each made significant contributions to ecotheology already in the 1970s.
- In the African context some early contributions were made in the 1980s by Emmanuel Asante, Marthinus Daneel, Jesse Mugambi,[44] and Harvey Sindima. Ecotheology flourishes especially in the context of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians, as is illustrated by a volume entitled *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, edited by Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (1996). The work of Mercy Oduyoye was foundational and more recent contributions by Sophia Chirongoma, Mary Getui, Fulata Moyo-Mbano, Kuzipa Nalwamba, Isabel Phiri, and many others are noteworthy.
- In *Minjung* theologies (in South Korea) the concept of life is sometimes used instead of "ecology," as illustrated in the early contributions of Kim Yong Bock, Heup Yong Kim, and Chung Hyun Kyung.[45]
- In Western Catholicism one may find some precursors to ecotheology (e.g., in the writings of Lonergan, Rahner, Schillebeeckx, and Teilhard), but

43. See especially Niles, *Covenanting, Resisting, Between the Flood and the Rainbow.*

44. See Mugambi, *God, Humanity and Nature in Relation to Justice and Peace*.

45. See her keynote address at the Canberra Assembly of the WCC (1991), entitled "Come, Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation".

it began to flourish through the work of diverse scholars such as Thomas Berry, Celia Deane-Drummond, Ilia Delio, Denis Edwards, Matthew Fox, Elizabeth Johnson, and Rosemary Ruether.

- In Orthodox theology the cosmic work of the Holy Spirit was easily extended to address ecological concerns, especially through the influence of the ecumenical patriarchs Dimitrios I (1972–1991) and Bartholomew (1992–) and scholars such as Paulus Mar Gregorios, John Chryssavgis, Elizabeth Theokritoff, Kallistos Ware, and John Zizioulas.
- In Latin America, liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Virgilio Elizondo, and Ivone Gebara recognized the link between poverty and ecology, the "cry of the poor" and the "cry of the Earth"[46]—a motto that was also picked up by the Argentinian Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*. More recently, responding to current challenges, various editions of *Voices*, the journal of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (which also include regional perspectives from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Indigenous communities around the world), published significant contributions to ecotheology by the Latin American (LA) section of EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) (mostly in Spanish and Portuguese).[47]
- Ecowomanist theologies began appearing in the USA in the early 1990s, for example through contributions by Karen Baker-Fletcher, Shamara Shantu Riley, and Delores Williams. Numerous younger voices, led by Melanie Harris soon followed. Among them is Sofia Betancourt. A significant contribution from the perspective of black theology was made by James Cone through a paper entitled "Whose earth is it anyway?" (1998).
- Contributions to ecotheology from the Pacific region are becoming increasingly significant, not least given experiences of the impact of rising sea levels. Such voices are prominent in the lobbying of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) at the various Conferences of the Parties, at consultations of the WCC, and through postgraduate studies by church leaders. An early example is the PhD thesis of Ama'amalele Tofaeono (Samoa) entitled *Ecotheology: Aiga—The Household of Life* (2000). Subsequent contributions may be found in the work of Cliff Bird (Solomon Islands), Faafetai Aiava (Samoa), and Upolu Lumā Vaai (Samoa/Fiji), while Clive Pearson (originally from New Zealand) regularly supervises postgraduate projects in the field.
- The academic field of religion and ecology—stimulated by the work of Thomas Berry and further developed through a series of ten conferences organized by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim beginning in 1996 at the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions—provided fertile soil for

46. See especially, Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*; Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*.

47. For an overview, see Kerber, "A Reading Guide" and his essay in this volume.

> the growth of ecotheology. Such conversations between the various world religions, including Indigenous religions, have subsequently flourished in different geographic regions throughout the world. For some discourse on "religion and ecology" cannot be clearly distinguished from Christian ecotheology, while others frame this as a debate on the "theology of religions."

Since the 1970s, and in part because of the early influence of the WCC, many streams of ecotheology have rightly insisted that theological inquiry into ecological matters must consider the social justice implications of those matters. This commitment is becoming more widespread with increasing recognition that climate change is—for example—far more deadly for the world's economically impoverished people and people of color, yet is caused largely by the world's high consuming people who are also disproportionately white.[48] Yet much ecotheology coming from the Global North continues to focus on the ecological side of the conservation–social justice nexus.[49] As noted earlier, this is a crucial line of debate, also regarding method in ecotheology.

The term "ecotheology" itself gained currency only in the 1990s. This was symbolized by an important WCC volume entitled *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (1994), edited by David Hallman and by the name change of the journal *Theology in Green* (1992–1996) to *Ecotheology* (1996–2006).[50] The abbreviated term "ecotheology," instead of "ecological theology," must be understood against the background of the term "ecojustice" which is used in ecumenical discourse to capture the need for a comprehensive sense of justice that can respond to economic injustice, ecological degradation, *and* the interplay between them. This term was coined by William Gibson and popularized by Dieter Hessel.[51] It builds upon the recognition that the English words ecology, economy, and ecumenical share the same etymological root in the Greek *oikos* (household). Accordingly, ecology describes the underlying logic (*logos*) of the household, economy circumscribes the rules (*nomoi*) for

48. This ecology/social justice nexus is treated more fully, for example, in Moe-Lobeda, "From Climate Debt to Climate Justice," and in "Climate Change as Race Debt, Class Debt, Climate Colonialism."

49. In the South African context this is typically framed as a debate on the "green" agenda of nature conservation and the "brown" agenda of ecojustice. In response, Steve De Gruchy proposed "An Olive Agenda" to hold together such concerns.

50. The journal *Ecotheology* was subsumed under the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* that started publishing in 2007, indicating another symbolic shift.

51. Hessel defines "ecojustice" in the following way: "A combination of ecology and social justice, "eco-justice" refers to the interlocking web of concern about the earth's carrying capacity, its ability to support the lives of its inhabitants and the human family's ability to live together in harmony. It highlights the interrelatedness of such pressing issues such as world hunger and world peace, the energy crisis and unemployment, appropriate technology and good work, biblical stewardship and feminist consciousness, radical justice and pluralistic community, life-style choices in response to poverty and pollution." See Hessel, *For Creation's Sake*, 12.

the management of the household, while the "whole inhabited world" (*oikoumene*) refers to the inhabitation of the household. In ecclesial terms one may also speak of "ecodomy" as the upbuilding of the household.[52] One may therefore say that ecotheology is the English translation of the Greek oikos + theos + logos. Indeed, the "whole household of God" has become a dominant root metaphor in many strands of ecotheology, for example, in contexts as far apart as the Pacific islands, South Africa, and South Korea.[53]

Even though the term ecotheology is widely used, there is little or no consensus on what doing ecotheology entails.[54] Ecotheology is characterized by global divides—along confessional lines, between the North and the South, the West and the East, between academics and church practitioners, the clergy and the laity, on nature conservation versus ecojustice, on issues of gender and sexual orientation, and, especially, by reference to contemporary science (especially in the Global North) and/or traditional, Indigenous wisdom (widespread in the Global South). Worldviews clearly play an important role, although this category is itself contested and open to confusion.[55] Another crucial factor, prompting both a rich plurality of voices and considerable confusion, is the role of interlocutors and implied readers. These are found in the academy (with the full range of disciplines), the church (the laity or church leaders and decision-making bodies), and various sectors of society (including politics, agriculture, business, and industry, jurisprudence, the media, and activist movements in civil society). Often particular discourses in ecotheology remain isolated from others in "special-interest" lobby groups.

With other theological discourses, ecotheology shares the need to make distinctions while also drawing connections and perhaps challenging dualities in various arenas—the relationships of Christian theology with other forms of theology (especially in the Abrahamic faiths but also with reference to other religious traditions and notions of the "Supreme Being" in Indigenous religion), theology with religious studies, the humanities with the social sciences and, in the "Anthropocene," the humanities with the natural sciences. All the disputes on the very existence, identity, and character of God (the *theos* in ecotheology)

52. See especially Müller-Fahrenholz, *God's Spirit.*

53. The metaphor of the whole household of God is widely explored in ecumenical theology since the early contributions by general secretaries such as Philip Potter and Konrad Raiser. Among countless publications, see again Tofaeono, *Eco-Theology: Aiga—The Household of Life*, also Ayre and Conradie, *The Church in God's Household* and the envisaged volume 6 of this series (on ecclesiology).

54. The term "doing theology" deliberately and explicitly includes the theological reflection of the laity. It also includes whatever is taught in sermons, Christian education, pastoral care and counselling, and so forth, and the popular literature that may be produced in the process. It does not exclude formal theological education or the scholarly production of research in the field of ecotheology, but this is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Even so, ecotheology is often reduced to scholarly output—which may well be understood as "producing" theology, rather than "teaching," "studying," or "doing" theology.

55. See Conradie, "Views on Worldviews," also "Ways of Viewing an Evolving World."

come into play when juxtaposed with the terms *oikos* and *logos*. As we will indicate, there are not only diverging views on *theos* and *oikos* but also on the presumed *logos*/Logos given the long-standing disputes—as well as fruitful dialogues—between the various sub-disciplines of Christian theology and between theological studies, secular fields of ethics, religious studies, and philosophy. Not surprisingly, such disputes and interplay spill over into discourse on ecotheology.

On Method in Ecotheology

Christian ecotheology cannot be reduced to environmental ethics, or creation theology, or Christian earthkeeping praxis. It touches on all aspects of Christianity and therefore on all the theological sub-disciplines[56] This could best be understood in terms of the notion of reformation. The Lutheran reformation may have started with a critique of indulgences but soon the notion of justification by grace through faith touched on all aspects of the faith, biblical interpretation, Christian ethos, ecclesial praxis, and of course also institutions. Likewise, an ecological reformation of Christianity soon becomes comprehensive. It may start with Christian concerns over ecological destruction but this also yields an ecological critique of Christianity as being complicit in such destruction in multiple ways.[57]

Not surprisingly, there are widely diverging points of entry into what could be included under "ecotheology" as an umbrella term. Consider these fourteen rubrics, in randomized order, each with a vast literature from around the world and considerable internal contestation:

- Christian discourse on environmental stewardship or "creation care," typically with reference to nature conservation, wilderness preservation, and the loss of biodiversity and with attention to greening the church or forming eco-congregations;
- Christian discourse on climate change mitigation and adaptation and associated issues around climate debt, climate justice, climate racism, just transition, climate engineering, and technology transfer;
- Christian discourse on the significance of religious thought in interdisciplinary responses to ecological matters;
- Christian discourse on a "Season of Creation," greening the liturgy and preaching, seeking appropriate rituals amid environmental disasters;
- Christian discourse on the rights of Indigenous peoples, the rights of nature, and animal rights;

56. See Conradie, "The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology," from which we draw in this essay.

57. On such a notion of ecological reformation, see Andrianos et al., *Kairos for Creation*, Conradie and Pillay, *Ecclesial Deform and Reform Movements*; Conradie, Tsalampouni, and Werner, "The Volos Call"; Dahill and Martin-Schramm, *Eco-reformation*.

- Christian discourse on embodiment, typically with reference to issues of gender, sexual orientation but also reproductive health;
- Christian discourse on an ecological biblical hermeneutics retrieving the biblical texts with both suspicion and trust, amid vast ecological challenges;
- Christian discourse on environmental dimension of racism and the racial dimension of environmental issues, for example with reference to toxic waste management and the disproportionate impact of climate change on people of color around the world;
- Christian discourse on cosmology, the epic of cosmic, biological, and human evolution;
- Christian discourse on creation as being at the heart of God's mission;
- Christian discourse addressing macro-economic concerns over poverty, unemployment, and inequality;
- Christian discourse on sustenance, food security, sustainable agriculture, the plight of farmed animals, the use of biotechnology, and genetic engineering;
- Christian discourse on the critique of and reinterpretation of classic symbols, doctrines, and moral codes;
- Christian participation in multi-religious and multidisciplinary dialogue on each of the listed points and in a wide range of classic and emerging forms of spirituality: Aboriginal, African, animist, Celtic, ecofeminist, evangelical, Franciscan, Ignatian, Indigenous, Lutheran, Mennonite, New Age, Pentecostal, Quaker, Reformed, you name it!

All of this would suggest that ecotheology typically involves fruitful interaction among the various disciplines within theological studies. Indeed, at times it does. Nevertheless, the old, tired methodological disputes between the theological sub-disciplines are readily revived in the context of ecotheology, often leading to misunderstanding if not conflict. Contributions from within biblical studies, the history of Christianity, systematic theology, Christian ethics, practical theology, and missiology approach the subject matter in diverging ways. Consider the resistance to doctrine in biblical hermeneutics, or the difficulty of defining what is theological about the history of Christianity, or the ecumenical divide between "Ecclesiology and Ethics," the tensions between practical theology with its typical empirical orientation and systematic theology with its conceptual focus, or between the agenda of Christian mission and how this is related to all the other theological sub-disciplines.[58] At the same time, oikos-theology as a transversal theme harbors some promise to address such methodological divides. Ecotheology is typically interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or transdisciplinary in orientation,

58. As an aside one may note that it is exceptionally hard to introduce ecotheology into any theological curriculum because it is not clear where it should be made to fit in. It could fit everywhere but often fits nowhere.

not only within the family of disciplines comprising theological studies (e.g., biblical studies, constructive or systematic theology, theological and social ethics, church history, practical theology, etc.), but also in relationship to other academic disciplines.

Given such dynamics, it would be hard to identify any clear pattern emerging on method in ecotheology. It may be fair to say that individual exponents of ecotheology tend to adopt and sometimes adapt—or critique and re-form—the dominant methods employed within the particular confessional tradition or theological school in which they stand. On matters of epistemology and hermeneutics one finds a wide range of conversation partners in disciplines such as philosophy, religious studies, the humanities, the social sciences, or the natural sciences. For example: Catholic ecotheology may turn to Thomas Aquinas, the Franciscan tradition, or Bernard Lonergan for guidance; ecowomanist theology draws upon sources that are central to womanist theology more broadly speaking such as black literary artists and social theorists; West-European ecotheologies may draw on the hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Jürgen Habermas, or Jacques Derrida; process ecotheology would turn to Alfred North Whitehead; liberation ecotheology may draw on Marxian critiques of knowledge as reflecting economic interests and turn to Paulo Freire's pedagogics of the oppressed; ecofeminist theologies may draw upon varied streams of feminist theory and ecofeminist theory and offer a gendered critique of the epistemic assumptions of the logic of domination in modernity; *Minjung* theology would engage in conversation with Buddhist and Confucian sources; while Indigenous theologies around the world would draw on regional IKS. Some ecotheologians turn more to the experiences of people struggling for climate justice and other forms of ecojustice, or to the teachings of the land itself, and put those experiences and teachings in dialogue with academic disciplinary knowledge.

Given this diverging array of ecotheologies, it comes as no surprise that there are several attempts, typically by Western scholars, to identify models of doing ecotheology. One may mention the typologies offered by Sigurd Bergmann, Ernst Conradie, Celia Deane-Drummond, Heather Eaton, James Gustafson, John Haught, Michael Northcott, Rosemary Radford Reuther, Paul Santmire, Peter Scott, and many more. The line of demarcation of each typology is different and these hardly focus on issues of method. One may even be tempted to explore a typology of typologies!

This volume seeks to make a very specific contribution to such discourse on method in the context of Christian ecotheology. It cannot and need not cover all the themes, angles, and approaches mentioned. Instead, it raises a question of *theological* discernment that would typically be addressed in systematic or constructive theology and/or Christian ethics. Again, this is the question of what God may be up to amid the "Anthropocene" and how human

beings are called to respond. More specifically: How would we know what God is up to? And how would we know how we ought to respond before God?

A Spirituality of the Road

The metaphor of a journey is attractive for doing Christian ecotheology. It carries many biblical overtones given the themes of exodus, the return from exile, the two contrasting ways (Ps 1), the Torah as a lamp for the road ahead (Ps 119:105), the "Way" of Jesus Christ, the *via dolorosa*, the road to Damascus, and the depiction of Christians as sojourners (1 Pet 2:11–12, Heb 11:13) or as People of the Way, and so forth. One may add the notion of the "imitation of Christ" (Thomas á Kempis), following as it were "in the footsteps of Jesus."

Accordingly, as mentioned earlier, doing ecotheology may be described as a journey through an unchartered landscape (or seascape)—unchartered because the future "ain't what it used to be," because of looming thresholds and the now unavoidable impacts of climate change and other forms of ecological devastation that make the world of the future fundamentally different from the world inhabited by humankind for most of human history. Both the temporal and the spatial axis of such a journey are important. In the imagery of the series on "Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'," one may then speak of telling, sharing the story *en route*, with companions—many of whom will have been "strangers" before becoming companions—on the way. This would recognize the value of listening to the stories of people considered "strangers," and would also recognize the role of story-telling in all cultures, at best around a campfire in the evening, anticipating what lies ahead for the next day, sensing what God may be up to.

The metaphor of a journey is nevertheless dangerous—and not only because the road ahead is dangerous. The journey imagery can easily lead to escapism, to the impression that Christians are not at home on earth, that their true home is in heaven with God. This can only lead to alienation from the earth, from "nature," and from other forms of life. One may even argue that the metaphor of a journey is in tension with the image of the "whole household of God" (*oikos*) that constitutes the etymological root of *eco*theology. While the metaphor of a journey emphasizes the temporal axis, the metaphor of the household is more spatial in orientation. These images can easily be combined with the notion of a homecoming journey. Theologically, one may say that the earth is indeed "our" one and only house but that it is not our home yet—given the brutality of economic and racial inequity that prevent some from being "housed" in this good earth, and the many faces of violence and ecological destruction. There is then much to do along the way, in making the house a home for all God's creatures, human included. Being at home, even staying at home is then also a journey of a different kind.

In this volume, we have invited ten companions to travel together for one leg of the journey. They each have stories to tell, food and drink to share. Let us listen to the accounts of from where they come, where they are heading, and what the logos is by which they live. We will communicate in English with each other, with the dangers of hegemony that this implies, even though it is a home language for only two of us. A diversity of other languages and their attendant epistemologies reverberates in the background.

Bibliography

Andrianos, Louk, et al., eds. *Kairos for Creation: Confessing Hope for the Earth*. Solingen: Foedus-Verlag, 2019.

Ayre, Clive W., and Conradie, Ernst M., eds. *The Church in God's Household: Protestant Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ecology*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2016.

Bakken, Peter, and Steven Bouma-Prediger, eds. *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology*, *Theology and Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

Balasuriya, Tissa. *Planetary Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984

Balcomb, Anthony. *Journey into the African Sun: Soundings in Search of Another Way of Being in the World*. Pretoria: Unisa, 2014.

Bauman, Whitney, Ernst M. Conradie, and Heather Eaton, eds. "The Journey of Doing Ecotheology." *Theology* 116 (2013), 1–3, 4–44.

Bevans, Stephen B. *Models of Contextual Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003.

Birch, Bruce C., Lapsley, Jacqueline E., Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia and Rasmussen, Larry. *Bible and Ethics: A New Conversation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017.

Birch, Charles. *Nature and God*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965.

Boff, Leonardo and Virgilio Elizondo eds. *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor, Concilium*. 1995/5. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995.

Boff, Leonardo. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997.

Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991.

Cannon, Katie G. *Black Womanist Ethics*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988.

Chikane, Frank. "Doing Theology in a Situation of Conflict." In *Resistance and Hope: South African Essays in Honour of Beyers Naudé*, edited by Charles Villa-Vicencio and John W. de Gruchy, 98–102. Cape Town: David Philip.

Chilisa, Bagele. *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. London: Sage, 2012.

Cone, James H. "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?" In *Earth Habitat: Eco-injustices and the Church's Response*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Larry Rasmussen, 23–32. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001.

Conradie, Ernst M. *Angling for Interpretation: A First Introduction to Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2008.

———. "The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology: Revisiting the Current Debate." *Scriptura* 119 (2020), 1–13.

———. "(How) Are We Doing Ecotheology in (South) Africa? Some Hermeneutical Reflections." In *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, edited by Elias K. Bongmba, 292–302. New York: Routledge, 2020.

———. *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene: What's Wrong with the World?* Lanham: Lexington, 2020.

———. "Views on Worldviews: An Overview of the Use of the Term Worldview in Selected Theological Discourses." *Scriptura* 113 (2014), 1–12.

——. "Ways of Viewing an Evolving World Amidst Ecological Destruction." *Scriptura* 117 (2018), 1–13.

——. "What Makes the World Go Round? Some Reformed Perspectives on Pneumatology and Ecology." *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6 (2012), 294–305.

Conradie, Ernst M., ed. *Creation and Salvation: A Companion on Recent Theological Movements*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2012.

Conradie, Ernst M., Ekaterini Tsalampouni, and Dietrich Werner, eds. "Manifesto on an Ecological Reformation of all Christian Traditions: The Volos Call." In *Climate Justice and Food Security: Theological Education and Christian Leadership Development*, edited by Dietrich Werner and Elisabeth Jeglitzka, 99–108. Geneva: Globethics.net, 2016.

Conradie, Ernst M., and Miranda N. Pillay, eds. *Ecclesial Deform and Reform Movements in the South African Context*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2015.

Conradie, Ernst M., and Pan-chiu Lai, eds. *Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin …. An Earthed Faith 1*. Durbanville: Aosis/Eugene: Cascade, 2022.

Conradie, Ernst M., and Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa. "'Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity' or 'The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity'"? *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 161 (2018), 37–53.

Dahill, Lisa, and, James B. Martin-Schramm, eds. *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016.

Deane-Drummond, Celia E., Sigurd Bergmann, and Markus Vogt, eds. *Religion in the Anthropocene*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017.

De Gruchy, Steve M. "An Olive Agenda: First Thoughts on a Metaphorical Theology of Development." *Ecumenical Review* 59:2–3 (2007), 333–45.

Deloria, Vine Jr. *God is Red*. New York: Dell Books, 1973.

Gebara, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999.

Gnanadason, Aruna. *No Longer a Secret: The Church and Violence against Women*. Geneva: WCC, 1993.

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973.

Habel, Norman, ed. *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

Hallman, David G., ed. *Ecotheology. Voices from South and North*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1994.

Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind.* New York: Hatchett Books, 2020.

Hessel, Dieter T., ed. *For Creation's Sake: Preaching, Ecology, & Justice*. Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1985.

Horrell, David G., et al., eds. *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives*. London: T & T Clark, 2010.

Institute for Contextual Theology. *The Kairos Document. Challenge to the Church*. Revised 2nd ed. Johannesburg: ICT, 1986.

Jenkins, Willis. *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2013.

Jennings, Willie James. *After Whiteness: And Education in Belonging*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020.

Kanyoro, Musimbi R., and Nyambura J. Njoroge, eds. *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996.

Kaufman, Gordon D. *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Kelsey, David H. *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

Kerber, Guillermo. "Recent Latin-American and Caribbean Ecumenical Initiatives—A Reading Guide." In *Kairos for Creation: Confessing Hope for the Earth*, edited by Louk Andrianos et al., 271–4. Solingen: Foedus-Verlag, 2019.

Kuitert, Harry M. *Everything Is Politics but Politics Is Not Everything: A Theological Perspective on Faith and Politics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986.

Kumarappa, Joseph C. *Christianity: Its Economy and Way of Life*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1945.

Kyung, Chung Hyun. "Come, Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation". In *Signs of the Spirit*, edited by Michael Kinnamon, 37–48. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991.

Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia. "Christian Ethics Toward Earth-Honoring Faiths." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 57:1–2 (2004), 132–50.

———. "Climate Change as Climate Debt: Forging a Just Future." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 36:1 (2016), 27–49.

———. "Climate Change as Race Debt, Class Debt, Climate Colonialism: Moral Conundrums, Vision, and Agency." In *Ecological Solidarities: Mobilizing Faith and Justice for an Entangled World*, edited by Krista Hughes, Dhawn Martin, and Elaine Padilla, 61–80. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019.

———. "Faith and #BlackLivesMatter: Future Directions and Current Directives for White Folk." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 49:1 (2022), 51–58.

———. "From Climate Debt to Climate Justice: God's Love Embodied in Garden Earth." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, edited by John Hart, 203–219. Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2017.

———. "Globalization and Planetary Ethics Related to Religion and Nature in North America." *Theology & Religion Online* (2021), 1–18. DOI: 10.5040/9781350934986.003.

———. *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.

———. "Love Incarnate: Hope and Power for Climate Justice." In *Ecotheology: A Christian Conversation*, edited by Alan Padgett and Kiara Jorgenson, 67–105. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020.

———. "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself: A Call to Resist and Transform Economic Empire." In *Scripture and Resistance*, edited by Jione Havea, 119–34. Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2019.

———. *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013.

Moltmann, Jürgen. *Sun of Righteousness, Arise: God's Future for Humanity and the Earth*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010.

Moltmann, Jürgen, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Ellen T. Charry. *A Passion for God's Reign. Theology, Christian Learning and the Christian Self*, Edited by Miroslav Volf. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Mosala, Itumeleng J. "The Use of the Bible in Black Theology." In *The Unquestionable Right to be Free*, edited by Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Thlagale, 175–200. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986.

Mugambi, Jesse N.K. *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995.

———. *God, Humanity and Nature in Relation to Justice and Peace*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987.

Müller-Fahrenholz, Geiko. *God's Spirit Transforming a World in Crisis*. New York: Continuum, 1995.

Niles, D. Preman. *Covenanting for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation: An Ecumenical Survey*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987.

Niles, D Preman, ed. *Resisting the Threats to Life: Covenanting for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1989.

———. *Between the Flood and the Rainbow*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1992.

Nolan, Albert. “Theology in a Prophetic Mode.” In *Hammering Swords into Ploughshares*, edited by Buti Thlagale and Itumeleng Mosala, 131–140. Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986.

Pihkala, Panu. *Early Ecotheology and Joseph Sittler*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2017.

Rasmussen, Larry. *Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Schreiter, Robert J. *Constructing Local Theologies*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986.

Segundo, Juan Luis. *The Liberation of Theology*. Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1977.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books, 1999.

Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology Volume One*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

Tofaeono, Ama’amalele. *Eco-Theology: Aiga—The Household of Life: A Perspective from Living Myths and Traditions of Samoa*. Erlangen: Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene, 2000.

Tracy, David. *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*. New York: Seabury, 1974.

Weems, Reneta. “Re-reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader,* edited by Katie Cannon, Emilie Townes, Angela Sims, 51–63. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

White, Lynn. “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.” *Science* 155 (1967), 1203–7.

On the Road of Doing Christian Ecotheology: Reformed Perspectives from South Africa

Ernst M. Conradie[1]

A Deeply Unnerving Question

There is something deeply unnerving about even talking about method in theology in general and also in ecotheology. Method depends on how the *theos-logos* in "theology" is understood. Does God-talk refer to talking about God or to God's talking? If it is about words, does theology entail words about God, words to God, or God's Word of grace to us and for the world? Or, if this is about a disciplined "studying," can one speak of "studying God"—or even "God studying us"? Are God's gracious words to humanity not more important than the adequacy of human words about God? Does teaching theology mean teaching about God (as if God is not listening) or being taught by God? Does

1. Ernst M. Conradie is Senior Professor in the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa.

How to cite: Conradie, EM 2022, "On the Road of Doing Christian Ecotheology: Reformed Perspectives from South Africa", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?,* An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 31–53. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.02

it make any sense, then, to talk about "method" in theology, as if there are rigorous steps that can be followed to study God? In this contribution, I hope to show how difficult it may become to keep together the meta+hodos+logos of "methodology" and the oikos+theos+logos in ecotheology.

Raising these questions reveals treacherous terrain on both sides of this road, the *hodos* in method as *meta-hodos.*

On the one side of the road (the Mountain) there are dangers associated with a modernist logic, as if the *logos* can control the *theos*, as if God can be put in a box, studied like an object in zoology or geology. As if there can be a step-by-step handbook with instructions guiding us on this path. This reveals a human arrogance that cannot hold in the face of mystery—as expressed in the apophatic, in experiences of radical transcendence, of Otherness. Indeed, the finite cannot hold what is infinite.[2] This has significant implications for method. Any method adopted for disciplined inquiry needs to be adequate given the subject matter. A reductionist notion of method prescribed from the perspective of the natural sciences or the social sciences cannot hold for philosophy and certainly not for theology. Does it then make any sense to even talk about such a "method" —if the subject matter is nothing short of Godself? Can God be reduced to "subject matter"? Would theology still be theos-logos if the focus on "God" is replaced by altogether human "notions of God"?

On the other side of the road (the cliff over the deep blue sea) loom equal dangers. Pious talk about knowing God, listening to God's Word anew, about being known by God (Ps 139:1) can easily revert into using God's authority to legitimize one's own authority, for defending narrow group interests over and against God's perceived enemies (Ps 139:19–21) who may then be hated with a burning passion (Ps 139:22). The proverbial road to hell is paved with such piety—as the history of Christian legitimation of white supremacy, apartheid, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and human supremacy amply illustrate. Humility requires a recognition that claims to have heard God's Word, to proclaim the Word of God, have to understood as altogether human witnesses to God's perceived revelation, human words about God, human constructs of God. We should not fool ourselves in thinking that direct access to God is possible. All words about what comes "from above" emerges "from below". Indeed, this is the modern insight since Kant, that all knowledge is mediated. Any form of hermeneutics would suggest that understanding is shaped by preunderstanding—and by previous misunderstandings. Such insights have been radicalized by each of the "turns" in the humanities: the historical, hermeneutical, linguistic, sociological, gendered, and spatial turns. The modern

2. On the strange return of God in postmodernity, liberated from the logos of modernity, see Tracy "Form and Fragment," *Fragments.*

logos helps to guard against theological shortcuts. This road requires rigor and resilience. There is a need for scrutiny, clarification, critical inquiry, if need be for contestation. There is a need to reflect on epistemological notions of knowledge, rationality, truth, disciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity. Theology cannot be excused from such rigor merely on the basis of its subject matter or else it will have neither intellectual nor ethical credibility.

The modern logos has itself been exposed as less universal and more provincial than some of its exponents presumed—following "sub-modern" epistemological insights emerging from critiques in terms of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, culture, language, and indigenous wisdom long subdued and subjugated by modernity. However, such critiques also apply to claims for the epistemological privilege of the poor—who do not have direct access to God either. Veering to the other side of the road, one may say that God is on the side of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized in their struggle for justice, but is that not an equally universal statement? How would one know that? This recognition requires only more rigor from theological reflection in interrogating its epistemological and methodological assumptions.

Heeding the dangers on the one side of the road suggests the wisdom of replacing God, God's revelation or God's Word with something that can indeed be studied more or less methodically, something more readily accessible such as the world, nature, culture, religious experiences (a feeling of absolute dependency perhaps), forms of spirituality, human witnesses (as expressed in the biblical texts), the Christian tradition, the Christian faith, Christian praxis. Heeding the dangers on the other side of the road suggests the limitations of such human wisdom, allowing for possibility to exceed actuality, trusting that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, believing that the finite can and does convey something of the infinite.

Where can an appropriate method for doing theology then be found, one that could do justice to both *theos* and *logos*? Can such a road be found? This may sound a bit like the question in *Fiddler on the Roof:* Is there a proper blessing for the czar? Indeed, "May God bless and keep the czar … far away from us!" Given the dangers of driving too fast one may need to consider walking instead of driving, walking along faint footpaths or animal tracks, probably through unchartered terrain.

From within the Christian tradition, I suggest, there are especially three provisional clues that can guide an answer to this question, one on *theos*, one on *logos,* and one on what may be called the Pneumatological hyphen in *theos-logos.*

First, one should not take for granted that we first need to establish what being divine entails (on philosophical or cultural grounds) and only then decide whether and in which god (if any) one believes. One may be in for

some surprises that could challenge any generic notion of *theos*. One needs to allow for a God both near and far, transcendent and immanent, palpably present or one who has abandoned us,[3] a God of mercy and (therefore?) of wrath, a living God and not a machine dispensing goods and services, a God who is utterly holy but who also loves matter utterly, a God who promises the new (what is evolutionary and what is revolutionary) but then remains steadfast and faithful to such promises.

The second provisional clue is that the *logos* to know this *theos* cannot be reduced to some methodological rigor or quasi-mathematical logic. What is needed to discern this logic is more than empirical data, selected information, algorithms, packaged knowledge, or layers of insight. One needs to see clearly but also see the invisible through foresight and wisdom. Not only how things are but also how they could be and should be. Such wisdom is far from being aloof; in fact, it has become enfleshed and is expressed throughout God's beloved creation. But it is not as if some design can be traced from the world—for this wisdom can easily look like folly, it can take the Pauline shape of the wisdom of the cross (1 Cor 2). The Christian conviction is that such logic comes in the form of this Logos.

The Pneumatological hyphen in *theos-logos* offers a third provisional clue. It is the Spirit who holds together the work of *theos* and *logos*. The Spirit of truth enables humans to know the Truth. The Spirit is a Comforter, a motherly Giver of Life, but also a fierce Wind and Fire. If Christ's work is for us and on our behalf, the Spirit works in us and through us, in body, mind, and spirit.[4]

Following these three clues I suggest that one can formulate three further guidelines for the road of doing theology? Provisionally these would suffice: (a) Doing theology is not something stationary as if one can investigate an object through a microscope. It suggests a movement along the road, seeking wise directions for the road ahead without knowing in advance what that may hold. (b) It is not the task of Christian theology to build the road, to pave the way, to construct bridges across all obstacles. Christians are followers of the Way of Jesus Christ, not blind followers but disciples with some discipline, traveling companions. There is something receptive in doing theology before it can be constructive. It relies on experiences of grace, prior rest, and receiving bread and brew for the way. At best such (Sabbath) rest not only refreshes but also transforms one's identity. (c) Doing theology does require something like a spirituality of the

3. See Ellul, *Hope in a Time of Abandonment*.

4. See especially Van Ruler, "Structural Differences."

road, being energized by the Spirit, walking in step along the way, finding synergy between what lies behind on the road, what may lie ahead, and what is alongside (see further on).

One may need to add a fourth guideline namely that Thinking about the road (method) logically comes after having traveled on it for a while, neither before, nor after, but while still on the way (an *ecclesia perigrinans*).

All of this would not suffice for doing theology though, as one also needs to be alert to other travelers on the road, the road surface, the landscape and its vistas, the climate and to threats that may surround one, including weather forecasts. In short, one needs to be alert and take cognizance of a range of other factors and upcoming changes that may influence the journey. Indeed, doing theology is not possible without other disciplines—as the combination of the roles of reason and experience in the Methodist quadrilateral also suggests. However, theological reflection also cannot merely derive its method(s) from other disciplines for then it may easily lose its w(W)ay.

The three Greek roots in the term ecotheology (*oikos* + *theos* + *logos*) could also be understood in a Trinitarian way: there is an interplay between the inhabitation of the Spirit, the transcendence of God, and the Way laid out by the Logos. From this perspective the *perichoresis* between these terms should prevent the one dominating the other. Yet, multiple distortions are possible in discourse on ecotheology. One danger is that *logos* would come to dominate *theos*. As sketched earlier, this is the modernist logic that underplays the brokenness of the cross, embodies hubris through knowledge, science, and technology, and tends to displace God as the focus of theology. Likewise, one may explore similar dangers where logos dominates *oikos* (modernist ecological destruction), where *theos* dominates *logos* or *oikos* (perhaps authoritarian religion), and where *oikos* dominates either *theos* or *logos* (perhaps secularized hedonism). It makes a difference whether the household (*oikos*) is understood as a noun (*house*), an adjective (homely, the warm hearth[5]), a verb (housekeeping), a destination (a homecoming journey perhaps), or an ongoing activity of preparing the house for the homecoming dinner.[6]

Given these preliminary observations, what methods would be appropriate in doing ecotheology? Or in the core question of this volume: How would

5. Note the distinction between house, home, and hearth in African women's theology. See Kanyoro and Njoroge, *Groaning in Faith*.

6. I developed such imagery in several publications on the household of God. See, e.g., Ayre and Conradie, *The Church in God's Household*. On "communing" as a verb, as an "organic activity that breathes life into the commons," see Zachariah, "Whose Oikos Is It Anyway?," 213.

we know what God is up to given what we know about the so-called "Anthropocene"? How would we know how we ought to respond? The metaphor of a journey is clearly helpful to allow both a temporal and a spatial axis. It is also apt given the methodological need to reflect on (*meta*) the logic (*logos*) of the road or path (*hodos*) along which this journey is situated.[7]

In terms of this metaphor it may be appropriate to imagine this question as a discussion around a campfire in the evening, alongside the path, with companions and fellow travelers, reflecting on today's leg of the journey, anticipating tomorrow's. It may also be best to think about a route rather than a road, for the journey may be through the wilderness, through an unchartered landscape or seascape, without established footpaths, only with some directions for the way. It is a matter of walking (or sailing), not driving. We may be able to make projections toward where we will be going tomorrow but the future remains uncertain, especially given what is known about the "Anthropocene." This is an ongoing journey, a "long road to freedom" (Nelson Mandela), an extended wandering through the wilderness toward the promised land,[8] perhaps even an enforced form of migration through treacherous terrain with the hope of finding a new home. As Jan Jorrit Hasselaar observes:

> The journey of hope is not a straight line or a smooth path. It is a journey through the desert with many setbacks, feelings of fear and doubt, opportunistic behavior, dead ends and the longing for a misremembered past built on coal and other fossil fuels. The journey is long, because the images we live by are part of the problem. We, with our images, are part of the problem.[9]

In thinking about the road ahead it may be helpful to gather any available tools such as a map, a compass, perhaps a camera or binoculars, stories from other travelers, travel guides, boots, a rucksack, provisions, a torch or candle, and warm clothes for the night. In what follows, I will consider such tools based on my personal journey of doing ecotheology so far. I proceed with some caution not to end up in the gender stereotypes of a testosterone-driven emphasis on an adventurous journey, a male gaze in mapping the terrain, the "trail of tears" that long journeys may evoke, or a domesticated notion of the motherly home.

7. See Bauman, Conradie, and Eaton, "The Journey of Doing Ecotheology."

8. Jan Jorrit Hasselaar draws on Jonathan Sacks (and Maimonides) to suggest that it takes time to change a people's identity. A journey to Palestine that could have taken a few days or weeks takes 40 years because it is impossible to abandon their identity as slaves overnight. If slavery is to be abolished, former slaves have to overcome a slavish mentality or else will merely enslave others and themselves. See Hasselaar, *Climate Change*.

9. Hasselaar, *Climate Change*, 115.

Gathering Some Tools for Doing Ecotheology: Reflections on a Personal Journey

The Role of Hermeneutics

A first tool that has helped me along the way is hermeneutics. Throughout my studies at Stellenbosch University hermeneutics was the name of the game—in philosophy, biblical studies, dogmatics, homiletics, and missiology alike. It occupied the best minds. In hindsight, the reason is clear. The generation of scholars that taught me in the 1980s had to come to terms with the biblical and theological support for apartheid found among the generation before that. How could things have gone so horribly wrong? How could a theology that is purportedly "orthodox" (returning to a rather rigid reformed orthodoxy) become so heretical? This sparked a historical consciousness, a hermeneutical consciousness, a more dynamic notion of theology as rooted in an ongoing personal relationship with God (instead of eternal truth claims), and also an ecumenical consciousness.[10]

My teachers therefore explored the dynamics of interpretation philosophically, theologically, and biblically. Overhearing North Atlantic hermeneutical debates, they learned from different schools of thought and tried to develop mind-maps of the terrain. Most made a distinction between the world behind the (biblical) text (historical-critical methods), the world-of-the-text itself (literary approaches), and the world-in-front-of-the-text (recognizing the role of traditions of interpretation, the role of the reader, and the necessarily contextual nature of interpretation). Many were influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer's conversation model of interpretation. However, given the attempt to break with apartheid thinking, the role of radical ideological distortions in interpretation and hence the need for a hermeneutics of suspicion was recognized, following the insights of Jürgen Habermas and others (but not yet black, feminist, or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and more [LGBTQIA]+ theories). Likewise, the role of a destabilizing plurality in interpretation was recognized by Jacques Derrida and others. Not surprisingly, the way in which Paul Ricoeur integrated such insights through a spiral of interpretation–explanation–interpretation was widely welcomed. In my doctoral work on David Tracy I followed such developments in terms of the role of an analogical imagination in addressing what Tracy described as "plurality and ambiguity" (with reference to Derrida and Habermas, but also many others).[11]

10. I discussed these developments in "A Journal for Biblical, Theological and/or Contextual Hermeneutics?"

11. See Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*; *Plurality and Ambiguity*.

In teaching hermeneutics at the nearby University of the Western Cape (as a historically black university worlds apart from Stellenbosch) in the 1990s, I developed the mind-maps of the terrain of hermeneutics of my teachers somewhat further and together with some colleagues produced a textbook on biblical, theological, and contextual hermeneutics entitled *Fishing for Jonah* in 1995.[12] We ended up identifying the following seven sets of factors that influence interpretation (see Figure 1):

a. The world-behind-the-text (the complex history of the production of the text and the socio-historical and the rhetorical contexts within which that took place).
b. The world-of-the-text (various literary features of a text, its co-text, and its rhetorical thrust as reflected in the text itself).
c. The world-in-front-of-the-text (the Wirkungsgeschichte of the text, including traditions of interpretation created by the text, including confessional traditions, their liturgies, creeds, confessions, and practices).
d. The act of interpretation and re-appropriation itself (with a focus on various strategies for the appropriation of the significance, meaning, relevance of text, and tradition, for us, today).
e. The rhetorical thrust of the act of interpretation and appropriation (with conversation partners, within contemporary interpretative communities, an interpretative culture, intended readers).
f. The contemporary context (societal challenges, changing circumstances requiring a wide range of tools of social analysis).
g. The world "below" interpretation (interpretative interests and subconscious ideological distortions that influence each of the other aspects).

Here is the map as it was subsequently refined in *Angling for Interpretation* (2008:55):[13]

This map of the hermeneutical terrain allowed us to propose seven sets of criteria for relative adequacy, namely whether each of these aspects with their multiple embedded factors have been taken into account. Such criteria would not guarantee adequate interpretation but it may help to identify where things may and have gone wrong. We likened this to the role of a nurse, a doctor, and a specialist. Such medical staff cannot ensure one's health but they can identify what is wrong, with deepening degrees of sophistication. Admittedly, such a diagnosis remains based on an educated guess. This applies even more so to any proposed remedy.[14] This also indicates the limitation of hermeneutics.

12. See Conradie et al. *Fishing for Jonah*; reworked in Jonker and Lawrie, *Fishing for Jonah (anew)*.

13. Conradie, *Angling for Interpretation*. The author holds the copyright for this diagram.

14. In a subsequent project on "Redeeming Sin?" I employed similar terminology to suggest that Christian discourse on sin may be understood, at least from the outside, as a form of social diagnostics. The underlying question, also in the context of the "Anthropocene," is to wonder what on earth has gone wrong with the world.

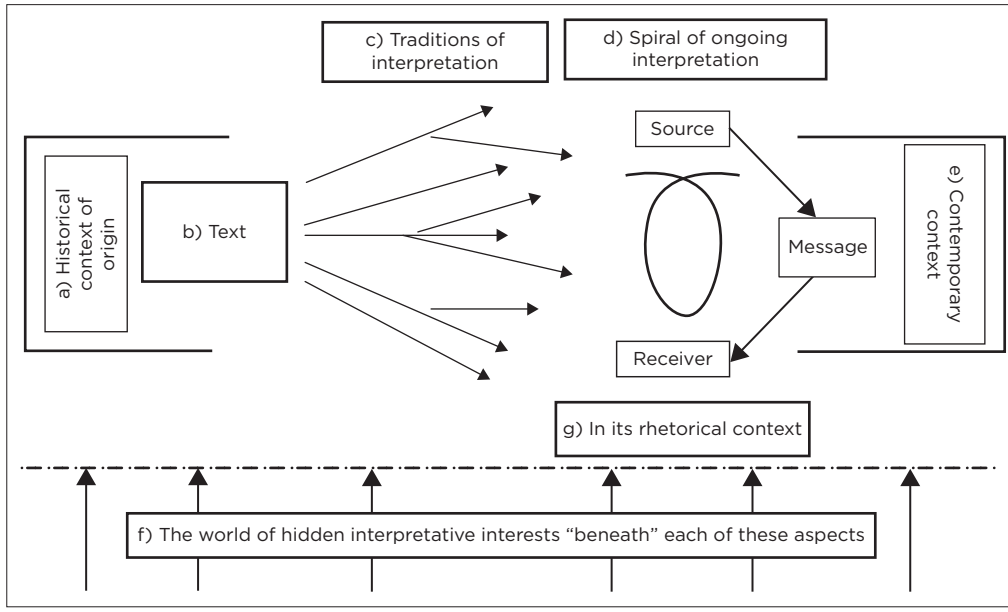


FIGURE 1: Sets of factors influencing biblical and theological interpretation.

I am often haunted by a comment from Jacques Ellul on the futility of hermeneutics: if God chooses to be silent, no form of theology or hermeneutics would be able to retrieve the living Word of God. He comments sharply: "The truth is that no reading is possible when God is silent"; and "Hermeneutics is the business of interpreting revelation without revelation."[15] This surely has implications for the question posed in this volume: How would we know what God may be up to? Hermeneutics may help to see what has gone wrong but by itself does not offer guidance on the way forward or guarantee adequacy.

My own main interest remains in the spiral of interpretation and the strategies of appropriation involved in that. Interpretation is called forth by the claim to attention posed by the otherness of the text (and of the context) but then in order to establish the significance of such otherness for the interpreter. The greater such otherness, the greater is the potential for transforming the world of the interpreter there will be. However, making sense of such otherness is only possible on the basis of identifying some form of similarity (*idem facio* = to *make* similar), always with the danger of domesticating such otherness.

15. See Ellul, *Hope in a Time of Abandonment*, 143, 146.

What intrigued me most is the role of what I termed "heuristic keys" and more specifically "doctrinal constructs" in making interpretation possible.[16] No exegesis is possible without such doctrinal keys. Three brief examples may suffice. The notion of "justification" may be used to link the message of God's forgiveness and contemporary experiences of guilt. The notion of "liberation" may be used to link God's victory over evil with contemporary forms of oppression. The South African notion of "reconstruction and development" may be employed to link the messianic Way with contemporary needs to overcome poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The differences between, a Lutheran hermeneutics, an ecofeminist hermeneutics, a black hermeneutics, and a Pentecostal hermeneutics (to use random examples) therefore lie in the different heuristic keys (or doctrinal constructs) employed to relate text to context.

Such doctrinal constructs obviously require conceptual clarification and scrutiny. It is at least striking to note how such constructs are rooted in long-standing soteriological motifs, to recognize that they cannot be merely invented, and how one such construct may remain dominant for centuries.

Each of the three examples mentioned earlier are employed in ecotheology: to confess guilt over historical carbon emissions, to call for the liberation of God's whole creation (including non-human animals and subjugated and enslaved human bodies), and in debates on sustainable development.[17] These three examples also show the limited scope of metaphors such as stewardship or priesthood. The dominant root metaphor in ecumenical forms of ecotheology is probably the "whole household of God."[18] A core task of ecotheology is therefore to reflect on the strengths and also the limitations of such doctrinal constructs.

Seeing, Judging, and Acting

Since the publication of the Draft Confession of Belhar (1982) and the Kairos Document (1985) I have been intrigued by the notion of "doing theology" as opposed to "studying theology," "teaching theology," or nowadays "producing" theology (of which this volume is an example). I was drawn to the understanding of theology as a form of praxis that includes anyone who thinks "on their feet" about the Christian faith, not only learned theologians. I found Gustavo Gutiérrez's view that theology entails critical reflection on Christian praxis

16. For a discussion, see Conradie, "What on Earth Is an Ecological Hermeneutics?"

17. For this typology, based on Gustaf Aulén's famous typology in *Christus Victor*, see Conradie "The Salvation of the Earth."

18. See again Ayre and Conradie, *The Church in God's Household*, also Zachariah, "Whose Oikos Is It Anyway?"

hermeneutically plausible.[19] Likewise, I warmed to not only liberation theology but also to the liberation of theology (Juan Luis Segundo) from various trappings.[20] In South Africa, such a notion of "doing theology" was developed especially through the work of the Institute for Contextual Theology. Such insights were gathered in two edited volumes with essays by leading South African theologians, namely *Doing Theology in Context* and *Doing Ethics in Context* (both 1994).[21]

In theological reflection at the grassroots, often in the form of contextual Bible studies, this emphasis on doing theology was formalized through a "method" described in three "steps," namely See–Judge–Act. "Seeing" indicates the need for social analysis. Judging refers to the need to critically assess the situation, also (but not only) in the light of the gospel. Acting then identifies modes of emancipatory praxis.[22] The South African Kairos Document remains an excellent example of what such a process entails.[23]

Although I intuitively recognized the appeal and the simplicity of this model, I had a few reservations on how this model could easily become distorted, as is sometimes (but not always) in South African literature.

First the action–reflection model suggests that "seeing" never comes first, nor is "acting" merely an application of what was seen and judged. The model should therefore best be understood in terms of an ongoing spiral of Act–See–Judge–Act. Prior action (which always has some cognitive content but cannot be reduced to that) plays the same role as preunderstanding or tradition does in hermeneutics but is a broader concept.

Second, it is often not possible to separate seeing and judging. Where seeing does come logically before judging, there is always the danger that social analysis will become reductionist or that the analysis (and the social theoretical tools used) will determine the outcome of theological reflection so that *logos* again controls *theos*.

Third, the criteria for judging still have to be clarified, not least because of distortions in the biblical texts, but also given fluctuations in public opinion, the *Zeitgeist*.

Fourth, the full range of appropriate forms of praxis has to be recognized, allowing for diverse roles and role players or else emancipatory praxis may itself become hegemonic.

19. See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.

20. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*.

21. Both volumes were edited by De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio.

22. See also the essay by Guillermo Kerber in this volume.

23. Produced by the Institute for Contextual Theology.

Fifth, there is a danger that this will degenerate into running theological commentary on political developments with little if any theological weight, given the absence of any explicit reference to God in the method.

Sixth, unlike the core intuition of prophetic theology, the emphasis on action is not necessarily embedded in discerning the counter-movements of the Holy Spirit and thus could easily become activist in such a way that hope turns into despair.

Seventh, the emphasis on seeing (social analysis) follows the modernist focus on the eye and thus on empirical evidence. The role of the ear and therefore of listening (to the Word of God) is underplayed (this may apply to the other senses too although the concept of action always includes the more visceral senses). In theory, this could form part of judging but the hermeneutics of suspicion (also regarding the role of religion) often implies that activists either cast judgment on God or assume that the Judge is on their side (the side of the oppressed). Although social critique abounds, self-justification (and self-entitlement) can easily trump being self-critical.

Mapping Moral Concepts

At the University of the Western Cape where I am based we teach Ethics (understood as the "moral and religious foundations of society") as a major subject toward various degrees. Classes are huge. We teach students that ethics is basically about moral judgments. One may judge something to be moral, immoral, or (hopefully) amoral. That "something" may be an action but cannot be reduced to that. An "ethics of doing" needs to be supplemented by an "ethics of being". We also judge the character of a person (e.g., as being "cruel"), institutions or companies (e.g., as being "corrupt"), an economy (e.g., as being "unsustainable"), a culture (e.g., as being "consumerist"), or a whole society (e.g., as "deeply divided").[24]

Such judgments can be expressed in various ways, often simply through moral directives. Many South African theologians draw on a study by James Gustafson in which he identified especially four forms of moral discourse, namely visionary prophetic discourse, narrative discourse (telling vivid stories to express some moral judgment), the more technical policy discourse, and ethical discourse in the narrower sense, namely the clarification of moral problems and moral concepts.[25] Each of these forms of moral discourse has some core strengths but also significant limitations so that circumspection is required.

24. See Conradie et al., *Morality as a Way of Life*.

25. Gustafson, *Varieties of Moral Discourse*.

We teach modules on the role of religion in informing such moral judgments, on applied ethics (e.g., on human rights, economic justice, the environment, gender, and human sexuality), and on ethical theory. In ethical theory we teach students that the basis for moral judgments is discerned in different ways in different theories. Here we make use of the map of four moral concepts that Larry Rasmussen has developed where the distinct roles of (a) an emerging moral vision (for the good society), (b) virtues (character), (c) obligations (duties, rules, principles, responsibilities), and (d) social values (or goals) are recognized in contrasting ethical theories.[26] One may add to this list the role of divine commands, moral sentiments, and especially the more complex role of worldviews. In traditional African cultures such ways of seeing the world often prove to be the decisive basis for moral judgments.[27] How one sees the world does make a huge difference—for example as "oh so beautiful" (Romanticism), as "red in tooth and claw" (social Darwinism), as natural resources available for exploitation (mercantile capitalism), as something so sublime that it is to be worshipped (New Age mysticism), or as a threat to be tamed and brought under human control (ecomodernism).[28] In a "primal" worldview the emphasis is on a balance of cosmic forces, with implications for not disturbing such a balance (e.g., by hoarding personal possessions).

If one restricts moral judgments to moral decision-making processes (i.e., actions), we then teach our first-year students (with the help of the responsibility theory of Heinz Eduard Tödt) that this entails especially six aspects, each with further refinements:[29]

- The perception, acceptance, and stipulation of the problem as a moral problem.
- Analysis of the situation.
- Design and evaluation of options for action.
- Testing norms, goods, and perspectives.
- Testing the morally communicative and obligatory character of the selected course of action.
- The need for making a decision and taking responsibility for that.

One may say that Tödt's theory is a more complex and more sophisticated version of the See–Judge–Act method, building in more feedback loops. For the last part of the question raised in this volume, namely "How ought humans respond?," this is the tool on which I tend to fall back. In the South African context where theories of responsibility thrive (as is the case also in Germany

26. See Rasmussen, *Earth Honoring Faith*, 123–59; also Birch et al., *Bible and Ethics.*

27. See, e.g. Magesa, *African Religion*.

28. For such "warped" worldviews see Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed.*

29. I am drawing here on De Villiers, "An Ethics of Responsibility."

and the USA), this tool has been used to address community-based decision-making in response to complex social problems such as poverty, unemployment, the HIV and AIDS pandemic, and gender-based violence.

The Fourfold Tasks of Doing Christian Ecotheology

My academic journey with ecotheology commenced in 1991 with collecting bibliographic material to assist Stellenbosch students with an assignment and resulted in eventually publishing several versions of a bibliography on ecotheology until I gave up this task in 2006 when the literature became too overwhelming and also too amorphous.[30] With each version of the bibliography came an assessment of the state of the debate. The first version published in 1993 already suggested that ecotheology entails a dual critique, namely an ecological critique of Christianity and a Christian critique of ecological destruction.[31] The former critique is (in)famously related to the Lyn White thesis first published in 1967 but has been picked up by many others around the world. The latter critique may be understood as an apologetic response to the former but is also based on a retrieval of the ecological wisdom embedded in the biblical roots and the subsequent history of the Christian tradition. At best it stands in the prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power in God's Name.

Three further comments on this dual critique may suffice here.[32] First, the genius of Christian ecotheology lies in its ability to hold these two critiques together. Without a critique of Christianity, it becomes an apologetic exercise that overlooks the need for a radical ecological reformation of Christianity and merely reiterates human responsibility toward the environment through notions of stewardship or priesthood. Without a Christian critique of ecological destruction, ecotheology loses its ability to offer any distinct contribution to wider debates. Ecotheology then becomes nothing more than one branch of "religion and ecology" and cannot avoid the traps of self-secularization.

Second, to accept the validity of an ecological critique of Christianity is to raise suspicions over the criteria employed and from where they are derived. Some would say that this amounts to a form of natural theology that renders Christianity vulnerable to shifts in the *Zeitgeist*. What is meant by an "ecological" critique? Is the critique perhaps based on the biocentric notion of intrinsic worth, or on animal rights, or on the ecocentric notion of stability, or on the critique of domination in the name of differences of race, gender and

30. For the last version, see Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology*.

31. See Conradie, "Ecology and Christian theology."

32. I am drawing here on a few paragraphs from my article on Conradie, "The Four Tasks on Christian Ecotheology."

class (in ecofeminism or social ecology), or on the more utilitarian notion of sustainable development? Is the criterion sustainability or adaptability or perhaps resilience? One may argue, in response, that such insights are the long-term fruit of the gospel coming to fruition in an emerging moral vision of sustainability. Ultimately, it is God's mercy that sustains us, forever.[33] Is such a response plausible though? What is at least clear is that Christian ecotheology cannot ignore such an ecological critique of Christianity and has to engage in conversations with such critics from the outside and the inside. It forms part of the agenda, whether primary or secondary, in any adequate form of ecotheology.

Third, these dual critiques do come together in the call for an ecological reformation of Christianity. One of the early versions of such a call is found in an essay by James Nash.[34] The clearest ecumenical expression may be found in the Volos Call for an ecological reformation[35] and in the subsequent Wuppertal Declaration.[36] What is at least clear is that such a reformation has to be comprehensive, touching on all aspects of a Christian faith, spirituality, ethos, and praxis—and is therefore relevant for each of the traditional sub-disciplines of Christian theology. One may add that if indeed the root causes of ecological destruction are associated with Christianity, as is widely assumed from outside Christianity, then getting their own house in order may be the most significant contribution that Christians can make to what Thomas Berry describes as the "Great Work."[37] This may be hard to swallow as it implies that Christians should stop proclaiming that Christianity has a message that can save the world. The question is no longer whether there can be salvation outside the church, but whether there is salvation inside the church,[38] whether the church itself and its message can still be salvaged, whether its decline is inevitable and even needs to be celebrated.

More recently, I have been suggesting that this dual critique needs to be complemented with a constructive contribution. This is also of a twofold nature, namely a constructive contribution to the common good and to Christian authenticity.

The Christian vision of the coming reign of God in every square inch of society (the famous vision of Abraham Kuyper) is planetary, indeed cosmic in scope. How this vision is best understood is the subject of ongoing ecumenical

33. See Conradie, "Is it not God's Mercy?"

34. Nash, "Towards the Ecological Reformation of Christianity."

35. See Conradie, Tsalampouni, and Werner, "Manifesto."

36. See Andrianos et al., *Kairos for Creation*, 9–12.

37. Berry, *The Great Work*.

38. For this comment, see Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 384.

conversations and contestations (arguably in terms of a journey toward justice, peace, and the integrity of God's creation) but its scope is undeniable. Christians cannot merely retreat into self-isolated ghettos but have to engage with the common good in (secular) society because of the conviction that the Earth belongs to God.

Here Christians have to work with many others in addressing the full range of ecological challenges. This has to be a multidisciplinary effort in which civil society is only one player, alongside government, business and industry, trade unions, and the like. And in civil society the roles of cultural organizations, the arts, community-based organizations (CBOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and faith-based organizations (FBOs) have to be recognized. Clearly, Christians cannot take the lead here and have to work with those (including adherents to other religious traditions) who may be deeply skeptical about working with Christians.[39] Working with others implies having shared (penultimate) goals and shared agendas, even if the ultimate vision may remain distinct. But at some point the question will emerge whether Christians have a distinct contribution to offer. It is understandable and indeed sometimes necessary that Christians merely reiterate what is said by others or translate Christian convictions in highly generalized categories in order to find the common ground that may be necessary. At the same time, Christians should not shy away from making a contribution to the common good if they are the only ones who are able to make that particular contribution.[40] That would at least include getting its own house in order, but perhaps more than that.

In this light a second constructive task for Christian ecotheology becomes vital, namely a contribution to what may be called Christian authenticity. Arguably, the constructive task in society can only come to fruition if it is indeed based on a contribution from ecotheology to Christian authenticity, that is, the ongoing renewal of Christianity from within on the basis of a retrieval of its own vision. This entails many priestly tasks that have been addressed in ecotheology and where ongoing further work is required: We need to read and re-interpret biblical texts with an ecological hermeneutics, and we need to recover some and critique other stories from the history (his-story) of Christianity. We need to engage critically with the content and significance of the Christian faith. We need to explore common ethical categories such as justice, rights, duties, responsibilities, values and virtues, what is good and what is right. We need to engage in critical reflection on ecclesial praxis (liturgies, preaching, eco-congregations, pastoral care, ministries, etc.). And we need to reflect on God's mission in the world, also

39. For this notion of "working with", see Conradie and Koster, *T&T Clark Handbook*, from which I draw in this paragraph.

40. See also Conradie, "The Four Tasks."

while seeking common ground through dialogue with other living faiths. Again, this is both a matter of "ecclesiology" and of "ethics." All of these are necessary tasks to keep the vision alive. In this sense, Christian discourse on sustainability not only needs to be sustained (in the imperative) but in another sense also sustains (in the indicative) the daily praxis of Christian communities and the vocations of Christians in society. These tasks can best be sustained by the recognition that it is God's mercy that nourishes and sustains us forever.[41] There is by now a wealth of literature from all around the world that attests to such a priestly task of ecotheology.

Such a contribution to Christian authenticity (the fourth of the tasks) may besides such priestly roles also entail a prophetic task.[42] I suggest that this can be sub-divided into five steps: (a) a discernment of the "signs of the time," the dominant movements that "make the world go round"[43] (if you like, the symptoms of the underlying disease); (b) a prophetic critique of ruling powers but also against heresies (a diagnostics of the root causes of the disease); (c) seeking to discern the counter-movements of God's Spirit and discovering the direction in which they lead in order to know and follow God's will (the remediating work of God to address what is wrong); (d) to tell, through Christian witness and theological reflection, the story of God's work moving in that direction; and (e) the expression of a prophetic vision (often in narratives with rich symbolism) of what the world could be and should be like as a critical comment on how the world has become and now is. It is this vision (step 5) that enables a recognition of the signs of the time (step 1) —so that this prompts an ongoing spiral of theological reflection.

The fourth step, telling the story of God's work, is in my view crucial but also dangerous—as any attempt to detect the "finger of God" in human history is fraught with the danger of legitimizing narrow group interests. This has left a trail of blood and tears throughout the history of Christianity, not least in South Africa.[44] Yet, the power of a good narrative lies in its capacity to help us to make sense of the complex, ambiguous world in which we live. It tells a story of how we got to this point, explains what is going on around us, and directs our attention to the way forward. It is this fourth step that is addressed in this series on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'." All four of these tasks, the dual critique and the dual constructive engagement, have been on the agenda of ecotheology as it has emerged all

41. See Conradie, "Is it not God's Mercy?"

42. I am drawing again from Conradie, "The Four Tasks."

43. For a discussion, see Conradie, "What Makes the World Go Round?"

44. This has always been an extremely dangerous question, as is well recognized by the South African theologian Jaap Durand in an essay on "the finger of God" in history, with reference to apartheid theology. See Durand, "God in history."

around the world. In the "Anthropocene" ecumenical dialogue on this agenda recognizes the need to go one step further to address changes in the Earth system (of which climate change, ocean acidification, the loss of biodiversity, and zoonotic diseases are all symptoms) across the global divides that also plague Christianity.

On Using Such Tools Along the Way

As noted in the introductory essay to this volume, the metaphor of the journey of doing ecotheology[45] has several attractions, especially if viewed as a journey through an unchartered landscape (or seascape) with companions, facing serious challenges ahead. Although the route ahead is not clear, there is a clear sense of destination (perhaps a vision of shalom, where justice will prevail, of the coming reign of God). The aim of the journey is not merely to reach the destination; every step of the journey is important and has eschatological significance as stories are gathered along the way. The homecoming dinner, perhaps the feast of the Lamb that was slain, has its lure but it is every step of the journey that matters. Four further comments will suffice.

First, a further comment about method, about the way (*meta-hodos*). It should be clear that the journey of doing ecotheology requires some tools and that there are many such tools available. Carrying too many tools may exceed one's carrying capacity but some may be helpful. The journey is not about the tools though. Charting the terrain, studying the available maps is important but cannot replace the actual journey. The focus should be on the *hodos* not on the *meta*. Tools may be useful at times and then need to be taken to hand, if need be stopping for a moment or a while longer, taking rest. Such tools cannot prescribe the direction, the route, or one's speed and therefore should not be used in any quasi-mechanical way. Going forward requires practical wisdom and ongoing decision-making processes. Methodical rigor is called for but does not and cannot guarantee a safe journey.

45. For "The Journey of Doing Ecotheology", see especially the collaborative document that resulted from a small colloquium held in San Francisco on "Christian theology and the Earth" in November 2011. Under various rubrics the collective and collaborative journey was described as being through an unchartered landscape (or seascape), as a journey from an unacceptable present with roots in Christianity itself, as a journey with a sense of destination, as drawing on various sources of inspiration (sources that can be analyzed hermeneutically, using various modes of transport, steering through various tensions), a journey situated within a larger cosmic journey, a journey where wagers of transcendence are entertained, and where various theological re-descriptions of this journey are found. The metaphor of a journey is clearly helpful to allow both a temporal and a spatial axis. It is also apt given the methodological need to reflect on (*meta*) the logic (*logos*) of the road or path (*hodos*) along which this journey is situated. See Bauman, Conradie, and Eaton, "The Journey of Doing Ecotheology." On the relation between the metaphors of the whole household of God and the journey, see also Conradie, "Rethinking Root Metaphors".

Second, a comment about how this journey is related to the knowledge of Godself, that is knowing the identity and character of God and knowing what God may be up to. It should be clear that using tools cannot ensure reliable knowledge of God. Tools can stand in the way of knowing God as well as assist in knowing God but then the biblical witnesses do not shy away from portraying God as a toolmaker and a user of instruments, including human agents. There is room for talking about tools between *homo faber* and the Triune Creator. Other animals, birds and insects, trees providing shelter, may participate in that conversation.

Yet, in the same way that one may see a path but cannot see an entire journey, that one may detect signs of love without seeing that love, God's presence and character can be discerned without being visible. Knowledge of God enables us liturgically to see the world in the light of the Light of the world. We cannot actually see that Light; we can only see things in that light. Or in the often-cited words of C.S. Lewis, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." One needs tools along the way, including a lantern or a torch, but one should not confuse the lantern with light. Put differently: One cannot actually see the sea as such, only a minute portion of it; but in looking at the sea, it is indeed the sea that one sees.

Third, the metaphor of a journey does yield some remarkable insights on what may and what may not be expected of God. Given this metaphor, the question what God may be up to sounds awkward. It is not as if one could expect God to pave the way, to provide rescue operations, to carry creatures all the way, or to show the way by offering directions (as an omniscient director who knows every way in advance) that one then has to follow robotically. Even the image of following in the footsteps of Jesus, as if one does not need to think about the route oneself, seems inappropriate. It is also not as if it is God who puts the challenges ahead in place like an obstacle course. These challenges (e.g., those associated with the "Anthropocene") may be self-inflicted or not, but should not be regarded as divine punishment for human folly. It is not as if the Creator controls the forces unleashed in the "Anthropocene" and can choreograph what human agents are to do next. One may say that being the Creator implies self-limitation from God's side, allowing creatures to be and to evolve without pre-planning and pre-determining every step of the way. Human parents who engineer and then micro-manage the lives of their children (selecting their genes and talents, deciding on a school, sport, career, marriage, grandchildren and even their eventual deaths in advance) would be diabolic. God needs to make room within Godself for creatures to be, to evolve, to make mistakes, to cope with challenges, to mature, and hopefully to flourish.

This does not mean that the divine parent is absent from the lives, the journeys of beloved creatures. Whenever God acts it is through creatures, involving a paradox of multiple agencies at different levels.[46] How, then, does God interact with (human) creatures? How would we know what God is up to in this sense? According to the Christian confession, this is not an unfathomable mystery as if it would take an intellectual tour de force to reach the answer. The identity and character of this God has been disclosed to us in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit. Such identity and character cannot be captured under any one formula and has been contested throughout the Jewish-Christian tradition in conversation with other religions and philosophies, but it is also not as if anything goes, as if one may construct for oneself a god in one's own imagination. As the theological critique of apartheid in South Africa suggests it is possible to identify and resist heresy and to find a "moment of truth."[47] This will need to be explored in future volumes of the *An Earthed Faith* series.

Given the metaphor of a journey and a Trinitarian intuition one may provisionally, in anticipation of the other volumes in this series, say that God's presence and interaction with creatures take the shape of (a) parental guidance (in broad parameters) like any loving parent who finds joy in their adult children would, providing some light so that one may see for oneself; (b) helping those who have lost their way completely to find the Way again; and (c) a comforting presence along the way (or the Wind behind one's sails) throughout the journey, especially when times get rough.

Fourth, there may indeed be a need for something like a "spirituality of the road," to borrow a phrase from the South African missiologist David Bosch. Such a spirituality may be shaped by a life of prayer, but then the question has to be what we are praying for.[48] What is needed for the journey of doing ecotheology is not any ABC, a method with a few easy steps. The notion of a journey requires a balancing of the temporal tensions between past, present and future. To live in the moment, with a vision toward the future and on the basis of a memory of the past is demanding.[49] A prerequisite of such a

46. The notion of a "paradox of double agency" is widely discussed in discourse on divine action in the world. An action may be ascribed to an agent at one level and to another agent at a higher level. For a discussion, see Conradie, *The Earth in God's Economy*, 175–220.

47. *A Moment of Truth* is the title of a volume on the Belhar Confession, edited by Daan Cloete and Dirk Smit.

48. See the collection of answers to this question in Chitando and Conradie, "Praying for Rain?"

49. Blaise Pascal comments on the malaise of temporality in this way: "We do not rest satisfied with the present. We anticipate the future as too slow in coming as if in order to hasten its course; or we recall the past, to stop its too rapid flight. So imprudent are we that we wander in the times that are not ours, and do not think of the only one which belongs to us; and so idle are we that we dream of those times which are no more and thoughtlessly overlook that which alone exists. For the present is generally painful to us. [...] So we never live, but we hope to live; and as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be so." See Pascal, *Pensées*, 172.

spirituality is to "come into step." To be in step is to appreciate the moment in between footsteps. The moment just before the next foot touches down. It does not help to linger in the past. One has to shift one's body weight with the necessary courage. It also does not help to hasten the movement. This will soon lead to exhaustion. One has to be willing to linger for a moment in the air, in anticipation of touching down and feeling the earth under one's feet anew. Only in this moment of lingering, only through a "rediscovery of slowness" (Stan Nadolny), instead of an ever faster pace, will time be experienced and not merely measured. This may indeed help us to experience the merciful presence of the eternal God in the moment.[50]

What does this mean in the context of the "Anthropocene"? What is God up to in such a period? A fuller answer to this question would need to be held in abeyance and will be addressed in other volumes in the series. For this volume on method in ecotheology, it may suffice to suggest that it would mean exploring the story of who God is and what God has done in the past in the evening around the campfire in anticipation of a particularly challenging next phase of the journey.

Bibliography

Andrianos, Louk, et al., eds. *Kairos for Creation: Confessing Hope for the Earth*. Solingen: Foedus, 2019.

Ayre, Clive W., and Ernst M. Conradie, eds. *The Church in God's Household: Protestant Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ecology*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2016.

Bauman, Whitney, Ernst M. Conradie, and Heather Eaton, eds. "The Journey of Doing Ecotheology." *Theology* 116 (2013), 1–3, 4–44.

Berry, Thomas, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*. New York: Bell Tower Books, 1999.

Birch, Bruce, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, and Larry Rasmussen. *Bible and Ethics: A New Conversation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017.

Bosch, David J. *A Spirituality of the Road*. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1979.

———. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991.

Chitando, Ezra, and Ernst M. Conradie, eds. "Praying for Rain? African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change." *The Ecumenical Review* 69:3 (2017), 311–435.

Cloete G.D. (Daan), and Dirk. J. Smit, eds. *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, 1982*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984.

Conradie, Ernst M. *Angling for Interpretation: A First Guide to Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2008.

———. *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2006.

———. *The Church and Climate Change: Signs of the Times Series Volume 1*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008

———. *The Earth in God's Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2015.

———. "Ecology and Christian Theology: An Introduction with an Extensive, Indexed Bibliography." *Scriptura* 47 (1993), 52–104.

50. See Moltmann, Wolterstorff, and Charry, *A Passion for God's Reign*, 41.

———. "The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology: Revisiting the Current Debate." *Scriptura* 119 (2020), 1–13.

———. "Is It Not God's Mercy That Nourishes and Sustains Us … Forever? Some Theological Perspectives on Entangled Sustainabilities." *Scriptura* 116 (2017), 38–54.

———. "A Journal for Biblical, Theological and/or Contextual Hermeneutics?" *Scriptura* 119:3 (2020), 1–10.

———. *Redeeming Sin? Social Diagnostics amid Ecological Destruction*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017.

———. "Rethinking Root Metaphors in Ecotheology: Oikos and Hodos amid a Changing Climate". *Ephata* 4:1 (2022), 285–304.

———. "The Salvation of the Earth from Anthropogenic Destruction: In Search of Appropriate Soteriological Concepts in an Age of Ecological Destruction." *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, Ecology* 14:2–3 (2010), 111–140.

———. "What Makes the World Go Round? Some Reformed Perspectives on Pneumatology and Ecology." *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6 (2012), 294–305.

———. "What on Earth Is an Ecological Hermeneutics? Some Broad Parameters." In *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives*, edited by David G. Horrell et al., 295–314. London: T&T Clark, 2010.

Conradie, Ernst M., et al. *Fishing for Jonah: Various Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*. Bellville: UWC Publications, 1995.

Conradie, Ernst M. *et al*. *Morality as a Way of Life: A First Introduction to Ethical Theory*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2006.

Conradie, Ernst M., Ekaterini Tsalampouni, and Dietrich Werner, eds. "Manifesto on an Ecological Reformation of all Christian Traditions: The Volos Call." In *Climate Justice and Food Security: Theological Education and Christian Leadership Development*, edited by Dietrich Werner and Elisabeth Jeglitzka, 99–108. Geneva: Globethics.net, 2016.

Conradie, Ernst M., and Hilda P. Koster, eds. *T&T Clark Handbook on Christian Theology and Climate Change*. London: T&T Clark, 2019.

Conradie, Ernst M., et al. *Fishing for Jonah. Various Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*. Belville: UWC Publications, 1995; reworked as Jonker, Louis, and Douglas G. Lawrie, eds. *Fishing for Jonah (anew): Various Approaches to Biblical Interpretations*, 27–165, Stellenbosch: Sun Press .

De Gruchy, John W., and Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds. *Doing Theology in Context. South African Perspectives*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1994.

———. *Doing Ethics in Context: South African Perspectives*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1994.

De Villiers, D. Etienne. "An Ethics of Responsibility Reading of Eduard Tödt's Theory of the Formation of Moral Judgement." *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 54:3–4 (2013), 1–9.

Durand, Jaap. "God in History: An Unresolved Problem." In *The Meaning of History*, edited by Adrio König and Marie Henri Keane, 171–78. Pretoria: Unisa, 1980.

Ellul, Jacques 1973. *Hope in a Time of Abandonment.* New York: Seabury.

Gustafson, James M. *Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical, and Policy*. Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 1988.

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973.

Hasselaar, Jan Jorrit. "Climate Change, Radical Uncertainty and Hope Theology and Economics in Conversation." PhD thesis, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2021.

Institute for Contextual Theology. *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church.* Revised 2nd ed. Johannesburg: ICT, 1986.

Jonker, Louis, and Douglas Lawrie, eds. *Fishing for Jonah (anew): Various Approaches to Biblical Interpretations*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.

Kanyoro, Musimbi R., and Nyambura J. Njoroge, eds. *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*. Nairobi: Acton, 1996.

Magesa, Laurenti. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997.

Moltmann, Jürgen, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Ellen T. Charry. *A Passion for God's Reign: Theology, Christian Learning and the Christian Self*, edited by Mirosav Volf. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Nash, James A. "Towards the Ecological Reformation of Christianity." *Interpretation* 50:1 (1996), 5–15.

Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Translated by W.F. Trotter. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1932.

Rasmussen, Larry. *Earth Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Segundo, Juan Luis. *The Liberation of Theology*. Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1977.

Snyder, Howard A. *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011.

Tracy, David. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. London: SCM, 1981.

———. "Form and Fragment: The Recovery of the Hidden and Incomprehensible God." *Reflections* 3 (2000), 62–88.

———. *Fragments: The Existential Situation of Our Time*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

———. *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

Van Ruler, Arnold A. "Structural Differences Between Christology and Pneumatology." In *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics*, translated and edited by John Bolt, 27–46. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989.

Zachariah, George. "Whose Oikos Is It Anyway? Towards a Poromboke Eco-theology of 'Commoning'." In *Decolonizing Ecotheology: Indigenous and Subaltern Challenges*, edited by S. Lily Mendoza and George Zachariah, 205–22. Eugene: Pickwick.

Revelations from the Book of Nature: Knowing God in the Cenozoic and "Anthropocene" Epoch

Heather Eaton[1]

The question of "how would we know what God is up to in the 'Anthropocene'?" is an intriguing and essential topic for consideration. The inquiry into theological methods can influence how one discerns, determines, or declares God's presence, absence, or whereabouts in the difficult era of current Earth communities. The subject of theological methods is varied in every way. This essay will first enter the labyrinth of theological methods, indicating some basic issues with the topic of methods in Christian theologies. Section two will present core questions and presuppositions related to the theme, focusing on revelation, nature, evolution, and the "Anthropocene." Section three will explore the topics of knowing God, religious experiences, and the natural world as a religious source and vital influence.

1. Heather Eaton is a Professor of Conflict Studies at the Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada. She is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the Anthropocene."

How to cite: Eaton, H 2022, "Revelations from the Book of Nature: Knowing God in the Cenozoic and 'Anthropocene' Epoch", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?,* An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 55–76. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.03

The Labyrinth of Theological Methods

Theological Methods: Dilemmas and Diversities

Theological methods are plural. What this means is not only are there identifiable and well-defined methods, but they are numerous and divergent. Methods may be attributed to distinct traditions, particular thinkers, theological disciplines, diverse sources, or pursuing precise questions arising within specific eras, contexts, concerns, and competencies. The purpose here is to first expose some methodological dilemmas and diversities, while noting that each is trying to discern God's presence and activities, the responsibilities of being an engaged Christian, and the implications for our personal and social lives.

Distinct Traditions

Research into theological methods reveals distinct Christian traditions as a central category. Methods can be ascribed as Lutheran, Mennonite, Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Evangelical, Episcopalian, Baptist, Quaker, Anglican, and more. However, this categorization is problematic in several ways. For example, from what context and culture? From which era? Who is authorized to speak for a tradition? With what knowledge, sources, purposes, and implications?

In addition, traditions are not enclosed, and they are amalgams of incalculable variations. Each tradition is a loose categorization of multiplicities of variances, emphases, and contradictions. All traditions contain countless sub-traditions. When one considers the meaning of a "tradition" over time, geographic location, contexts, events, personalities, institutional forms, theological tomes, etc., the term *tradition* sprawls toward meaninglessness.

A second observation is that while there may be distinctions between methodological emphases, such as *sola scriptura*, scripture and tradition, and historical and/or contemporary interests, there are myriad hermeneutics within and across these emphases that obscure a tradition-based notion of methods. Furthermore, hermeneutics are heterogeneous.

Those who train in theology rarely learn of these methodological variations or contradictions within their own traditions, and even less frequently of those from other traditions. Even referring to "Christianity" is barely intelligible given its countless diversities and divergences. When the pluralities of the many traditions and sub-traditions are taken seriously, the topic of methods becomes murky. These cursory observations indicate that assuming or alleging tradition specific methods is simplistic, even indefensible.

☐ Theological Methods and Luminaries

A second prevalent approach to methods in theology is to probe the contributions of noteworthy thinkers. Extensive research on a plethora of thinkers is ongoing, from biblical times to the present, and from various traditions. The methods of historical figures, such as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Hildegard von Bingen, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and moving through centuries to Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, Bernard Lonergan, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and a countless list of theological luminaries and their influence, have been studied closely. Contemporary prominent theologians, such as Gustavo Gutiérez, Jürgen Moltmann, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Catherine Keller, and many more, are also studied for their methods.[2]

To extrapolate a "method" from an individual thinker usually suggests systematic or biblical theologians who have written enough that a coherent and consistent approach can be discerned. There are innumerable other theologians, pastors, spiritual leaders, and activists who are also studied for their theological methods. Most of these have raised new questions, corrected or critiqued outdated, narrow or biased approaches, offered original perceptions, and some founded new "traditions" or methods, with their unique insights, and decisive contributions. They are luminaries who brought fresh perceptions and enhanced the meaning of methods. The limitation of this approach is that these are specific individuals, usually European-trained elite men, who immersed themselves in pursuit of their era and interests, and often with considerable societal and personal support. Contemporary theologians are varied in all possible manners, with fewer supports and often with less intellectual formation.[3]

☐ Theological Disciplines

A third approach to method is by way of theological disciplines: biblical, historical, doctrinal, systematics, moral or ethics, practical, ritual or liturgy, religious education, and spirituality. Each claims to have distinct methods, and yet none are internally homogenous. Further differentiations exist, such as classical or traditional, feminist, liberation, global, ecumenical, postcolonial, or other methods, which are used within theological disciplines. And, each

2. Each of these authors have numerous and renowned publications, too many to reference here.

3. In the past many theologians read in multiple languages, studied widely in numerous disciplines, and for decades. Such training, and concomitant supports are rare today. My own graduate theological and interdisciplinary training, (3 year M.Div. and 6 year PhD) required years of course work and competencies in five ancient and modern languages, has been replaced with a one-year MA and a four-year PhD, with minimal language requirements, only as needed.

contains internal variations, and pursues sometimes discrete and sometimes overlapping questions.

Most theologians are trained in one theological discipline, and can be unaware of the epistemological tools, the types of questions asked, and the manner of answering them, in other areas. Each discipline is replete with epistemological elements, such as the relative, absolute, inerrant, symbolic, transient, or eternal nature of any knowledge claim. The disputes of fact and fiction, veracity and legitimacy, and accountability, are at the heart of many of these methods.

☐ More Methodological Categories

This last exposé on the problems with methods considers further variations, without a connecting category. For example, understanding Christian aesthetics, art, architecture, music, rituals, and symbolism requires discerning theological methods behind and within these expressions. The enduring practices of ascetism, monasticism, contemplation, prayer, and silence are sophisticated religious lifeways, as are Christian political activism and movements for liberation and social change. These are not specifically theological methods, although they represent many ways through which individuals and communities engage with Christian insights. All are trying to discern what God is up to, within their own parameters and priorities.

One can study how Christianity functions as a lived religion, as rituals and community-building, as worldviews or narratives, as identity formation, as social movements, or as providing cultural orientation. The possibilities are plentiful. From another stance, theological methods vary depending upon dialogue partners, which could be philosophy, social, political, or natural sciences, anthropology or psychology, ethics, religious studies, and more. Theology always has an interlocutor, and this influences methodological considerations. The choice of the interlocutor also reveals the central pursuit.

For some, the starting point and main preoccupations are about doctrine or biblical interpretations, in innumerable contexts. For others it is moral or ethical. Social inequalities, justice, restoration, and the nature of sin will be the impetus that shapes the theological methods. This may include incorporating social ethics, political theories, postcolonial studies, economics, or critical race theories as interlocutors. For others it could be about the pluralities of religions, or a "larger scheme of things." The focus might be the purpose and telos of human life, the Earth community, or the cosmos. And for others the central themes are based on the origin, nature and structure of religion(s), religious experiences, the impulse of religious awareness, spiritualities, or the multiplicities of religions across time, cultures, and contexts. Diverse starting points and preoccupations shape theological methods.

A final relevant topic is God imagery. "How would we know what God is up to in the 'Anthropocene'?" depends on the functioning images of God. Not enough attention is given to the variety of God images—creator, redeemer, Spirit, Mystery, as Jesus, the Trinity, and as mother or father, friend, guide, lover, healer, judge, or as energy, transformer, new life, and so on. God is imaged as a noun or a verb, as present and absent, as an overall orientation or as enmeshed in daily living. The images of God as destroyer, punisher, conqueror, or vanquisher have shifted to less militaristic metaphors, although these still operate. There are innumerable images of God throughout biblical texts and traditions. How do we confirm the validity of images of God? These should be examined as to their sources, how they function, what actions they encourage, and the meaning given to, and implications of, God's images in the "Anthropocene" epoch. Although this is another topic for another time, it is pertinent, even vital, to proposals within this volume.

☐ Theological Methods Re-viewed

This synopsis of the problems of methods, and the plethora of possibilities, may seem to render a discussion of methods perplexing, even impossible. This brief sojourn into distinctions and diversities indicates that while *method* assumes an approach, procedure, or systemic orderliness, there are countless possibilities and presuppositions at work. Theological methods are unlike scientific ones, the latter of which must be measurable, verifiable, and usually repeatable. Theology is not such a discipline, and is based in worldviews, beliefs, texts, interpretations, images, and many other factors mentioned. The disparities across theological proposals, methods, and claims could be construed as distinct languages, often unintelligible to others.

Theological methods need to be transparent: about starting points, the intent, the driving questions, and "to what question is this an answer?" How is the inquiry framed? For example, if social inequities are the driving question, the intent may be to ponder sin and salvation, and/or to accept, understand, expose, critique, or transform such inequities. Questions continue, such as what is the main goal? What is the substance of the position? Based on what epistemology? What knowledge or disciplines are included and excluded? What sources, and what is the validity of the sources? What hermeneutics, biases, or underlying values are present? Presuppositions lurk within all theological methods and should be articulated as far as possible.

These considerations are, in my view, the foundations of theological methods. They are in the background, always operative, and will determine the parameters of the theological inquiries and often the claims. For example, theologies that assume Christian supremacy will differ from those that present a theology of world religions, and more so when religious pluralism is the

central veracity. Each position contains multiple presuppositions, and the theological methods and claims that ensue may not be commensurate with each other.

A further caveat is that all theological inquiries and methods are limited: revealing and concealing elements. They come from specific cultural and religious contexts, usually within the parameters of one Christian tradition and formation, are pursuing a particular line of inquiry from a precise standpoint—even if proposing a "theory of everything." Theological treatises are undertaken, customarily, by one theologian, with particular formations, experiences, and personal concerns. Of course, these enter a dialogical community to be considered and debated.

Diversities within theology are extensive. While some contributions can cross the divides between traditions, epistemologies, presuppositions, etc., many cannot. Hence, it is vital to understand the aforementioned interrogations in order to evaluate and appreciate any claims. Last, all these inquiries share a desire to understand the presence and will of God, and what this means for human life. My assumption is that if presentations of methods and accompanying elements were more transparent, we may better understand how Christian influenced cultures are implicated in, even accelerating, the "Anthropocene."

The Book of Nature, Evolution, and the "Anthropocene"

This epoch, characterized by the term the "Anthropocene," is ecologically precarious and perilous: now, and for future planetary-life ways and communities. *Homo sapiens,* a species of approximately 700,000-years of colonization of Earth. operating with symbolic consciousness, emerged relatively recently in the Cenozoic era. Of course, hominins and Earth life are much older, as is Earth itself at 4.5 billion years. The solar system, galaxy formations, and the 13-billion-year cosmogenesis are the larger processes out of which Earth emerged. Such timelines and dynamics are relevant in this section.

The term "Anthropocene," while awkward, is used here to indicate that the Cenozoic era—the past 65 million years—may be coming to an end through anthropogenic causes. The Cenozoic has been a time of flourishing life: of infinite interconnections between matter, energy, life, and spirit that had not existed to this extent in other planetary-life eras. The "Anthropocene" refers to an emerging *zoe* -and *geo*-logical epoch characterized by diminished life, lifeways, and immeasurable and unpredictable planetary decline. The Cenozoic and the "Anthropocene" represent two divergent Earth epochs. Humans (not all) are the cause of the "Anthropocene" and planetary decline.

These realities, the cosmo- and geo-genesis—and the fact that the Cenozoic may be diminished or terminated by the "Anthropocene" —are the overarching context of this theological reflection on discerning God's presence. How we fathom "what God is up to" can be considered within this long-term, deep time, perspective.

Starting Points, Core Questions, Presuppositions

Anthropogenic planetary decline, with its deleterious effects on Earth's life systems, is unconscionable. This is my assessment of these times and represents my presuppositions and bias. It is a transgression of inestimable proportions. There are, and will be, physical, psychic, and spiritual consequences that extend from human life to the biosphere, and beyond. The reckless unraveling of the Cenozoic era infringes upon and distorts what I discern and accept to be a *divine milieu* which we are privileged to inhabit. Divine presence is thus embedded, with immanent and transcendent dimensions or dynamics, and the human spirit is infused with and seeks such presence.[4] It is unbearable to fathom the Cenozoic era, which has been astonishingly life-generating, being transformed by the "Anthropocene," which is life deteriorating. What can be said of God given such opposing realities? These are the themes within this section.

As mentioned, context is decisive. The importance of starting with cosmological origins and dynamics is key here. The formation of the Milky Way galaxy, our solar system, Earth, evolutionary processes, and hominin expansion with complex social systems are the dynamics of cosmogenesis. They are not prescribed, chaotic, or ultimately determined. They are the processes of emergent complexities, profound entanglements, and at least for Earth, a formidable impetus for life-intensifications. It is necessary that these be taken together as the context, background and foreground, and horizon of meaning. To speak of serious matters, such as "how would we know what God is doing?," it behooves us to consider a comprehensive context of reality—as we know it—for two reasons.

The first is the issue of starting points and preoccupations. Where is the best, most useful, and fruitful starting point for this inquiry? I considers cosmogenesis to be the most revealing because it provides insights about fundamental orientations of the processes of reality out of which we emerged. These origins and processes are the foundation and bedrock of all phenomena we can know empirically. They are our origins and source. They are instructive

4. This is not the place for an in-depth presentation of theological anthropologies, their variations, and implications. My approach is generally influenced by Karl Rahner and his various treatises in *Theological Investigations*, coupled with studies in evolution.

in myriad ways, although not without interpretative quagmires. I have written frequently on why the dynamics of the universe are religiously pertinent.[5]

Understanding what is known about the universe and Earth's evolutionary processes is key to realizing not only that humans belong to, are embedded in, and dependent upon Earth's health and vitality. It is that humans are an expression of the universe, of Earth's biosphere, and are a member of and within a living biosphere. From humans, as a symbolic species with a transcendent impulse, arise questions of origins, meaning, purpose, of life and death, of evil and suffering, and so on. Religions thus evolved from human "interior" development. Much has been written on these topics.[6] My main point is a reminder of the depth of continuity, integration, and entanglement from cosmogenesis to human emergence, including our religious sensibilities. Not only do these processes influence how we imagine or discern facets of God, but the religious impulse also emerges from within these processes. Furthermore, humans seek depths of intelligibility within, and with reference to, a greater whole. Each religious tradition affirms this quest to glimpse a "larger schemes of things," and seeks the limits and meaning of such a meta-schematic.

The second reason refers to the work of Thomas Berry where he reminds us that the Earth is primary, and humans are derivative.[7] Symbolic consciousness evolved as the *modus operandi* and navigation system of *homo sapiens*, which includes languages, worldviews, cultures, and indeed religions. While language processes are inherent to humans, specific languages are relative and mutable. The same would be true of religions: while religious (spiritual, transcendent) impulses and sensibilities are intrinsic, specific religions are myriad, fluid, and provisional. Without oversimplifying these topics, the emphasis is a reminder that most religions, with the certainty of universal and eternal significance, have dissolved into a historical past. They come and go throughout history, while the religious impulse or quest endures. Whatever can be known of God, must take this into account. It is an impoverished approach to consider divine presence in the "Anthropocene" epoch without being informed of these far-reaching and comprehensive dynamics.

Alternative Views and Multiple Interpretations

A brief mention of alternative interpretations is in order. For example, in a cursory fashion, it is generally accepted, one way or another, for Christians to

5. See Eaton, "The Human Quest."

6. For example see Deacon, *The Symbolic Species;* Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World?*; Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave*.

7. Berry, "New Story."

believe that our origins, and all the cosmos, originate(d) in God, or are God's creation. How important "creation" is varies. Some take an intelligent design view, proposing that humans are the culmination of creation. For a few, the "Anthropocene" epoch signals the *end times*, to be celebrated.[8] In early ecotheology, the differences between fall or redemption or creation theologies, and their dissimilarities in theological methods, interlocutors, concerns, and conclusions, were topical. Some consider that while cosmogenesis is "true," it is only tangentially germane to human affairs and Christian precepts. Issues of suffering, sin, redemption, and the meaning of Jesus as both human and divine are seen as more fundamental. Others may focus solely on Christian historical processes, correctives, and the revealing of God in human history. For these views, creation is less instructive about God than are Christian scriptures, doctrines, histories, and teachings.

From another angle, some suggest that the universe, the biosphere, and human capabilities advanced until humanity was receptive for the specificities of Christian revelations of God's presence, chiefly in Jesus as Christ. Thus, while cosmogenesis is interesting, it is not religiously relevant because God chose to intervene in history to save humans from their existential orientation or fallenness, or as a verification, corrective, or reinforcement. Also, many versions of Christianity support conventional claims of human exceptionalism: that humanity is the only, or the essential, creature in the image and likeness of God.

All these claims reveal that however creation is theologically interpreted, each standpoint rests on distinct presuppositions: that creation is central, peripheral, or irrelevant, and is good, fallen, incomplete, or en route to perfection. These methods start with Christian theology, and interpret creation, or cosmogenesis, through that lens. My method, also replete with presuppositions, starts with cosmogenesis and evolution, which some will protest as theologically erroneous.

Evolution and Theological Claims

There are engaging debates at the nexus of Christianity and various sciences, with robust discourses on models, method, meaning, and metaphysics. Often the most contentious are those that integrate evolution and theology. Evolutionary theologies (and various natural theologies or theologies of nature), are a developing theme. As more is known about evolution, and as evolutionary pathways are being obstructed through ecological devastation, these topics have caught the attention of some theologians.

8. I am not addressing those who consider ecological ruin to be a welcome sign of an apocalypse, which is theologically ludicrous and spiritually vacuous.

Debates rage on, often in response to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's influence.[9] His approach was the first comprehensive attempt to blend evolutionary sciences with Christian theology, with his cosmo-, bio-, anthropo-, and Christo-geneses progressions. This is not the place to delve into his scientific-mystical "theory of everything." The point is that there is an uneasy alliance between evolution and conventional theologies. Teilhard and others—who attempt to integrate salvation history with an evolutionary view of the world—are accused of Gnostic heresies, forsaking faith in a biblical God as the ultimate reality, meditating on science rather than on scripture, rejecting biblical eschatology, replacing grace with nature, ignoring the doctrines of sin and grace, abandoning Christian anthropology, or simply offering pathetic neologisms (Jacques Maritain).[10] Critics of Teilhard de Chardin, and others who depart from biblical and classical theological norms by starting with evolution, evoke much commentary, and by prominent theologians. Jacques Maritain, Jürgen Moltmann, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and David Lane reject those, such as Teilhard, who, in their eyes, replace "the supernatural Christian story of redemption in Christ with a naturalistic account of evolution."[11]

Others defend Teilhard's views as purely formed by and steeped in classical theological themes, such as revelation, sacrament, and teleology. Theologians influenced by Teilhard, such as Henri de Lubac, Denis Edwards, John Haught, Anne Primavesi, Celia Deane-Drummond, Holmes Rolston III, Ian Barbour, and more, advise that theology(ies) must find ways to integrate evolution, and each offers various proposals.[12] In all these there is a tacit tendency to prove that their theological submissions are "orthodox."

The approach here is not to present the debates, but rather to indicate that theological commitments, beliefs, presuppositions, and preoccupations are at the heart of how theologians engage with evolution. These influence, and can limit and distort, evolutionary insights. Customarily, in theology, the concerns are reversed.

Books of Divine Revelation

Principal preoccupations govern theological methods and interpretations. High or low Christologies determine the centrality of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. Theological epistemologies establish the parameters and genres of veracities of Christian (or scientific) claims. Relevant to this discussion is the demarcation of parallel revelations: the adage of the books of nature

9. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*. This is his most influential work on the subject of evolution.

10. Curran, "Theology, Evolution, and the Figural Imagination," 293.

11. Curran, "Theology, Evolution, and the Figural Imagination," 288.

12. These theologians have published frequently, affirming and critiquing, Teilhard de Chardin's proposals.

and scripture. Does the one supersede the other? Conradie asserts that the book of scripture is part of the book of nature, with which I concur.[13] For current purposes, I will consider them separately to elucidate the issues of methods.

These "books" are not just complementary or congruent revelations. They probe different veracities, with separate interlocutors, and use unique tools of analysis. Most importantly they may come to dissimilar conclusions about revelation, sin or redemption, Christology, and relevant here, the role of creation or cosmogenesis. Both "books" are used to discern God's presence and activities, while concentrating on particular and delimited preoccupations. Responses to "how can we know what God is up to" also differ, as the presuppositions mentioned enclose, and constrict, methods and interpretations.

The Primacy of the Book(s) of Nature

My emphasis is to look at the larger orientation of the universe, and what can be known about the eras of life on Earth as a starting point and hermeneutical framing. It may seem abstract or irrelevant to consider the universe in this inquiry. However, it is not only that the universe is the larger or largest horizon of reality and can thus function as a backdrop to current studies. It is that these processes reveal the basic orientation to all that exists, that we currently know. The ongoing discoveries of the complexities, diversifications, sequences of transformations, and inter-relatedness of the universe reveal a cohesiveness and coherence. The universe is dynamic and integral: unified, not uniform. Scientists speak of emergent complexity, entanglement, correspondence, congruence, fine-tuning, or intelligibility to describe the overall coordination within the universe that are also evident in the evolution and functioning of the biosphere. The biosphere is replete with interrelated processes, self-organizing with networks of connections, mutual influences, and communication systems from the molecular and cellular to the planetary processes. These are the origins, foundational processes, and dynamics of the biosphere including the emergence and development of hominids in the Cenozoic. It is from these larger processes that hominins develop religious language, systems, doctrines, etc.

To learn of the universe and its sojourn to the Milky Way, Earth and life is profoundly revealing about God. No language is adequate to express the depth of spiritual insights gleaned by studying cosmogenesis, evolution, and the expansion of life from singular cells to symbolic consciousness. God's ways, desires, vision, or hopes can be intuited, even as intimations of the divine. This is, of course, not a new idea. There are numerous treatises on the revelatory elements of the natural world, and for centuries.

13. See Conradie, "On the Hope."

The difference now is that one evolutionary era is being overtaken by another. The depths of biospheric entanglement indicate that the impact on human communities will be (unevenly and unfairly) ruinous, certainly over time. The transitions—ecological, social, cultural, and religious—will be massive. The Cenozoic era—the past 65 million years—may be ending, with the cessation of countless life forms, of some evolutionary pathways and even biospheric integrity. It may also mean the end of an expansive, creative, and profound historical phase of cultural and religious development. Apart from the endless ethical issues, what will the revelations be from the book of nature in the "Anthropocene"?

God and the "Anthropocene Epoch"

In responding to the question "How would we know what God is up to in the 'Anthropocene'?" it is crucial to make claims about God that are intelligible, and if not verifiable, are judicious and justifiable. This section has three parts. The first is about claims about God, ways of knowing, and personal tendencies. The second is about religious experiences. The third addresses some religious or spiritual exigencies of the current era.

Knowing God: Apophasis

What does it mean to know the ways of God? After a lifetime of learning and reflecting on the topic of God, I remain suspicious of those who seem to know a lot. Having spent decades studying and teaching theology, and involved with several Christian communities, I am perplexed by those who communicate confidently about God. There are many reasons for this, one of which is that I am dubious about (any) truth claims and need empirical or persuasive evidence to adhere to "truth." A second, and more pertinent, reason here is that my spiritual temperament is intensely apophatic. I am drawn to apophatic thinkers, or negative theologies, which are circumspect about God knowledge and God-talk.

There are examples, such as in 1 Kings 19:12 where God is almost absent: not in the mighty wind, the fire, or the earthquake, but in the gentle breeze, or as a quiet, still voice. One needs to be silent to be able to hear. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's notion that God's Word lies in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence resonates deeply with me. From the "Cloud of Unknowing" to Meister Eckhart to Rudolf Otto, I am drawn to those who begin and end with the ineffable, the numinous, unknowing, and mystery. I cannot explain the origin of this tendency. It simply is, and it shapes my theological methods, and pronouncements, or lack thereof. This inclination, or predisposition, allows for an appreciation of other traditions, such as apophatic themes from Daoist

insights, the Upanishads, Sri Aurobindo, or the Lakota teachings of the lessons hidden in every leaf and rock. Apophatic leitmotifs are within all religious traditions. An apophatic sensibility makes responding to the question of how we know would what God is up to in the "Anthropocene"? challenging.

There are numerous philosophies on the inscrutability and hiddenness of God that accompany apophatic tendencies. Even cataphatic theologies affirm that humans cannot definitively know God, despite the endless assertions about God's nature, Trinitarian being, activities, etc. Although most careful theologians realize that theological language is metaphoric, symbolic, image-laden, and/or allegorical, cataphatic theologies carry on as if religious utterances are transparent or have direct representations. Cataphatic theologies are the norm, and are dominant and assertive.

Apophatic approaches are under-appreciated and misjudged in systematic and moral theologies, in general. This is not simply because they seem less certain about God, but also because they are shunted off into personalist spiritualities, theological aesthetics, mysticism, liturgy/ritual, monasticism, contemplative techniques and interiority, or other less resolute theological realms. It also may be that apophatic versions of theology cannot be readily systematized and are methodologically enigmatic. Yet, because apophatic affinities convey a wariness around truth claims, they tend to seek the presuppositions and preoccupations out of which theological pronouncements arise. Also, because of the apprehensions of God-talk, apophatic propensities will not settle for unexamined beliefs, opinions, or even convictions masquerading as conclusive knowledge. This is beneficial – it seems to me – and explains the telos of the earlier sections on methodological pluralities, assumptions, and core questions. It also indicates that there can be no facile claims about God, or explicit methods to analyze or critique apophatic approaches.

Religious and Other Experiences

What also operates in the background of theological methods is religious experiences, or whatever experiences shape theological investigations and conclusions. This line of inquiry is fraught with difficulties. What is the meaning of "experience"? What constitutes a "religious" experience? Is there any essence to or verification of a religious experience? If so, how is it formative? How are such experiences interpreted? There are so many areas where this topic loses its clarity and parameters. Thus, I will make only a few provisional comments.

The first is that religious experiences are valid and somewhat specific. Religious experiences have been studied, such as by William James, Ninian

Smart, Wayne Proudfoot, Ralph Hood, and Ann Taves.[14] There are handbooks and encyclopedias from numerous disciplines, suggesting that such experiences occur within and outside of religious realms. However, there is no definitive structure or template to these experiences.

My optics are narrow here. I draw initially from Victor Turner, and his studies on liminal experiences within rites of passage.[15] In this perspective, religious experiences may occur where one faces liminality: a state of *betwixt and between*, at a threshold of profound dissolution and resolution where genuine new insights arise. Turner portrays this liminal passage as one where perceptions of the infinite or ineffable occur. These liminal experiences, and what Rudolf Otto refers to as numinous experiences, are the basis of religious consciousness. It cannot be taught but only induced, evoked, or awakened. This process not only transforms one's inner awareness, but also confers values, confidence, conviction, and social responsibility. As such, these are profound, life-orienting, and affirming experiences. They reveal to the neophyte, in Turner's language, the larger and sacred horizons and visions of reality. In Christian language, they reveal divine presence.

I realize that this manner of defining religious experiences, and with or without religion, is inadequate. This narrow focus is meant to validate certain kinds of depth experiences that illuminate, orient, and inspire, as well as infuse meaning and purpose. They open possibilities of encountering the world in new and unexpected ways, generating a surplus of meaning within expanded horizons, life-enhancing awareness, and ethical obligations. The purpose of this depiction is to suggest that such experiences are occurring in countless communities as people become aware of the decline of the Earth's health and life in tandem with awakening to the magnificence of the natural world, and for some the cosmos.

Religious Experiences and the Natural World

To become aware of the splendor of natural or Earth realities, and to integrate this awareness, can be life changing. Learning of evolution and human emergence from and dependence upon the biosphere can be an impetus to consider the natural world as more than the "environment," or "nature out there," or a lovely place to stroll or exercise, a respite, or a quiet place of rejuvenation or reflection. The shift is from experiencing the natural world as having utilitarian, instrumental, or aesthetic value to realizing the embeddedness and entanglement between humans and the natural word, and as having intrinsic, and for some spiritual, value.

14. Each of these authors has published formative works on religious experiences, too many to reference here.

15. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*; Eaton and Hornborg, "Ritual Time and Space."

Wonder is a common response to the natural world.[16] With others I have researched the dynamics of wonder, and how experiences of wonder can orient and instruct, and infuse actions.[17] Wonder and awe, primary spiritual sensibilities, are potent and should not be ignored as a manner of religious instruction and as revealing God's presence. Experiences of wonder and awe are formative, even decisive, although interpreted, at times, as splendid yet sentimental. Rachel Carson aptly sums up my position: "The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction."[18]

Religions connect the sacred or divinity with the natural world in one way or another. In light of ecological stress, many are retrieving and reviving themes that rouse awareness, affirm the breadth, depth and goodness of creation, and support experiences of wonder and awe. The natural world and its dynamics can be interpreted as revelatory of, or united with, what is deemed to be sacred, divine, holy, or God. Much has been written on this, including the work of Mark Wallace on Christian animism.[19]

Negative Contrast Experiences

The decline of the natural world can also provoke an awakening. From the angle of religious experiences, it can be a *negative contrast experience*, as described by Edward Schillebeeckx. Slow deterioration, statistics on animal extinctions, increases in allergies, cancers and anxiety, climate changes, and constant talk of impending doom are rarely an impetus for religious experiences. However, for some, when juxtaposed with the life-affirming ones, the losses—now and in the future—give rise to a deep awakening, and focal point for social change.

Rapid deterioration, usually alarms, even frightens, people, and can accelerate an ecological awakening. Of course, other reactions also occur, such as disbelief, defending resources, protecting privileges, escaping into affluence, or ignoring what is occurring "elsewhere." Yet, there is no doubt that current and future perils of the "Anthropocene" are garnering attention. The pervasive fires, floods, and storms of 2021 alone are a wake-up call about climate change, hopefully for many. Climate change is a threat multiplier.

16. I am not dismissing experiences of the natural world that evoke terror, radical otherness, being overwhelmed, or even disdain and apathy. I am privileging experiences of wonder in this instance.

17. For example, see Eaton, "Crossroads and Crosshairs"; Gallagher et al., *A Neurophenomenology of Awe and Wonder*; Deane Moore, "The Truth of the Barnacles"; Carson, *A Sense of Wonder*.

18. Carson, "Speech."

19. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird*.

These and the Corona virus have taught us that we are susceptible to Earth's exigencies.

Religious Awakenings: The Cenozoic, the "Anthropocene," and Spiritual Sensibilities

Comprehension of the grandeur of the Cenozoic and apprehension of the looming "Anthropocene" elicits an agonizing, even unbearable, tension. Furthermore, these dual awakenings are not a given; that is, many will become aware of both—the abundant Cenozoic and the prospects of the "Anthropocene"—and not have any profound or religious experiences. The reasons for this are multiple. For example, it is staggering to note how bias, ignorance, apathy, and escapism function. A small tangent is perhaps relevant. It is shocking to me, as someone from Canada, that most people in ecologically and economically affluent realms, have little to no ecological literacy. Many urban dwellers are unaware of where their food comes from, that to pollute water is to drink these contaminants later, and that vibrant ecosystems are needed for basic living. The ignorance is appalling.

Awakening to the natural world and gaining some basic ecological literacy are long overdue, for some. In other regions in Canada and around the world, many struggle to survive in ecologically stressed conditions and chronic undernourishment, where subsistence farming, land infertility, and reduced vitality are necessitating migrations, and causing much suffering. These struggles are increasing, albeit very unevenly.

The role of, and support for, depth or religious experiences that awaken, positively or negatively, should not be underestimated. The themes of spiritual awakenings are long-standing, rich, and common in all religions. They can be affirmed, even encouraged, in our times, even if religious experiences are delicate to discern, rarely systematic, and oftentimes neglected in Christian theologies and discourses.

Religious or Spiritual Exigences of the Current Epoch

This section comprises two responses to the themes of this essay. The first considers moral outrage, while the second furthers the theme of the influence of the natural world on religious sensibilities.

Political responses to these calamities vary but are overall ineffective, as seen with inaction of the 2021 COP 26 meetings. Oil companies pressure governments to tone down climate change rhetoric and actions. They, and other powerful lobbies from meat and dairy industries, constantly find ways to weaken the United Nations and IPCC climate change reports and undermine

effective ways to address climate change. So far, most governments have been slow, weak, self-serving, and exceptionally inadequate in response to the current ecological stresses and the dire predictions of the "Anthropocene" epoch. This is reprehensive and is cause for religious responses of moral outrage.

The focus of this essay is not on moral outrage and ethics although these are crucial topics. Moral outrage and subsequent actions are indispensable Christian responses to current issues of social inequities, migrations, food insecurities, climate changes, and callous governments and corporations. This extends to the enmeshed grip of aggressive capitalism on so much of the world's economic and social systems, and the intrusion of capitalist worldviews into most other worldviews. Of great concern is how far economic schemas have infected ecological or sustainability frameworks. The ability to denigrate and dismiss ecological wisdom—anthropocentric or biocentric—in favor of so-called economic stability seems unstoppable. These should evoke moral outrage.

There is no doubt that whatever we claim of God in these times, there are negative contrast experiences occurring. Coupled with appropriate analyses, these become a profound calling to moral outrage. Edward Schillebeeckx explored negative contrast experiences, and suggested they must include moral outrage and be followed by protests and praxis to mend, and end, the suffering. The religious import of exposing ecological or social sins, demonstrating and dismantling structural evils, and calling for confessions and conversion, reforms and revolutions cannot be underestimated. While these theological approaches and methods are not the emphases of this essay, they are critical in considering ways we would know what God is up to in the "Anthropocene" and are well-presented elsewhere in this volume.

Religious or Spiritual Sensibilities, the Natural World, and Knowing God

The last topic continues the theme of religious experiences, but from different angles. The natural world—its wonders and relationship to the divine—permeate most religious traditions. How the natural world is revelatory, and how this meshes with other forms of revelation, is affirmed differently within specific traditions. However, the overall emphasis is that the natural world is infused with divine presence, is revelatory, speaks of and reveals God, manifests God's Spirit, orientation and intentions, and in myriad ways is deeply connected to what we can know, and claim, about God. This is key.

The theoretical or theological architecture may be pantheistic, panentheistic, or animistic, and with immanent and transcendent dimensions. Each stance differs on the way the divine is manifested, and how much we can discern

about God. Each will interpret this knowledge in terms of how central creation and the natural world are with respect to texts, traditions, teachings, etc. In Christian realms, creation is a functioning theme, especially with respect to ecological concerns, and with variations. For some, creation remains a backdrop to the centrality of human–divine dynamics. For others, the natural world is guided by or is permeated with divine presence. These distinctions, while significant and described earlier, are not the central point here.

Regardless of the differences, God (the divine, holy, sacred, Spirit) intersects with or is embedded within the natural world. God's presence or activities may be discerned as traces of the divine, as intimations, as an I–Thou encounter, as depth experiences of being part of a larger whole, or of encountering Mystery, Presence, Activity, or the Numinous, and so on. My main point is fundamentally that to *know* this is to *experience* it. They are powerful, animating, and orienting experiences. Religious texts, poets, mystics, and nature writers are replete with affirmations of these experiences and learnings, often expressed through wonder and awe, and in ways that intermingle nature and spirit. Much has been written on these occurrences, and often with elegant and poignant language.

Yet, there are few theological methods that affirm these experiences, especially within systematic theological norms. Rarely are they included in theological studies, unless as spirituality, poesis, metaphoric, or symbolic theologies, or dismissed to the regions of personalist or unverifiable mysticism. Even religious experiences are rarely researched or taught. And yet, to discern the divine in the natural world is both archaic and contemporary, and throughout all religions, cultures, and regions of the world. The natural world has been a primary source of spiritual insight, teachings, guidance, and inspiration for millennia. It is well-established within Christian traditions. Yet, it is, in my view, a significant lacuna in ecotheology.

It is vital to converse about how the natural world has been and is revelatory and inspirational as the lavishness of the Cenozoic era is transforming into the deterioration of the "Anthropocene." The images of a God of extravagance, fulsomeness, and abundance of life relate to interpreting the divine presence within the natural world in the Cenozoic era. What will a diminished Earth disclose? Will it reveal an impoverished, harsh, austere God?

The Book of Nature: Source of Religious Awareness

This line of inquiry has breadth and depth.[20] A few brief points are relevant here. There is a great deal at stake at this nexus of creation, religious

20. See Eaton, "The Human Quest to Live in a Cosmos", "A Spirituality of the Earth"; Berry, *Dream of the Earth*"; Tucker and Grim, *Living Cosmology;* Mickey, Tucker and Grim, *Living Earth Community.*

experiences, methods in theology and what will be discernible about God. The first is to judge unambiguously that the extent of ecological ruin is reprehensive. Christians and capitalists alike, with religious certainties, images of progress, and appetites for domination are destroying not only human lives but also other living communities and planetary systems such as climate processes. These are moral and ecological sins of unspeakable proportions and indicate spiritual depravity. As writes biblical scholar Norman Habel: "To violate the Earth is to tear God's masks, to scar God's physical face, to desecrate God's Earthly dwelling."[21]

The second is the role of religious yearning and spiritual sensibilities within evolutionary frameworks. If evolution is integrated with some *gravitas*, we must consider hominin development within evolutionary processes. That is, in our totality we are of the Earth. The Earth is our origin, nourishment, and fulfillment. Therefore, human life, in all its intricacies and diversities, is most accurately understood in continuity within the evolutionary activities of Earth. This also means that our capacity for religious awareness or spirituality is Earth-derived.

Berry's axiom that the earth is primary and the human derivative means that every aspect of human functioning—imagination, subtlety of emotion, thoughts and words, capacity for intimacy, and awareness of experiences of the divine—is Earth-derived. He goes further to claim that our spiritual propensity and refinement is because of the grandeur of the earth:

> We should be clear about what happens when we destroy the living forms of this planet. The first consequence is that we destroy modes of divine presence It we have a wonderful sense of the divine, it is because we live amid such awesome magnificence. If we have refinement of emotion and sensitivity, it is because of the delicacy, the fragrance and indescribable beauty of song and music and rhythmic movement in the world about us. [...] If we lived on the moon, our mind and emotions, our speech and imagination, our sense of the divine would all reflect the desolation of the lunar landscape.[22]

If we take this approach, it has implications for how we discern God in the "Anthropocene". As Berry states: "The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we belong. To become alienated from this community is to become destitute in all that makes us human. To damage this community is to diminish our own existence."[23] A diminished Earth will result in a decline in spiritual sensitivities and awareness. Others advocate a similar insight. "We are as much alive as we keep the Earth alive" is a well-known axiom of Geswanouth Slahoot (Chief Dan George).

21. Habel, "Key Ecojustice Principles," 119.

22. Berry *Dream of the Earth*, 11.

23. Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 81.

The consequences are apparent. It is unknowable if and how God is active in the "Anthropocene." However, if the natural world, and the Cenozoic flourishing, is a basis of knowing God as encouraging life abundance, the goodness of creation, and immanent presence, then during the "Anthropocene" God will be known in different ways, or some knowledge of God will diminish.

Conclusion

The emphasis of this essay has been threefold. The first was to survey diversities within theological methods. The purpose was to indicate numerous pluralities that result from Christian traditions, theological disciplines, luminaries, divergent commitments, core questions, presuppositions, and preoccupations. This calls for circumspection and transparency as we ponder how would we know what God is up to in the "Anthropocene," as inferences, biases, and convictions will be operative in the background.

A second area of exploration was to propose, and expose, my starting point to this discussion, which is the importance of cosmological and evolutionary processes. These can be profoundly revealing of both modes of divine presence and the larger orientations within the cosmo- and geo-genesis dynamics. The assumption is that we live in a *divine milieu,* thus the ways and means of God are at least partially discernible in a panentheistic framework. This was followed by an examination of the area of religious experiences, with a focus on their significance, even centrality to religious reflection and God-talk. This was followed by juxtaposing religious experiences in the Cenozoic era and "Anthropocene" epoch, which is somewhat artificial but indicates that the thriving of the natural world is inherent to religious awareness and awakening, and has been for millennia. Within these discussions I included a personal note about apophatic tendencies, some general comments about the problems of God-talk, and the difficulties of bringing systematic theologies and methods to bear on religious experiences, spirituality, and apophasis.

The last section presented two distinct but necessary religious responses to the exigences of the current era. The first was that of negative contrast experiences, moral outrage, and ensuing actions. The second was to consider whether, if knowledge of evolution became integrated, it could be seen as an influential framework for ecotheology. Then the development of religious impulses, consciousness, capacities, and sensibilities, generally defined, would be interpreted as evolutionary processes. A next step is to suggest that these are dependent upon a thriving natural world. As the Earth diminishes, so will these capacities.

My view is that to make declarations about God is precarious at best. One should be clear how such claims can be substantiated, as they cannot be verified with any customary epistemologies. Much can be believed, claimed, sourced in texts, traditions, and doctrines, and presented as religious truths.

These can also just be theological tautologies. However, we ponder the question of how would we know what God is up to in the "Anthropocene," transparency of sources, concerns, convictions, and biases should be paramount.

Finally, in the throes of climate change discussions, and ecological projections and concomitant social instabilities and sufferings, three general directions are of note. One, encapsulated by Extinction Rebellion movements, is clamoring for genuine economic, social, and ecological actions. As much as I appreciate such movements, I find the language of *fighting*—fighting climate change, species extinctions, ecological deterioration, even COVID-19—to be an obstacle. It is within the same militaristic mindset, and in the end sets humans, once more, against the natural world. The second direction represents many other movements for socio-ecological change, such as the efforts for economic reforms, global solidarity undertakings, voluntary simplicity for the affluent, the Green New Deals, and more. These programs are influential and important. My concern is that many are anthropocentric. The third is a quiet move toward deep reflections, contemplation, and interiority. I mention these spiritual tenets, not to support diversions or escapism. Nurturing interiority, mature spiritual awareness, and inner depth increases capacities of nonviolent resistance, of sustaining difficulties, of solidarity, and of profound spiritual awareness. John De Gruchy's proposal that we are entering a monastic moment is in a similar vein, as is Catherine Keller's *Facing Apocalypse* with a theme of *dreamreading*.[24]

There is no roadmap to, and for, the future. It will take wisdom, courage, and depth to plot a viable way forward. These are all spiritual themes, that could assist along the way to discerning how we would know what God is up to in the "Anthropocene," as is much needed hope.

Bibliography

Berry, Thomas. *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988.

——. "The New Story." In *The Dream of the Earth*, 123–37. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988.

Carson, Rachel. "Speech to Theta Sigma Phi.", 21 April 21, 1954. See https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2018/01/09/exceeding-beauty-of-the-earth-april-21-1954/ (last accessed 27 March 2022).

Carson, Rachel. *The Sense of Wonder*. New York: HarperCollins, 1965.

Conradie, Ernst M. "On the Hope that the Christian Story May Transform the Universe Story: A South African Reformed Perspective." In *Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin … An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story Amid the "Anthropocene" Volume 1*, edited by Ernst M. Conradie and Pan-Chiu Lai, 95–118. Durbanville: Aosis, 2021.

Curran, Ian. "Theology, Evolution, and the Figural Imagination: Teilhard de Chardin and His Theological Critics." *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 84:3 (2019), 287–304. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140019849385

24. De Gruchy, *This Monastic Moment*; Keller, *Facing Apocalypse*.

Deacon, Terrence. *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2011.

———. *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Deane Moore, Kathleen. "The Truth of the Barnacles: Rachel Carson and the Moral Significance of Wonder." *Environmental Ethics* 27:3 (2005), 265–77. https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics200527316

De Gruchy, John. *This Monastic Moment: The War of the Spirit and the Rule of Love*. Eugene: Cascade, 2021.

Eaton, Heather. "The Challenges of Worldview Transformation: To Rethink and Refeel our Origins and Destiny." In *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The Lynn White Thesis at Fifty*, edited by Todd Levasseur and Anna Peterson, 121–36. New York: Routledge, 2016.

———. "Crossroads and Crosshairs Violence, Nonviolence, Critique, Vision and Wonder." In *Earth@ Peace: Toward a Just and Ecologically Sustainable Peace*, edited by Joseph Camilleri and Deborah Guess, 49–71. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

———. "The Human Quest to Live in a Cosmos." In *Encountering Earth: Thinking Theologically with a More-Than-Human World*, edited by Trevor Bechtel, Matt Eaton and Tim Harvie, 227–47. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2018.

———. "A Spirituality of the Earth." In *The Natures of Things: Rediscovering the Spiritual in God's Creation*, edited by Norman Habel and Graham Buxton, 229–40. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016.

———. "An Ecological Imaginary: Evolution and Religion in an Ecological Era." In *Ecological Awareness: Exploring Religion, Ethics and Aesthetics*, edited by Sigurd Bergmann and Heather Eaton, 7–23. Berlin: LIT, 2011.

Eaton, Heather, ed. *The Intellectual Journey of Thomas Berry: Imagining the Earth Community*. Lanham: Lexington, 2014.

Eaton, Heather, and Anne Christine Hornborg. "Ritual Time and Space: A Liminal Age and Religious Consciousness." In *Religion, Ecology and Gender: East-West Perspectives*, edited by Sigurd Bergmann and Kim Yong-Bock, 79–90. Münster: LIT, 2009.

Gallagher, Sean, et al. *A Neurophenomenology of Awe and Wonder: Towards a Non-reductionist Cognitive Science*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Greenspan, Stanley, and Stuart Shanker. *The First Idea: How Symbols, Language, and Intelligence Evolved from Our Primate Ancestors to Modern Humans*. Cambridge: De Capo, 2004.

Gregersen, Niels Henrik, ed. *From Complexity to Life: On the Emergence of Life and Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Habel, Norman. "Key Ecojustice Principles: A *Theologia Crucis* Perspective." *Ecotheology* 5–6 (1998), 114–25.

Keller, Catherine. *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy and Other Last Chances*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2021.

Lewis-Williams, David. *The Mind in the Cave, Consciousness and the Origins of Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002.

Mickey, Sam, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, eds. *Living Earth Community: Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing*. Cambridge: Open Book, 2020.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *Le Phénomène humain*. Paris: Seui, 1956. Republished as *The Human Phenomenon*, translated by Sarah Appleton-Weber. East Sussex: Sussex Academic, 1999.

Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and John Grim, eds. *Living Cosmology: Christian Responses to the Journey of the Universe*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2016.

Turner, Victor W. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970.

Van Huyssteen, J. Wentzel. *Alone in the World? Science and Theology on Human Uniqueness*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

Wallace, Mark. *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019.

On Ecotheological Methods: Revisiting Early Latin American Liberation Theologies

Guillermo Kerber[1]

Introduction

The question "How would we know what God is up to?" directly leads us to the question of method that was addressed by several Latin American (LA) liberation theologians since the 1980s.

In this essay, I will focus especially on two of them. The first is Brazilian theologian Clodovis Boff, who, reformulating the See–Judge–Act pastoral method into socio-analytical, hermeneutical, and practical mediations, offered a basis for an epistemology for LA liberation theology. The second is Uruguayan Juan Luis Segundo who, besides calling for the liberation of theology, frequently quotes Gregory Bateson, well-known for his proposal of an ecology of mind. Segundo also offers clues for seeing the relationship between ecology and theology.

1. Guillermo Kerber teaches at the *Atelier Oecuménique de Théologie* and collaborates with the Adult Faith Formation Service of the Catholic church in Geneva, Switzerland. He is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the Anthropocene."

How to cite: Kerber, G 2022, "On Ecotheological Methods: Revisiting Early Latin American Liberation Theologies", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?,* An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 77–96. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.04

More than forty years later, these liberation theology approaches face new challenging and dramatic issues, such as climate change. In a third section, based on the insights of Boff and Segundo, and giving a concrete example of what Eaton requests in her chapter on reviewing theological methods, I try to show how the science of climate change offers relevant inputs for doing theology in the so-called "Anthropocene."

An excursus looks at Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* encyclical on care for our common home from the perspective of See–Judge–Act and some of the main concepts of LA liberation theology. The essay concludes with a summary of what was unfolded.

Clodovis Boff's Mediations: A Theological Review of the See–Judge–Act Method

The doctoral thesis of this Brazilian theologian on the epistemological foundations of LA liberation theology[2] remains a milestone in offering an in-depth analysis of its method more than forty years after the publication of the thesis.[3]

As Noble noted,[4] Boff's work has been described, by an author clearly identified with LA liberation theology, João Batista Libânio, as "a significant mark in the evolution of method (in liberation theology)," and by an "outsider" from Finland (Jukka Raunu) as "the official liberation theological method." Another scholar, Ivan Petrella, referring to a shorter but also relevant text,[5] says that it "provides the canonical view of liberation theology's methodology."

The merit of Clodovis Boff has been to unfold and to theologically deepen the See–Judge–Act pastoral method, developed in the first half of the twentieth century by the Belgian priest Joseph Cardijn for the Young Catholic Workers movement and later adopted by different movements of Catholic Action throughout the twentieth century.[6] By doing so, Boff contributed to developing a methodology that would assure LA liberation theology of a firm epistemological basis.[7]

In his book, Boff speaks of three mediations. These are the *sine qua non* components of meaningful political action, which remains the focus of

2. See Boff, *Teología*.

3. See Kerber, *El lugar*, 17.

4. See Noble, *Keeping*, 208 for such references to Libânio, Raunu and Petrella.

5. See Boff, *Epistemologia*.

6. See Kerber, "Ecumenical Background," 65.

7. See Richard, "Questions," 249.

his work. It is worth reminding that all the different branches of LA liberation theology have had a strong emphasis on transforming the social and political reality that is perceived as unjust and contrary to the message proclaimed by Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, Christian theology and the (Catholic) Church have, for centuries, supported, justified, and given a theological rationale to unjust and oppressive regimes and structures that have been in place in the region for five centuries. Therefore, another LA liberation theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, to whom I will return later, calls for a liberation of theology. This has not only been the case in the LA region. As Conradie points out in his essay, Christianity has legitimized white supremacy, apartheid, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and human supremacy.

Boff's purpose is to construct a method for theologies of the political (in fact, the Spanish version of his book keeps only the subtitle of the Portuguese version: *Teología de lo politico*). Although his work aims at providing the basis for concrete political engagement, he raises the concern of "activism" or "immediatism," as he calls it, which would be the tendency to act without a previous discernment on what would be the best action to be performed.

A critical reading and interpretation of reality requires the use of the already mentioned mediations. Theology, for Boff, is a critical discourse that needs to understand the social and political reality in which the theologian is immersed. In this sense, the role of theology can be seen as an insurgency against the empire narrative, as Solano also calls for in her essay. But understanding what is going on in a concrete historical situation is not "im-mediate." On the contrary, mediations are needed to reveal and interpret what is happening in a given society.

This is why, for Boff, *the first mediation is the socio-analytical*.[8] This involves the use of social sciences. When responding to the question of how social sciences are being used as mediation in theological method, Boff says that social sciences have at the same time, autonomy, and dependency in relationship to theology. In terms of the internal rules of social sciences, theology has nothing to say, they are autonomous. Nevertheless, theology can question both the presuppositions of the science in question, and the conclusions drawn from the research. Presuppositions and conclusions might go beyond the social sciences and include philosophical affirmations that might be challenged. This is not the only role of theology in relationship to social sciences. What Boff calls dependency is the capacity of theology to offer a critique to a specific social science when it argues that its approach is the only valid one. A sociological, political, historical approach, to name a few expressions of social sciences, should not become unquestionable but acknowledge both its specific and unique contribution and its limitations.

8. See Boff, *Teología*, 31–134.

In Boff's approach reality is social, political reality. When he wrote this book, in the 1970s, the non-human reality is hardly referred to in LA liberation theology. At that time, the urgency of the situation of the poor, as an overarching category that goes beyond the economic poor and includes the oppressed, the excluded, the marginalized, the victims, can make us understand the priority given to the social-political reality forgetting the non-human. The latter emerged strongly in the following decades together with new categories to expand the notion of the poor. Some of these new categories are reflected elsewhere in this volume, such as subaltern social movements, in Zachariah's essay.

Let me stress here that the use of social sciences as mediation already constitutes a first moment in doing theology. Although some authors may see the second moment (hermeneutical) as a strictly theological moment, I would argue that the use of a socio-analytical mediation helps us as theologians to be aware of the (sometimes implicit) presuppositions we have when we enter into the second moment of doing theology.

The second mediation for Boff is, consequently, *the hermeneutical mediation*.[9] At this point, the reality described by the social sciences is interpreted primarily in the light of the Scriptures and secondarily in the light of the Christian faith tradition. Here Boff stresses that theology is more a grammar than a lexicon, meaning that it is not in the particular words that theology finds its specificity but in the way those words are articulated in sentences, which are both symbolic and analogous. For Boff the concept of hermeneutics in relationship to his theology, is related to two notions. He calls the first one, following the Aristotelian legacy, ἑρμηνευτική τέχνη (*hermenéutiké tekné*), which would be the rules of exegetical interpretation while the second one, ερμηνεία (*hermenéia*), would be the act of interpretation itself.

As stated earlier, Boff strongly affirms the Scriptures as the originating source of interpretation. The task of the theologian is to receive the biblical text and to give theological articulation (interpretation) to that reading. However, the Christian tradition—in its extensive plurality—does have a role to play in the hermeneutical mediation. The successive interpretations of the Bible along the centuries become part of the very text that must be interpreted and re-understood in terms of the questions of the time and place in which those Scriptures are being read. The Bible necessarily requests to be read and interpreted in each concrete situation. For Boff, there is no "once and for all" meaning of the Scriptures and any attempt to argue for this is to canonize a historical moment, and not to allow the Scriptures to speak afresh. Boff here joins Juan Luis Segundo who defines the hermeneutical circle of the Bible as the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is a response to

9. See Boff, *Teología*, 135–286.

the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal: "Each new reality obliges to interpret the Word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly, and then to go back and re-interpret the Word of God again, and so on."[10] In this perspective, both for Boff and Segundo, the role of theology is to interpret the (socio-political) reality in light of the Bible and to address to the Bible the questions raised by this reality.[11] The personal journey that Conradie describes in his essay regarding the role of hermeneutics further expands the relevance of hermeneutics in relationship to sciences, philosophy, and biblical exegesis.

Boff names *the third mediation dialectical*, or as he puts it the "theory–praxis dialectics."[12] At this moment in the theological discourse, after having established the need for and the means of making a socio-analytic description of the reality and having demonstrated the relevance of the hermeneutic mediation, it is time to deliver a "praxic" outcome. Praxis, for Boff, as well as for other LA liberation theologians, is something different from action or practice. He is quite aware, as mentioned before, of the risk of falling in an activism or immediatism which would mean acting without previous reflection. Praxis, therefore, refers to the dialectical interplay of action or practice on the one hand and theory on the other.

Looking at the whole process, we can see similarities between Boff's proposal of the three mediations with the definition Gustavo Gutiérrez gives of theology as "a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word."[13]

Theology is thus understood as theoretical activity within Christian praxis. Praxis for Boff has the primacy and is an inherent part of doing theology. For that reason, he reflects on the social and political engagement of the theologian. As other LA liberation theologians also argue, Boff stresses that the social placing of the theologian is of paramount importance both for doing theology and for the liberation process. The social placing goes beyond the social and geographical coordinates and constitutes an epistemological situating of the theological discourse. As Conradie and Moe-Lobeda mention in the introduction to this volume and is stressed by other contributors such as Eaton and Maseno, contextuality permeates theological discourse. I would argue that all essays of this volume reflect the maxim that all theology is

10. Segundo, *Liberation*, 8.

11. Peter C. Phan notes that while for both Segundo and Boff the hermeneutical circle plays a key role in the interpretation of the Bible, they "do not apply the hermeneutics of suspicion to the Bible itself, many liberation theologians, especially feminists, have exposed the patriarchal and androcentric bias of the Hebrew-Christian sacred text." See Phan, "Method," 56.

12. See Boff, *Teologia*, 287–398.

13. Gutiérrez, *Theology,* 11.

contextual, and not only those essays that explicitly deepen African, Abyayalean, Tuvaluan theological perspectives, to name a few. Paraphrasing Pablo Bonavía, we can say that praxis is the starting point of Clodovis Boff's theology.[14] Or, as Christina Kheng puts it, "since its theological question arises from and is aimed at concrete experience and action, the liberationist method naturally finds a starting point and unifying principle in the concept of praxis."[15]

Praxis constitutes the true means of realization of concrete theological practice. It contributes to interpret history critically. In this sense, theology is counterintuitive, questioning mainstream presuppositions and views.

The third mediation, with its emphasis on praxis, brings us back to the socio-political situation in which we live. The whole theological method, and not only biblical interpretation as mentioned earlier, becomes a hermeneutical circle, or better spiral, as it has a teleological aim that is never completely achieved. This has led other theologians, such as Ernst Conradie, to argue in his essay, that the first moment is not "Seeing" but "Acting." Besides the South African Kairos document that he mentions, I find interesting the titles of the chapters of the study of the South African Council of Churches on climate change quite interesting: "Christian Responses to Climate Change ('Acting' and the Need for Ecclesial Analysis)"; "Investigating What Is at Stake ('Seeing' and the Need for Social Analysis)"; "Identifying the Roots of the Problem ('Judging' and the Need for Theological Discernment)"; and "Responding to This Vision (Renewed Acting)."[16] Keeping always in mind, as Boff does, and, as I will show later Segundo also does, that the whole method is a hermeneutical spiral, should prevent the theologian in falling in the distortions this method could entail that Conradie rightly describes.

The method of LA liberation theology, for Boff, constitutes a new way of doing theology, especially relevant for what he terms "Theology 2." Theology 2 focuses on what he calls secular realities, and includes theologies of the political, of gender, of race, of liberation, of the environment and so on. Together with "Theology 1," which focuses on classic dogmatic issues, they are complementary ways of doing theology.

As in any theological effort, LA liberation theology, according to Boff, runs the risk of two deviations. The first one is immanentism, and to avoid it theology should always have an eschatological perspective to interpret history. But, for Boff, even more dangerous than immanentism is the risk of transcendentalism; this is, ignoring the socio-political reality with the

14. Bonavía, *Praxis*.

15. Kheng, "Liberation Ecclesiology," 72.

16. South African Council of Churches, *Climate Change*.

presupposition that theology is only interested in the transcendent, without recognizing how the transcendent is mediated by non-transcendent means.

A Question of Method: Linking Ecology and Theology—Juan Luis Segundo's Point of View

Having seen Clodovis Boff's proposal on the epistemology and method of LA liberation theology, we can now move to a more specific concern related to the era in which we are living. Looking theologically to the "Anthropocene," we can ask ourselves: why should we combine theology with ecology? That question is part of a wider question: why combine theology with science? That in its turn raises a more traditional question at a different, epistemological, level: why combine theology with philosophy? However, asking "why?" does not exhaust the issue. It is more than that. It leads to the question: "How can it be done?"

In this section, I will follow another theologian, Uruguayan Jesuit Juan Luis Segundo (1925–1996). Even though Segundo is reckoned to be part of liberation theology,[17] he differs in large measure from other better-known liberation theologians, such as, for example Clodovis Boff's brother, Leonardo Boff or Gustavo Gutiérrez,[18] among others. What I shall attempt to demonstrate is that a large part of his work is based on a theological epistemology, which is somewhat different from that of Clodovis Boff presented earlier.

If I have to summarize what I am about to present I would say that Christian theology, and particularly Catholic theology, has traditionally used non-theological tools in its construction. The various theological disciplines, including those that we could call "specifically theological," such as, for example, biblical exegesis, have operated by having recourse, explicitly or implicitly, consciously or sub-consciously, to elements or, more precisely, to tools belonging already to a worldview or paradigm that is part of the culture in which theology is being done. They do this by using methods and aims of sciences or philosophies. The relation between theology and philosophy is long-standing. From the beginning of Christianity its theology has developed by drawing on various types of philosophy. Typical examples, to which I will come back later, are Neoplatonism in the case of Augustine's theology, and Aristotelianism in Thomas Aquinas' theology. Liberation theologians, including Segundo, have explicitly, as we have seen in the case of Clodovis Boff, had recourse to the social sciences as a tool to analyze society and as an integral part of the LA way of doing liberation theology.

17. Verdugo, "Juan Luis Segundo," 77.

18. Vallin, "Juan Luis Segundo," 42.

As stated earlier, the relation between natural sciences and theology has been an aspect less developed in early liberation theology, and more complex. However, as I shall attempt to demonstrate as we examine Segundo, it is not a secondary or extraneous issue.

Bateson According to Segundo

One of the reasons for having selected Segundo is that Gregory Bateson, the author of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, has had a considerable influence on Segundo's thinking. Bateson is one of the authors constantly referred to in Segundo's writings. He appears in the already quoted *The Liberation of Theology* in 1975 in reference to "learning to learn" (in Bateson's language "deutero-learning"). He is then quoted on many occasions in other works, and has a dominant place in one of Segundo's last works *Qué mundo? Qué hombre? Qué Dios* ("What world, what humankind, what God?"),[19] which leads Andrés Torres Queiruga to say that "very few theologians—not even Rahner, not even perhaps the representatives of process theology—have used this renewing ferment (the theory of evolution) so rigorously and consistently. Juan Luis Segundo does so discreetly at a *philosophical* level, nourishing his thought with a new epistemology, which he does not work out in detail, but which, by citing Teilhard and Bateson in support, he decisively practices."[20]

Why Add Philosophy or Science to Theology?

This heading is a paraphrase of the title of the first chapter of Segundo's book "What world, what humankind, what God?" which is "Why add philosophy to theology?" In this chapter Segundo highlights the time-hallowed use by Catholic theology of philosophy as an aid. The word "use" here describes its usefulness to the extent that traditionally philosophy has been called the *ancilla theologiae*, or handmaid of theology. Segundo points to the use by the Church Fathers of Platonism and Neoplatonism and, from Thomas Aquinas onwards, the use of Aristotle by scholastic theology. "It is clear," concludes Segundo, "that this custom of using philosophy as a servant to theology does not mean that one is prepared to accept that such a service can be rendered by just any philosophy, prudently cleansed of error. Anyone who reads how St. Thomas uses Aristotle without batting an eyelid will not be scandalized by

19. As far as I know, this book has not been translated into English, although there is a French translation, *Quel homme, quel monde, quel Dieu* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993). The translations of the author here are from the Spanish original.

20. Torres Queiruga, "Juan Luis Segundo," 13.

Maréchal's use of Kant or liberation theology's use of Marx, who, incidentally, was much closer to Christianity than Aristotle!"[21]

The second reason that Segundo gives can be summed up in the hermeneutical circle to which I referred already and that he has used since his *The Liberation of Theology.*[22] Segundo writes*:* "Epistemology and the sociology of knowledge have given us trustworthy proof that there is no such thing as total, pure, neutral listening. Any knowledge begins with a world of particular values and experiences of meaning. All interpretation is circular (or spiral)."[23] Segundo demonstrates that, on the one hand, it is not alien to theological activity to use non-theological categories, and specifically philosophical categories. On the other hand, it is impossible to approach the Bible as a *tabula rasa* or a blank piece of paper, as Clodovis Boff already pointed out. Our history, our choices, and our values, but also, at an unconscious involuntary level, our biology and our genes, go to make up what we are. We cannot extricate ourselves from them when we approach the biblical text. However, our experience often does not necessarily reflect proven scientific knowledge. Take one example. We know that the earth is a sphere flattened at the poles, but in daily life we proceed on the assumption that the earth is flat. We reckon the shortest distance between Montevideo and Geneva to be a straight line connecting them on a flat map and we forget that the earth is a sphere. Segundo recalls that "we must not forget that people today, although they know the theoretical arguments for evolution, are resistant to thinking differently in everyday usage."[24]

In the previous paragraphs I have made a leap that will not have escaped the attention of an alert reader. I was speaking of the relation between theology and philosophy, and I have made the transition to speaking of theology and science. Let us now examine that shift in more detail. In the realm of science, a distinction is made between the natural sciences, which are empirical or experimental, and the social sciences, the focus of Clodovis Boff's socio-analytical mediation. Among the first we find chemistry, physics, biology, etc. Among the second are sociology, economics, psychology, history, etc. There are also the pure sciences, such as mathematics and mathematical logic. As stated while analyzing Clodovis Boff's approach, social sciences have undergone detailed analysis in LA theology, by the bold use, inter alia, of Marxist tools to analyze society. Following the distinction made by Althusser, the Marxism that was used by liberation theologians, including Clodovis Boff,

21. Segundo, *Qué mundo?*, 40.

22. Segundo, *Liberation*, 7–38.

23. Segundo, *Qué mundo?*, 40.

24. Segundo, *Qué mundo?*, 36.

was historical materialism, explicitly leaving aside dialectical materialism, because of its close association with atheism.[25]

Social sciences have from their beginning been linked with LA theology. In the 1980s and 1990s there has been an increase in theological reflection on economics, because of the impact on Latin America of the economic policies implemented by various countries, which, under the label of neo-liberalism, have imposed structural adjustment policies with the consequence of the further social exclusion of millions of people. In the case of social exclusion, which is the obverse of economic globalization, the theological discourse on economics is justified, because, by analyzing consequences and alternatives, it respects and strengthens one of the main features of liberation theology, the option for the poor.

However, what has this option for the poor to do with experimental or natural sciences? In what way do the theory of evolution and scientific research affect the life of the poor, if, for the person in the street, and even more so for the victims of social exclusion, they seem to have little or nothing to do with their daily life?

The ecumenical movement through its conciliar process on Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) since the 1980s has strongly affirmed that issues of economic injustice are intimately related to issues of violence and the destruction of the creation. The World Convocation on JPIC in Seoul in 1990 states in its preamble that participants came "to consider their common response to the threats the present generation faces confronted by new and complexly interwoven threats, among them, the entrenched and deadly forms of injustice, universal violence, and the rapid degradation of the environment. The real danger lies in the interaction of these threats. Together they represent a global crisis."[26] This interdependence has been highlighted by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* with the leitmotif "Everything is interrelated,"[27] referring to social and environmental affairs and also to spirituality and Trinitarian dynamism. I will come back later to this encyclical in relationship to its structure and main contents. In her essay, Moe-Lobeda deepens this interrelation in the sense of the communion of the universe.

Not only the lives of the poor are related to the life of the whole creation. To understand this relationship, sciences, and particularly natural sciences,

25. It is worth reading Clodovis Boff's argument: "Liberation theology uses Marxism as an instrument. [...] Liberation theology uses in a free way some Marxist 'methodological indications' that have proved helpful to understand the world of the oppressed, among them: the importance of the economic factor, the mystifying power of ideologies, including religious ones, etc. Being this way, for a liberation theologian, Marxist materialism and atheism don't even constitute a temptation." See Boff, *Epistemología*, 104.

26. Niles, *Between,* 164–65.

27. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, § 70, 92, 117, 120, 137, 142, and 240.

continue to offer precious help. Theology, therefore, is not so far removed from science, as it accepts, many times uncritically and unthinkingly, scientific assumptions that are later expressed in the formulation and shaping of doctrinal thought.

I think that including ecological factors in Christian theology has sparked off a fresh revolution (in the sense that Thomas Kuhn refers to as "scientific revolutions") in theological thought. Recent socio-ecological movements such as Fridays for Future, the climate strike youth movement at the global level, and countless actions at the local level to prevent water and air pollution, deforestation, land grabbing, and degradation are "praxic" expressions, to borrow Clodovis Boff's terminology, to respond to the cry of the Earth and of the poor.

Furthermore, the relationship between ecology and theology or in more general terms, science and theology, is not exclusively a twofold relationship. That is because science, and in particular the three ecologies, as Felix Guattari named them, referring to biological ecology, social ecology, and ecology of mind, contain meta-scientific elements, which belong to the various domains of philosophy.

Segundo describes what I just said in the following way:

> [...] the sciences, first the natural sciences and then the human sciences, have gained their scientific status and begun confidently to advance in that they have specialized, and, finally, disentangled themselves from the philosophy that had hitherto been their framework. [...] Sciences have become differentiated and then established, together with their advances, to the extent that they have created, each in its own particular field of knowledge, increasingly precise tools for measuring and manipulating, in other words, from the moment at which they adopted empirical methods of measuring.[28]

Segundo suggests that the process of scientific development is directly linked to the sciences distancing themselves from philosophy and becoming independent of it. In the course of the Modern Era, this process has developed scientific positivism, through differentiation and specialization. Scientific positivism believed that it was on the point of attaining, according to the stages described by Auguste Comte, the third, or final, age of humankind, the scientific or positive age, after having overcome the theological and metaphysical ages.[29] This perspective has narrowed the field of philosophy to what it is impossible to define or measure with scientific tools. Paradoxically, the development from pure science to applied science, has again raised issues that are patently philosophical, with the result that the rejection of philosophy is no longer so shrilly maintained. Furthermore, the recent scientific controversy

28. Segundo, *Qué Mundo*, 16–17.

29. Comte, *Discours*, 16.

regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the use of vaccines raised unexpected questions regarding the epistemological status of biological sciences.

When calling for the liberation of theology, Segundo stresses that genuine liberation theology is that which at the same time as being a theology speaking of and proposing liberation, would also be an attempt to liberate theology itself. It would be, in a few words, a theology that would take the epistemological and hermeneutical precaution to liberate theology, as far as possible, from all the oppressive and dehumanizing elements it might be conveying and reinforcing. Segundo states, "In this work, I go directly to two phenomena: on the one hand, the development of the modern epistemology of the social, biological and physical sciences, and, on the other hand, the theological suspicion that the very doctrinal formulations alive in Latin America this Christian continent are vehicles of oppressive social interests from which they must be liberated."[30] Regarding the first phenomenon, Segundo regrets that, "there does not exist, for example, an overriding concern for ecology of mind, as it begins to blaze the trail to an ecology of the biological and chemical universe, which is constantly being violated by this diseased fixation of modern humankind, its 'positivitis'."[31]

Bridging the Gap: Latin American Liberation Theology Method in the "Anthropocene"

Having presented two representatives of LA theologies and coming back to the purpose of this volume we could ask: how would the LA liberation theology method concretely contribute to respond to the question "How would we know what is God up to and how ought humans respond?" To show some implications of this method I will take one example: the case of climate science. As I showed earlier, both Clodovis Boff and Juan Luis Segundo stress the relevance of the use of science in the process of doing theology. Let us see how to include the science of climate change in theological endeavors.

Climate change is a clear expression of what the "Anthropocene" is about. As Eaton states in her essay, climate change is a threat multiplier. The science of climate change has showed that anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions have taken over from variations in solar radiation as the dominant influence on the climate and hence on the biology and physiology of the earth. Together with other aspects of the present global ecological crisis such as, for example, the loss of biodiversity or air, soil, and water pollution, climate change is a key component of the "Anthropocene."

30. Segundo, *Qué Mundo*, 334.

31. Segundo, *Qué Mundo*, 39.

In fact, the science of climate change is relatively new. It has been gaining relevance during the last decades building on meteorological, environmental, and geological studies. There are many scientific studies on climate change at various levels: national, regional, global. The most ambitious studies are the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) because of their scope and of the large composition of the Panel. The IPCC, a scientific intergovernmental body under the auspices of the United Nations, was established in 1988 by two United Nations organizations, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and later endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly. The IPCC has, since its creation, produced five reports, so-called assessment reports. The sixth one, under drafting, is supposed to be finalized in late 2022. The IPCC does not conduct its own original research, nor does it do the work of monitoring climate or related phenomena itself. The IPCC assesses the published scientific literature, which includes peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed publications to create reports based on the best available sources. The IPCC also contributes to climate science by identifying the key uncertainties and by stimulating and coordinating targeted research to answer important climate change questions. To do so, thousands of scientists and other experts contribute on a voluntary basis, writing and reviewing reports. In this way, the IPCC provides an internationally accepted authority on climate change, highlighting the anthropogenic causes of climate change.

Despite being considered the scientific consensus on climate change,[32] some climate skeptics or climate deniers have either challenged the very fact of climate change or that it is human-induced. As Eaton shows in her essay, these critiques have strong links with the oil, meat, and dairy lobbies to governments. These critiques and skepticism have been widely spread by the media, although researchers have shown that climate skepticism reflects poor media reporting of science.[33] This controversy around anthropogenic climate change helps to deepen the status of scientific research in general and clarify the challenges it faces, as presented in a historical overview of climate change science.[34]

While science might be stimulated by argument and debate, it generally advances through formulating hypotheses clearly and testing them. In practice, the insights and research results of individual scientists are thus confirmed or rejected by the combined efforts of many other scientists. It is not the belief or opinion of the scientists that is important, but rather the results of this testing. Thus, science is inherently self-correcting: incorrect or

32. Lynas, Houlton, and Perry, "Greater than 99% Consensus," 1.

33. See Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*.

34. See Le Treut et al., "Historical Overview of Climate Change."

incomplete scientific concepts ultimately do not survive repeated testing. In the case of climate change, scientific theories and scenarios are ways of explaining phenomena and providing insights that can be evaluated by comparison with physical reality. Each successful prediction adds to the weight of evidence supporting the theory, and any unsuccessful prediction demonstrates that the underlying theory is imperfect and requires improvement or abandonment. Sometimes, only certain kinds of questions tend to be asked about a scientific phenomenon until contradictions build to a point where a sudden change of paradigm takes place, as Thomas Kuhn shows in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. At that point, an entire field can be rapidly reconstructed under the new paradigm.

Despite occasional major paradigm shifts, most scientific insights tend to emerge incrementally as a result of repeated attempts to test hypotheses as thoroughly as possible. Therefore, because almost every new advance is based on the research and understanding that has gone before, science is cumulative, with useful features retained and non-useful features abandoned. Active researchers, throughout their careers, typically spend large fractions of their working time studying in depth what other scientists have done. The attributes of science briefly described here can be used in assessing competing assertions about climate change. Can the statement under consideration, in principle, be proven false? Has it been rigorously tested? Did it build on the existing research record where appropriate? If the answer to any of these questions is no, then less credence should be given to the assertion until it is tested and independently verified.[35]

Coming back to anthropogenic climate change, the recognition that climate change is human-induced, has been one of the main affirmations of recent IPCC reports. They state that it is not only clear that the climate is changing but that it is also clear that it is caused by human action, and it has relevant impacts in ecosystems. "Human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history. Recent climate changes have had widespread impacts on human and natural systems."[36]

If, as the IPCC reports stress, climate change is human-induced, what are the implications for theology? If, as shown earlier, LA liberation theology needs the mediation of sciences to judge and act, what would the reality of anthropogenic climate change imply? If we interpret the Bible according to an understanding of the reality helped by sciences, what would be the consequences for human action? In my view, taking into account early LA liberation theologians' contributions, theologians cannot ignore the science

35. For these questions, see IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report (AR4).

36. IPCC, *Synthesis*, 56.

of climate change and more broadly other scientific contributions to understanding the "Anthropocene."

While, as indicated earlier with regard to Segundo's perspective, at some points the borders between science, philosophy and theology are blurred or not easy to draw, it is interesting to note that IPCC reports give some clues to advance in theological reflection. Let me give one example. IPCC reports clearly state that "vulnerable populations" are suffering and will suffer the consequences of climate change the most. It goes a step further affirming that "mitigation and adaptation raise issues of equity, justice and fairness. Many of those most vulnerable to climate change have contributed and contribute little to greenhouse gases emissions."[37] Given the significance attached by LA liberation theologians to the option for the poor, which goes far beyond the economic poor and includes, as said already, the excluded, the marginalized, the vulnerable, these "scientific" affirmations by the IPCC raise not only ethical but also theological questions. Furthermore, another key concept in LA liberation theology is justice. If in the 1970s the emphasis was put on social justice, in the context of anthropogenic climate change, as IPCC remarks, issues of equity, justice, and fairness are of paramount importance. It is not by chance that ecumenical and interfaith advocacy on climate has had climate justice as a motto for years.[38] As Maina's essay highlights, taking as an example Tuvalu's percentage of global carbon emissions, the fact is that climate change is punishing the innocent and the poor. Integrating climate justice in the struggle for justice by and for excluded, marginalized, impoverished populations, goes far beyond an intellectual theological reflection and implies a committed praxis.

Excursus on *Laudato Si'*: The Application of the See–Judge–Act Method to Ecology in Roman Catholic Social Teaching

Have early LA liberation theology's contributions on theological method and on key theologoumena been forgotten in recent theological efforts? In the Roman Catholic Church, the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI have consistently banned and silenced liberation theologians, not only from Latin America. Pope Francis's pontificate has followed a different path. While he cannot be identified with LA liberation theology, his writings and speeches clearly reflect key insights of this theology. His encyclical *Laudato Si'* on "Care for Our Common Home" (2015) provoked strong reactions as it was the first time a papal encyclical focused on ecological issues in depth. Considering

37. IPCC, *Synthesis*, 33.

38. Kerber, "International," 278.

what was presented in the previous sections of this chapter, let's have a look at the encyclical.

The Structure of *Laudato Si'*: See–Judge–Act

If we look at the structure of *Laudato Si'*, the six chapters of the encyclical can easily be organized according to the See–Judge–Act method discussed in the first section of this chapter:

What is happening to our home (Chapter 1)	→ SEE
The Gospel of Creation (Chapter 2) The human roots of the ecological crisis (Chapter 3) An integral ecology (Chapter 4)	→ JUDGE
Some guidelines and action points (Chapter 5) Ecological education and spirituality (Chapter 6)	→ ACT

By using this methodology, the pope might be winking to LA liberation theology as I argued elsewhere.[39] In any case, explicitly stressing the place of this encyclical in the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church (§15), Francis followed what the late Pope John XXIII stated in 1961 in his encyclical *Mater et Magistra*: "There are three stages which should normally be followed in putting social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; second, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; third, one decides what under the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: see, judge, act."[40]

While the use of this method is anchored in an earlier encyclical (although many later social encyclicals did not follow this structure) the topic addressed, namely the ecological crisis, is completely new. In fact, *Laudato Si'* implies a turning point in the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church by including ecology in social concerns. As stated several times in the Encyclical, "we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach." (§49)

(The Science of) Ecology in *Laudato Si'*

What are the main contents of the three steps of the method when applied to the ecological crisis?

The first part of the Encyclical (See) stresses some of the critical expressions of the ecological crisis: pollution, climate change, the water crisis, the loss

39. Kerber, "Latin American and Ecumenical Insights in *Laudato Si'*," 629–31.

40. John XXIII, *Mater*, §236.

of biodiversity. Pollution is linked to waste and a throwaway culture that is strongly criticized by the pope (§20–22). Climate is presented as a common good and a reference is made to scientific consensus on a warming climate due especially to human activity (§23–26). Water scarcity and dangers linked to water privatization, as well as the right to safe drinking water are another expression of the ecological crisis (§27–31). All these manifestations of the ecological crisis are intimately connected with poverty and inequality, which will become a main affirmation along the encyclical. The quotation cited earlier continues: "[…] a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*." (§49).[41]The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, in italics in the text of the encyclical, echo Leonardo Boff's book on theology and ecology which was precisely published with this title "Cry of the earth, cry of the poor."[42]I wonder why Francis did not quote Leonardo Boff in the encyclical. Was it to prevent stronger criticism from conservative sectors within the Catholic Church?[43]

On the second step (Judge), while recognizing the complexity and the various causes of the ecological crisis, the pope calls for a response being respectful of various approaches and wisdoms. Here, he affirms that "science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both" (§62). Taking into account what was presented earlier, I think it safe to say that this dialogue includes science and theology. In this sense, the pope affirms that this dialogue implies a revisioning of creation theology (§65–100). In my view, this is important, but it is not enough. Revising Christian theology is much more than looking at a theology of creation. As stated, the epistemological basis of theology, systematic theology, and theological ethics' aspects should all go through the ecological conversion that the pope calls for.

On the ethical aspect, which is the focus of the social teaching of the Church, the pope proposes an integral ecology (§137–162) which is based on the various dimensions of ecology (biological, social, human) and on the principle of common good, and considers especially responsibility toward future generations. When speaking about these dimensions of ecology, environmental, economic, social, cultural, and everyday ecologies are mentioned (§138–155). Over the years, popes have included various adjectives

41. See also *Laudato* §14, 53 and 117.

42. See Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*.

43. In the author's experience, when it was released, the encyclical had very positive comments from political and ecumenical leaders, such as US President Obama, US Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, or World Council of Churches General Secretary Olav Fykse Tveit, but contrasted reception within the Roman Catholic Church, some arguing ecology has nothing to do with the Gospel or the social doctrine of the Church, others seeing a "leftist" approach by Pope Francis.

to ecology. Without trying to be exhaustive, let us remember that Benedict XVI spoke of "human ecology,"[44] while John Paul II spoke of "human ecology" *and* "social ecology."[45] I believe that the adjectives added to "ecology" are not so important. Regarding integral ecology Hans Ulrich Steymans showed that the use of the adjective "integral," is not understood in the same way in different languages. Unlike French and Spanish where the word "integral" has the same large meaning, in German the word is used almost exclusively in the field of mathematics. Therefore, a German-speaking person does not understand what is meant by *integrale Ökologie* used in the discussion of the encyclical. This is why in the German version of the encyclical, different adjectives are used to translate integral ecology.[46]

The last two chapters of the encyclical (Act) focus on concrete action. They call for changes in our personal lifestyles (§203ff) and in local, national, and international policies (§164–181). Regarding the latter, while recognizing the advances that have been made on some aspects, with the Basel Convention on hazardous wastes, the Vienna Convention, and the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (§168), the pope affirms that progress made on the Climate Change Convention is regretfully very limited (§169). Despite the Conference of Parties meeting in 2015 and, the Paris Agreement and the Climate Pact adopted in Glasgow in 2021, this assessment is still valid several years later.

Education and spirituality are mentioned as two crucial components of the radical change, the ecological conversion (§216–221) that the world needs. In order to develop a deep spirituality of creation the pope quotes Catholic mystics, among them Saint Therese de Lisieux (§230) and Saint John of the Cross (§234). He also quotes Teilhard de Chardin in a footnote (53) and frequently cites Saint Francis of Assisi in the encyclical. It is interesting to note that not only Catholic or Christian authors are mentioned. Citations in this chapter of the encyclical include references to the Earth Charter (§207) which is an international ethical framework on sustainability, and to ninth century Muslim mystical writer Ali-al-Khawas (§233). This inclusion enlarges reflection and action beyond the Christian churches to civil and international society and other faith traditions.

Conclusion

I am quite aware that the crucial question of this volume, "How would we know what God is up to?" has not been answered exhaustively in this essay.

44. See, for example, Benedict XVI, "Caritas in Veritate," 51.

45. See, for example, John Paul II, "Encyclical Centessimus Annus," 38.

46. Steymans, *Défis*, 36–37.

It has not been my intention to do so. However, what I tried to show is that key issues developed by early LA liberation theologians related to method forty years ago continue to offer relevant insights for doing theology today in the context of the "Anthropocene."

The reformulation of the See–Judge–Act method, enhanced with the mediation of social sciences as formulated in the 1970s, should include the contribution of ecology and especially, as I argued, of climate science, in order to provide a valid reflection on the challenges posed by the ecological crisis.

Bibliography

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Benedict XVI (Pope). "*Encyclical Caritas in Veritate*", 2009. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (last accessed 31 January 2022).

Boff, Clodovis. "Epistemología y Método de la Teología de la Liberación." In *Mysterium Liberationis, Conceptos Fundamentales de la Teología de la Liberación*, edited by Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 79–113. Madrid: Trotta, 1990. Abridged English Translation: "Methodology of the Theology of Liberation." In *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, edited by Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, 1–21, London: SCM, 1996.

——. *Teología de lo político. Sus mediaciones*. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1982. Portuguese Original: *Teologia e prática: Teologia do político e suas mediações*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1978. English Translation: *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987.

Boff, Leonardo. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997. Portuguese original: *Ecologia: grito da terra, grito dos povres*. São Paulo: Attica, 1995.

Bonavía, Pablo. *La praxis: Punto de partida en la teología de Gustavo Gutiérrez*. Roma: Pontificia Universidad Gregoriana, 1976

Comte, Auguste. *Discours sur l'esprit positif*. Paris: Vrin, 1995 (first edition 1844).

Francis (Pope). *Laudato Si'. Encyclical Letter on Caring for our Common Home*. Vatican: Vatican Press, 2015.

Guattari, Felix. *Les trois écologies*. Paris: Galilée, 1989.

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988 (first Spanish edition, 1971).

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). "Fourth Assessment Report." 2007, https://accessipcc.com/AR4-WG1-Index.html (last accessed 21 July 2022).

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). "Fifth Assessment Report, Synthesis Report". https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/ (last accessed 31 January 2022).

John Paul II (Pope). "Encyclical Centessimus Annus». https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html (last accessed 31 January 2022).

John XXIII (Pope). *Mater et Magistra*. *Encyclical Letter*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1961.

Justaert, Kristien. "Cartographies of Experience: Rethinking the Method of Liberation Theology." *Horizons* 42:2 (2015), 237–61. https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2015.59

Kerber, Guillermo. "Ecumenical Background and Reactions to *Laudato Si'*." *Laudato Si' and Ecology*, *Voices* 2 (2016), 63–76.

——. *El lugar de la ecología en la teología latinoamericana*. Montevideo: Utopía, 2000. Portuguese edition: *O ecológico e a teología latinoamericana*. Porto Alegre: Sulina, 2006.

———. "International Advocacy for Climate Justice." In *How the World's Religions are Responding to Climate Change*, edited by Robin Globus Veldman, Andrew Szasz, and Randolph Haluza-DeLay, 278–93. London: Routledge, 2013.

———. "Latin American and Ecumenical Insights in *Laudato Si'*." *The Ecumenical Review* 70:4 (2018), 627–36. https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12389

Kheng, Christina. "Liberation Ecclesiology: Context, Method, and Relevance for the Church in Asia Today." *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 1:2 (2019), 69–88.

Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Le Treut, Hervé, et al. "Historical Overview of Climate Change." In: Solomon, Susan et al. (eds.) IPCC, Fourth Assessment Report, *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis*, 93–128. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Lynas, Mark, Benjamin Z. Houlton, and Simon Perry. "Greater than 99% Consensus on Human Caused Climate Change in the Peer-reviewed Scientific Literature." *Environmental Research Letters* 16:11 (2021), 114005. https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ac2966

Niles, D. Preman. *Between the Flood and the Rainbow*. Geneva: WCC, 1992.

Noble, Tim. *Keeping The Window Open: The Theological Method of Clodovis Boff and the Problem of the Alterity of the Poor*. Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary of the European Baptist Federation, 2009.

Northcott, Michael S. *A Political Theology of Climate Change*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013.

Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2011.

Phan, Peter. "Method in Liberation Theologies." *Theological Studies* 61:1 (2000), 40–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390006100103

Richard, Jean. "Questions d'épistémologie en théologie de la libération À propos de l'ouvrage de Clodovis Boff." *Laval théologique et philosophique* 49:2 (1993), 249–75. https://doi.org/10.7202/400769ar

Segundo, Juan Luis. *El dogma que libera*. Santander: Sal Terrae, 1991.

———. *The Liberation of Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976 (First Spanish edition 1975).

———. *¿Qué mundo? ¿Qué hombre? ¿Qué Dios?* Santander: Sal Terrae, 1993.

Steymans, Hans Ulrich. "Les défis de Laudato Si': Le contexte théologique et économique mondial de l'encyclique, in Vers une écologie intégrale. Deux lectures de l'encyclique Laudato Si'." *Cahiers internationaux de théologie pratique* (septembre 2019), 25–71.

South African Council of Churches. *Climate Change: A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa*. Marshalltown: SACC, 2009.

Torres Queiruga, Andrés. "Juan Luis Segundo: una teología verdadera." *Misión* 62–63 (1996), 12–13.

Vallin, Pierre. "Juan Luis Segundo y la Europa Latina." *Misión* 62–63 (1996), 41–47.

Verdugo, Fernando. "Juan Luis Segundo: al servicio de las comunidades." *Misión* 62–63 (1996), 73–80.

Sources for African Women's Ecotheology

Loreen Maseno[1]

Introduction

How would we discern what is God up to? This question provides an opportunity to consider theological method, including sources and debates, starting points, and presuppositions of Christian ecotheology. To date, there are continued efforts at articulating the norms and sources for African ecotheology in order to provide coherence within the field. This essay reflects upon the sources for African women's ecotheology in an attempt to know in part, what God is up to. Sources considered include African women's experience, stories, legends, and narratives, African religio-cultural heritage, particularly written sources from Africa, the Christian feminist movement of the West, and the Bible. The Bible as a source is analyzed in light of a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and an ecological hermeneutics particular to African women's ecotheology. These sources point to the need to remain open to self-critique and to re-interpret what is worthy, just, and liberative for the environment and for African women, men, and children.

1. Loreen Maseno is a senior lecturer in the Department of Religion, Theology and Philosophy, Maseno University, Kenya and a research fellow in the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa.

How to cite: Maseno, L 2022, "Sources for African Women's Ecotheology", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?,* An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 97–113. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.05

This essay focuses on describing and elucidating the sources available to women on the continent who wish to engage further with ecotheology. The possibility of combining environmental concerns and an understanding of God allows for ecotheology. According to Celia Deane-Drummond, ecotheology is that reflection on different facets of theology which take their bearings from cultural concerns about the environment and humanity's relationship with the natural world. In general, ecotheology is a particular expression of contextual theology that emerges in the context of environmental awareness.[2]

Ecotheology considers ecological practices that include stewarding the land, decrying species loss, recycling, and learning how to love God's creation. Ecotheologians base their reflections on related aspects such as the impact of colonialism, roles in food production, changing land tenure patterns, the impact of colonial policies on right to land, the marginalizing impact of commercialization and commodity production. Through their engagement, they imply that humanity may be here for a while and must take a greater responsibility in stewarding earth's ecosystems.

African women's theology demonstrates the concerns and priorities of African women theologians. According to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, African women do not accept that African men's theology should suffice for the entire faith community. This points to the need for the study of African Christian theology in a women-centered key, highlighting women as actors, agents, and thinkers.[3]

Theologically trained women in Africa explore a wide range of themes. The theme of community is pursued by many African women theologians because of their sense of and responsibility for extended families and the respect accorded to ancestors. Eschatology with reference to the resurrection of the body and the words of women are other foci. The themes of hospitality and spirituality are explored, together with themes such as sacrifice, ecology, and missiology. According to Oduyoye, African women theologians explore the theme of Christology where Jesus is understood as both human and divine. They also focus on the theme of ecclesiology, with attention to the household of God.[4]

Other arenas examined by African women include empowerment and liberation. Liberation as a theme grants a voice to the voiceless, motivates for social change, and helps develop a new sense of responsibility and solidarity. Empowerment helps African women theologians understand power in a

2. See Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, x.

3. See Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 10.

4. See Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 20.

new way. This new understanding of power implies "enabling power," empowerment that can be collective, can develop, and increase so that all who participate in it are affirmed and strengthened. This is different from the power that is practiced in a dominant, hierarchical mode where power is exercised as "power over."

In general, the themes addressed by African women theologians indicate the variety of their commitments. At the same time, their emphasis is on praxis, on doing theology as an activity that is ongoing and rooted in a cycle of practice wed to reflection. Their theological concerns and hence the themes they address arise from issues frequently encountered in their lives. While African women theologians have been dealing with many concerns, one recurring theme that cuts across the publications of many African women theologians is ecotheology.

The ecotheology of African women theologians demonstrates that Africans have high regard for the earth and land. That regard is displayed symbolically and ritually. Further, ecology is intrinsically linked to religion so that many religiously weighted taboos and rituals are enforced within space and time on communal land.[5] Offences against the environment constitute sin from an African perspective and offenders are branded wizards and destroyers of the land.[6] One sub-theme within ecotheology is that of creation. A core focus has been to affirm the goodness of creation that it has integrity as a whole, and that God continues to be involved, within all of creation.

Sources for African Women's Ecotheology

The Bible

The Bible is one source for African women's ecotheology. Most African women theologians are keen churchwomen, several ordained into the Eucharistic ministry while others are laywomen. For African women, the Bible is central to their theologizing. However, the Bible cannot be the only source since, "any interpretation of the Bible is unacceptable if it does harm to women, the vulnerable and the voiceless."[7]

For a long time, it had been taken for granted in Africa that men speak for women. Whatever men thought and said to be good and right in the area of biblical hermeneutics, women were supposed to affirm and support.

5. Contributions on the environment from the perspective of religion and theology include, for example, Mugambi and Vähäkangas, *Christian Theology and Environmental Responsibility*. See also Conradie and Koster, *T&T Clark Handbook;* Chitando and Conradie "Praying for Rain?"

6. See Ucheawaji, "Viewing Biblical Hermeneutics."

7. See Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 12.

Male African theologians dominated. They had become self-appointed spokespersons for women and children so that women's views were rarely voiced. Much theological work in Africa was done from a pre-feminist perspective. Women were part of the male story. For this reason, much of what has been written in Africa on biblical hermeneutics has come from male perspectives. This had been the case because theological scholarship and institutions in the times past were monopolized by men.

For this reason, there has been a need for a feminist hermeneutic. Interpreters of the biblical texts have never been and are even not now objective, if by objective one means ideologically unbiased. "Everyone interprets from a perspective controlled to some extent by her or his social location, interests and commitments."[8] The perspective of feminist theologians must be invoked in order to present an alternative view.

Many African women read the Bible, and will keep reading the Bible. In several biblical passages, in both in the Old and in the New Testaments, they find clear, explicit cases of marginalization or segregation. Many have found themselves at a dead-end as to how to deal with such passages.

The Bible is not a neutral book. Within it are androcentric elements and pronounced androcentric language. Androcentrism is characterized by a mindset that propagates hierarchies and domination. According to Elizabeth Fiorenza, the Bible employs patriarchal imagery, well knot within it. Biblical patriarchy continues to promote patriarchy and patriarchal culture, including the oppression and exploitation of women.[9] The Bible has been used, in Africa as elsewhere, to keep women in subjugation and to hinder their emancipation. Such elements within the Bible and uses of the Bible can no longer be ignored but need to be named, identified, and suitably dealt with. Feminist hermeneutics is the avenue by which this can be achieved. If the Bible is not to continue to serve as a tool for the patriarchal oppression of women, a feminist hermeneutic is needed that will inform women and women's empowerment and thus aid the liberation of women from oppressive patriarchal texts, structure, and values. To deal with a text that is patriarchal there is a clear need for a feminist hermeneutic.

Although some African women theologians' entry into ecotheology is primarily concerned with biblical exegesis, and in particular with the emerging field of ecological hermeneutics, not all theological responses to environmental issues have focused on biblical texts. African women's ecotheology, has produced a wealth of diverse and creative theological reflection on the place of humanity within the world from biblical texts and beyond.

8. See Schneider, "Feminist Hermeneutics," 351.

9. See Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 31.

For some, the conclusion that biblical interpretation in Christianity is very problematic also from an ecological perspective is unavoidable. This is particularly true among some African women theologians, a number of whom suggest that the exploitation and abuse of nature both mirrors and is a consequence of patriarchal and exploitative attitudes to women in the Bible and in the Christian tradition.

Some ecotheologies by African women do appeal to the Scriptures to support their perspectives. However, systematic and detailed exegesis of the biblical text is not usually a predominant feature. Partly to address this perceived shortcoming, a number of biblical scholars have engaged in readings of the biblical text from the perspective of environmental issues. This engagement has led to the development of ecological hermeneutics among African women theologians.

African women theologians have become more aware that the academic study of the Bible, hitherto primarily the province of white American and European males, needs to reflect the concerns of other population groups. In their reflection, African women theologians have welcomed a plurality of readings. This diversity includes input from feminist and womanist biblical studies and political or ideological readings, including liberation approaches and, most recently, postcolonial exegesis. Such approaches are based on the premise that "reading and interpretive strategies are socially, politically and institutionally situated."[10] They attempt to read and understand the text from the perspective of marginalized and disempowered groups, often seeking to discover voices in biblical texts that have been ignored or hidden over the centuries.

Yet, the ideology of the biblical text itself has come under question. For many the Bible is seen as the product of a patriarchal and culturally elite society, and therefore itself warrants serious critique. This has been especially encapsulated in the hermeneutic of suspicion adopted by a number of interpreters, including some liberation theologians and those operating in feminist biblical studies.

The Latin American (LA) liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo proposes that the biblical text should be read in such a way as to "acknowledge the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed." Such readings should be preceded by profound and enriching questions and suspicions both about the reader's real situation, and about theological superstructures, as in many instances "the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken important pieces of data into account."[11]

10. Marlow, "Ecological Hermeneutics," 85.

11. See Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, also Guillermo Kerber's essay in this volume

Such questioning of the text and building on the methods of liberation, and especially feminist, hermeneutics, is a key principle in ecological hermeneutics for African women theologians. For them, the land is often constructed as female gendered and the oppression of women is interlinked with the oppression of the Earth. African women theologians' reflection and reflexivity represents some of the most significant and sustained examples of ecologically sensitive readings of the biblical texts, and has in many ways pioneered the developing field of ecological hermeneutics.[12]

Stories, Folklores, and Myths

Theological reflection bearing on hermeneutical analysis of the Bible in Africa is complemented by other sources such as stories, folklores, and legends. Stories play a significant role in Africa in general and, therefore, African women accept stories as a source for theology.[13] Narrative theology prevails in both oral and written materials.

Wisdom traditions across African cultures are rich sites that have been used for African ecotheology.[14] These traditions have been found in the myths of African peoples. As I note in previous work, an African inculturated Sophiology uses African categories taken from myths to articulate the wisdom of God. African women theologians have focused on ancient African myths that retain contact with the earth and the sense of the sacred in nature. In so doing they have generated and articulated an African Sophiology that builds upon African wisdom traditions in light of ecological concerns.[15]

For African women theologians, the subject of inculturation has been reconstructed based on the idea that there is not a single image of Jesus and that our image of Jesus is influenced by our cultural context. It is within this interpretative sphere that Jesus as Sophia is reflected upon and a link is drawn between Sophia and the ancient wisdom traditions in Africa. Through various African myths, African women theologians provide insights into the sense of the sacred in nature. These myths suggest an interpretation of Jesus as Sophia in Africa. By exploring myths, women theologians of Africa creatively develop an African inculturated Sophiology that emphasizes ecological concerns. In so doing, meaning is made possible in the context of African culture and its historical periods.

12. See Masenya, "All from the Same Source?." 46–60; Masenya, "An Eco(bosadi) Reading."

13. See Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 10.

14. One objective of wisdom material and literature is to transmit lessons that nurture life. This is so even in the Old Testament and in the literature of other ancient Near Eastern civilizations, especially Egypt. See Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology,* 105–09

15. See Maseno, "Towards an African Inculturated Sophiology,"125–38.

African Religio-Cultural Heritage[16]

The African religio-cultural heritage provides insights and is another source appropriated by African women theologians for ecotheology. In African cities and farmlands, there is an orientation commonly described as an "organic worldview." This organic worldview sacralizes all realms of life and maintains that there is nothing in the visible world that has not been predetermined in the invisible realm.[17] The pre-colonial period in many African countries was characterized by a great amount of wildlife and plant species as well as human communities that sustained themselves and their environment for themselves and for posterity. Pre-colonial African communities purposefully made use of certain land-management strategies, forms of traditional knowledge, and mutually beneficial relationships with various cultural groups to maintain ecological and socio-cultural sustainability.

The religio-cultural heritage of the Sengwer of Kenya provides useful input for African women's ecotheology. The Sengwer are an indigenous forage community. Their religious worldview influenced their action and behavior toward their environment. They believe in a supreme being called Assis. Assis, who is omnipotent and omniscient, was charged with the creation of the universe and all the natural resources in it.[18] Participating in environmental conservation and taking care of natural environmental resources was a way of fulfilling gratitude to Assis and the spiritual world.[19] This participation in earth care stemming from the Sengwer religio-cultural heritage, is forward looking and of importance to African women's ecotheology. It is however unfortunate that at the moment, the Sengwer environmental knowledge, culture, and religion are on the fringes of being extirpated. At the same time, ecologically induced genocide continues to threaten the social, cultural, and physical existence of this particular community.

In view of African religio-cultural heritage, indigenous rituals were traditionally understood as spaces that produced knowledge for African ways of living. In ritual spaces, the novices were instructed on how to engage with nature and how to live with others within communities. Ritual spaces gave women and men (initiates) agency over a vast number of life issues. However, in search of progress, development, and better life, a number of African people have been neglecting such rites because they seem backward. According to Wane, local knowledge "in this regard environmental knowledge" of African people is least analyzed, considered, or understood for their contributions, especially in providing alternatives ways of sensitizing people on environmental issues.

16. This section is based my article "Environmental Consciousness Amongst Indigenous Youth in Kenya."

17. See Maseno, "Prayer for Rain," 436–41.

18. See Mamati, "An African Religious Worldview," 28–59; Kipkorir, "The Sun in Marakwet," 175–78.

19. See Mamati and Maseno, "Environmental Consciousness," 4.

African women theologians take note that a number of environmental conservation measures and climate change mitigation strategies are enshrouded in colonial and postcolonial thought. These strategies cast aside important traditional environmental knowledges emanating from the African religio-cultural heritage. A number of scholars point out how colonial systems suppressed, undermined, undervalued, and destroyed Indigenous knowledge rooted in diverse cultures. Colonial systems alienated the child from his or her culture by disassociation of the sensibility of the child from the natural and social environments.[20] African women theologians recognize that this blatant disregard of African religio-cultural heritage led to the demonization and marginalization of indigenous practices by missionary and colonial forces,[21] resulting in a desacralization of the environment and landscape in Africa as people started commodifying nature.[22]

African women theologians, in countering the marginalization of African religio-cultural heritage, therefore incorporate ecofeminist perspectives. An African ecofeminist perspective is cognizant of colonial machinations keen to alienate Indigenous knowledge. It serves as a major factor in destabilizing the homogenizing imperative of Western scholarship. It takes note that specific historical circumstances such as colonialism served to create ecological strains and a variety of social problems that continue to place a heavy burden on women of the Global South

Written Work of African Women Theologians

Written sources in the forms of articles and publications by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians remain useful for African women's ecotheology. One of several books by the Circle is "*Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Indigenous Religion,*"[23] that emerged from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' 5th Pan-African Conference held in Botswana from 2 to 4 July 2019.

The theme of the conference was "Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination". This volume brings to sharp focus how African indigenous religion shaped human responsibility regarding nature. A number of the chapters contend that prior to contact with Western missionaries the relationship between humans and nature was symbiotic. This line of thought serves to encourage theological reflection and action aimed at a positive environmental impact. At the same

20. See Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 16.

21. See Maathai, "Replenishing the Earth," 71.

22. See Mamati and Maseno, "Environmental Consciousness."

23. See Penxa-Matholeni and Manyonganyise, *Mother Earth, Mother Africa.*

time, indigenous rituals and rites served as an important area for women's engagement because African women have traditionally been either marginalized and excluded or accepted within communities through such rites. Within such frames of reference, gleaned from written works of African women theologians, certain rituals across the African continent are understood to link the well-being of the earth, the ancestors, and the living in a common bond. In general, such a bond is to be nurtured and would perpetuate responsibility toward nature.[24] Other writings utilized by African women theologians for ecotheology include contributions among others, those by Isabel Phiri,[25] Eunice Kamaara,[26] and Sophia Chirongoma.[27] These theologians capture several themes such as African imagination, indigenous religio-culture and ecology, gender, rituals, and the environment.

The Christian Feminist Movement of the West[28]

The Christian feminist movement of the West serves as another source for African women's ecotheology. Feminism as a tool for naming and addressing the social injustices experienced by women needs to be crafted to fit the African reality. African feminists have to then find the balance between fighting for greater public involvement for themselves on the one hand and supporting the autonomy of African states in decision-making. According to Kanyoro, "feminist methodology is used because it challenges cultural socialization and rejects the assumption that the roles of women and men have already been fixed, either by the creator or by the culture."[29] Feminist theology after originating from the West has been accessed by women theologians in Africa for ecotheology through writings and academic forums. Indeed, feminist theology in Africa, has developed because of African women's association with institutions, ideas, and publications of the West.

Ecofeminism has mostly been articulated by Western scholars, some of whom tend to view women as a homogenous group by not recognizing the realities faced by women of the Global South. Many women of the Global South approach environmental issues from a perspective of poverty, quality-of-life, and day-to-day domestic problems. Many African women have had to

24. See Kaunda, "Mother Earth."

25. See Phiri, "The Chisumphi Cult."

26. See Kamaara, "From Individualism to Communitarianism."

27. See Chirongoma, "Women in God's Image."

28. This section represents a substantial reworking of amalgamated facets from two publications, namely Mamati and Maseno, "Environmental Consciousness amongst Indigenous Youth in Kenya"; and Muthuki's Master of Social Science thesis, "Rethinking Ecofeminism: Wangari Maathai and The Green Belt Movement in Kenya."

29. Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology,"168.

face ecological problems such as overgrazing, desertification, and soil erosion resulting in their walking longer distances in search of fuel wood and clean water, something that most Western women have not had to face.[30]

African Women's Experiences

Many African women theologians experience or have heard of the experiences of others on issues such as women laborers, ecology, oppressive hierarchical structures in the churches, oppressive customs, and marriage structures. African women's theology draws much from their context and experience as they do not write theology that is remote and removed from their daily living. Most African women ecotheologians base their work on women's experiences of the impact of colonial policies on food production, changing land tenure patterns, women's right to land, and the marginalizing impact of commercialization and commodity production on women, for example in Kenya.

Such reflections consider the relationship between women and their environment by critically examining deep-rooted gender ideologies on appropriate roles for men and women. Traditional gendered roles, assigned to women, such as food and firewood gathering, tend to link women to environment management. African feminism/s, resist imperial oppression. Moreover, the African ecofeminist movement distinguishes itself from the wider feminist movement by identifying with the needs of rural women.[31] Unique experiences and theologically significant insights come from individuals in their contexts. For this reason, an additional source for African women's theology is African women's experience. This has raised debates as is discussed further in the text.

Current Debates Around Women's Experience

Feminist theological reflection, in Africa and elsewhere, often appeals to women's experience. It can include women's bodily experience, women's historical experience, women's socialized experience, or even women's feminist experiences.[32]

Yet, the notion of "women's experience" as an alternative source for knowledge has been questioned because, critics argue, it implies a universal and historically stable nature and experiential world of women. The well-known

30. See Mamati and Maseno, "Environmental Consciousness amongst Indigenous Youth in Kenya"; Muthuki, "Rethinking Ecofeminism," 15–16.

31. See Muthuki, "Rethinking Ecofeminism," 16.

32. See Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology*, 60–62.

counter-argument is that there is no transpersonal nature that is constitutive of women as such. This critique of the supposed universal nature of "woman" suggests, instead, that what we label as "woman" is socially constructed. Indeed, "women's experience is both a complex and troublesome category in feminist theory; when used, it needs to be examined and explicated."[33]

Despite the valid criticism and cautions regarding appeals to women's experience, I argue that it is a vitally important source in African contexts. This conclusion coheres with that of theologian Pamela Dickey Young, who argues that we have no choice but letting women's experience be a source of and norm for feminist theology. Women's experience is a valid source partly because many women are dissatisfied with theology's failure to consider the experiences of women. In Christian theology, traditionally, many women have been rendered invisible and made non-persons, when seen from the perspective of liberation theology.[34] Thus, rather than finding Christian theology liberating, many women continue to experience oppression from it.

Though women's experience is problematic, to eliminate it entirely is unrealistic because both women and men experience the world as gendered beings. To do away with the category "women", would negate attempts geared toward the emancipation of women. In general, there is a historical entity, women's experience. However, it is important to note that traditionally, the use of the category women's experience, has all too often denied the recognition that there are forms of oppression other than gender. This is because the emphasis on the commonality of women's experience easily conceals racial and class differences among women. It renders invisible and absorbs the lives of the full variety of women. In essence, there is a need for a more localized and particularized interpretation of women's experience that traces the historically particular situations of the women concerned.

African women theologians have noted that when African nations were seeking independence, both women and men struggled hand in hand and side by side to bring about liberation from colonial power for Africans. However, as soon as independence was won, women were marginalized. Consequently, a majority of African women experience triple oppression: sexual, racial or ethnocentric, and socio-economic oppression.[35] Further, the African church has inherited the misinterpretation of women in relation to God from European churches. According to many missionaries, African women were not to be trusted; in some areas, no woman was allowed near the priest's house after four in the evening.[36]

33. Eriksson, *The Meaning of Gender*, 46.

34. See Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology*, 60–62.

35. See Nasimiyu, "Is Mutuality Possible?" 50.

36. See Nasimiyu, "Jesus and an African Woman's Experience," 130.

Nasimiyu observes that women's experience at the national level is influenced by several factors such as cultural, physical, environmental, economic, and political variations. At the personal level, the variety is even more distinct where lifestyles vary according to the rich and poor, single or married, with no children or with ten children, with a husband present or absent, rural or urban, to mention but a few.[37]

A number of African women struggle for bare necessities. They work hard carrying heavy burdens such as firewood, fetching water from far away rivers and wells, planting, weeding, caring for children, grinding corn, and preparing food. Many women in rural sectors, especially those who take on the status of rural educators, tend to work for long hours. Besides fulfilling the duties expected of them as women, they also do eight hours of work in their professional fields (nursing or teaching). The main concerns of these women are physical needs: food, water, clothing, shelter, and medicine for themselves and for their children.[38] Often, in both traditional and modern rural life, women and their work are not acknowledged despite their fundamental contribution toward national development.[39] Clearly, as many African women fetch water and firewood, the degradation of the environment has a direct impact upon such women who have to walk further for water and much further to get firewood. The well-being of such women is strained when these basic resources are harder to obtain. These experiences of African women feed directly into African women's ecotheology.

Nasimiyu observes that as part of African women's experiences, a number of African women experience cultural hardships. These include taboos, for example, that women are not allowed to talk when men are having a conversation. Often, women are not taken seriously and belittled by men with respect to their intelligence. Traditionally, violence in the family has been ignored and even accepted as a way of keeping women disciplined and under men's control. In certain African traditions, a man was given a whip on his wedding day.[40] Customarily, women are looked upon solely as child bearers and servers and are often cruelly oppressed if they cannot bear children. African cultures often present a woman as one who has to fulfill her destiny of being a mother. These factors reinforce the need to take African women's experiences seriously as a source in doing ecotheology.

37. See Nasimiyu, "Jesus and an African Woman's Experience," 124.

38. See Nasimiyu, "Jesus and an African Woman's Experience," 123–24.

39. See Nasimiyu, "Jesus and an African Woman's Experience," 132.

40. See Nasimiyu, "Polygamy," 105–06.

Constructive Contribution: Stories, Folklores, and Myths As Sources

In his essay, George Zachariah notes that some vitally important sources have been underutilized and even ignored in theology as shaped by the Western academy. His focus is on grassroots social movements—particularly those that are engaged in counterhegemonic praxis—as a source for doing theology.[41] The ecotheology of African women invites consideration of another source typically unused in theological inquiry: the theological insights gained from stories, folklores and myths.

Through various African myths, African women theologians provide insights into the sense of the sacred in nature. Such a posture gives a contextual interpretation that takes African people's thought forms and worldviews seriously. This has been demonstrated by African women theologians through African indigenous mythology which lies within a broader context of wisdom traditions across the continent.

Oduyoye notes that proverbs, folktales, and myths provide insight into cultural values that either oppress or empower women.[42] Folktales and folklore have a communal outlook that is relevant now in restoring a world destroyed by modern individualism. According to Magosvongwe and others,[43] folklore remains part of an intangible heritage passed on from generation to generation but carrying the blueprint of how to survive within specific geographical and cultural locations. Through these the orator or writer often has lessons to impart to society which, in turn, remain useful to finding practical solutions to the challenges that women and the environment face in contemporary society.

According to Itumeleng and Nhlekisana Setwana, folktales are fertile ground for use in examining the earth as an important source of livelihood, personified as feminine and mother.[44] In their chapter, they focus on selected Setwana folklores that express Setwana worldview, philosophy, belief, and culture. Through these folklores both Itumeleng and Nhlekisana draw us to how values and morals were instilled among the Setwana through socialization. The nurturing motif in these folktales is made explicit, such that women are largely presented as nurturers not only to the family and in the home but also extended to the Earth through activities such as tilling, tending the crops, and harvesting. This nurturing motif exemplified in Setwana folktales provides critical insights to the challenges of environmental management in the age of

41. See especially George Zachariah's essay in this volume.

42. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*.

43. Magosvongwe, and Ndlovu, *Africa's Intangible Heritage.*

44. Itumeleng and Nhlekisana, "Exploring Women's Nurturing Nature."

the "Anthropocene". Itumeleng and Nhlekisana resolve that Setswana folktales are means through which women's agency in addressing the gender and global environmental crisis can be viewed and understood.[45]

African women theologians consider new readings of folktales in order to bring in sharp focus the relationship between women and the land or environment. Most of these folktales are developed from lived experiences and mirror society in Africa.[46] Consequently, reflections from these folktales suggest solutions for contemporary society and reveal religious and cultural values to inform human interaction with the environment.

African women theologians promote a plurality of ideas and bring to the fore the importance of Mother Earth through their use of folklore as a source for mitigating the challenges such as the global environmental crisis and sexism. Consequently, they consider the construction of Earth in religious and cultural traditions, and how it impacts the lives of women in the spaces they inhabit. African women theologians have used African categories taken from myths and interviews to articulate the wisdom of God. Myths are sacred narratives explaining how the world and humankind came to be in their present form and are therefore closely linked to religion. In a broad sense, a myth refers to any traditional story. Myths explain various aspects of society and express realities that history does not fully account for. In Africa there are many myths; these have often been passed on in the form of stories from generation to generation.

One example of such myths is from the Luo peoples of Kenya. It explains the origin of the lake Simbi Nyaima in Kendu Bay in Kenya. It is a volcanic lake and it is believed to be connected to the ancestors, which is why many Luos pray beside the lake. The myth explains how the water body Simbi Nyaima came to be after an old, weak woman came into the village and went from door to door begging for food. Nobody offered her food. Her prayers and sobbing to God resulted in thunderstorms and heavy rains that swept away the whole village and all that were in it leaving behind a water mass. Within this myth are insights into the sense of the sacred in Simbi Nyaima.

People draw water from this lake in bottles which they use for finding a cure. It is said that the lake is curative because the ancestors are directly involved when people pray for cures by the lake. Many skin diseases are cured and the lake is said to turn bloody or green or even clear at some times. When wishes and prayers are made around this lake, especially when there is drought, it is believed that the answers result from the ancestors in the lake having compassion for people.

45. Itumeleng and Nhlekisana, "Exploring Women's Nurturing Nature," 30–32.

46. Gudhlanga, Enna et al. "African Literature, Mother Earth and Religion".

African women theologians demonstrate how these African myths describe aspects of creation and identify the processes involved in creative activity. These myths communicate the dynamic interwovenness of the cosmos, humanity, and the divine; they articulate, for instance, the human, social, and cosmic faces of wisdom and consider how humans relate to creation up to this present day. This serves as an example of how African women theologians engage the source of myths, and stories for ecological healing of the earth.

Conclusion

What is God up to? And how would we know that? This essay has considered sources for African women's ecotheology including African women's experience; stories, folklore, and myths; African religio-cultural heritage; the previous writings of African women theologians; the Christian feminist movement of the West; and the Bible. These sources enable an engagement with ecological issues for African women's ecotheology. They point to the need to remain open to self-critique and re-interpret what is liberative for the environment in general and African women in particular. The side-lining of women in Africa presents a somewhat similar situation to the circumstances that gave rise to Western feminism. Yet, there are also differences: whereas Western feminism engaged—at least initially—primarily with forms of oppression related to sexism, women in Africa have encountered oppression related to racism and colonialism together with sexism. These sources provide a lens for African women's engagement in ecotheology for the sake of liberation for African women and the entire earth community.

Bibliography

Chirongoma, Sophia. "Women in God's Image: Images of God the Mother." In *Motherhood and Ecological Conservation of Mother-Earth*, edited by Karen Buckenham, 8–12. Pietermaritzburg: Private publication, 2005.

Clifford, Anne. *Introducing Feminist Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001.

Conradie, Ernst M. ed. *Creation and Salvation, Volume 1: A Mosaic of Essays on Selected Classic Christian Theologians*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011.

Conradie, Ernst M., and Hilda P. Koster, eds. *The T&T Clark Handbook on Christian Theology and Climate Change*. London: T&T Clark, 2019.

Davaney, Sheila Greeve. "Continuing the Story, but Departing the Text: A Historicist Interpretation of Feminist Norms in Theology." In *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney, 198–214. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.

Deane-Drummond, Celia, "Sophia: The Feminine Face of God as a Metaphor for an Eco-theology." *Feminist Theology* :16 (1997), 11–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/096673509700001602

Eriksson, Anne-Louise. *The Meaning of Gender in Theology: Problems and Possibilities*. London: Coronet, 1995.

Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *In Memory of Her*. London: SCM, 1983.

Itumeleng, Dinah and Rosaleen Oabona Brankie Nhlekisana. "Exploring Women's Nurturing Nature Motif in Selected Setswana Folktales." In *African Literature, Mother Earth and Religion*, edited by Enna Sukutai Gudhlanga, Josephine Muganiwa, and Musa Wenkosi Dube, 17–32. Delaware: Vernon Press, 2022.

Gudhlanga, Enna Sukutai. *Josephine Muganiwa, and Musa Wenkosi Dube eds. African Literature, Mother Earth and Religion*. Delaware: Vernon Press, 2022.

Kamaara, Eunice. "From Individualism to Communitarianism: Mission in Caring for God's creation." In *Witnessing in the Midst of Suffering Creation – A Challenge for the Mission of the Church*, edited by Lukas Vischer, 135–47. Geneva: Centre International Réformé John Knox, 2007.

Kanyoro, Musimbi. "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the 21st Century." In *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women*, edited by Nyambura J. Njoroge and Musa W. Dube, 158–80. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001.

Kaunda, Mutale, "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Women's Role in Indigenous Religions." *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* 27:1 (2021), 91–117.

Kipkorir, Benjamin. "The Sun In Marakwet Religious Thought—A Note." *Journal of Eastern African Research & Development* 6:2 (1976), 175–78.

Maathai, Wangari. *Replenishing The Earth: Spiritual Values For Healing Ourselves and The World*. New York: Doubleday, 2010.

Magosvongwe, Ruby, Obert Mlambo, and Eventhough Ndlovu eds. *Africa's Intangible Heritage & Land: Emerging Perspectives*. Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2016.

Mamati, King'asia, and Loreen Maseno. "Environmental Consciousness amongst Indigenous Youth in Kenya: The Role of the Sengwer Religious Tradition." *HTS Theological Studies* 277:2 (2021), a6690. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6690.

Marlow, Hilary. "Ecological Hermeneutics." In *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, edited by Hilary Marlow, 81–119. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2009.

Maseno, Loreen. "Prayer for Rain: A Pentecostal Perspective from Kenya." *The Ecumenical Review* 69:3 (2016), 436–441. https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12305.

Maseno, Loreen. "Towards an African Inculturated Sophiology: The Case of African Wisdom Traditions from Myths for Ecological Concerns." In *Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere*, edited by Celia Deane-Drummond and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, 125–38. London, T&T Clark, 2011.

Masenya, Madipoane, "All from the Same Source? Deconstructing a (Male) Anthropocentric Reading of Job (3) through an Eco-bosadi Lens." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 137, (2010), 46–60

Masenya, Madipoane. "An Eco(bosadi) Reading of Psalm 127: 3–7." In *The Earth Stories in the Psalms and the Prophets*, edited by Norman Habel, 109–22. Sheffield, 2001.

Mugambi, Jesse, and Mika Vähäkangas, eds. *Christian Theology and Environmental Responsibility*. Nairobi: Acton, 2001.

Muthuki, Jane. "Rethinking Ecofeminism: Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya." M.Th. thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2006.

Mwangi, R. *Kikuyu's Folktales: Their Nature and Value*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1983.

Nasimiyu, Wasike. "Is Mutuality Possible? An African Response". *Missiology* 29:1 (2001), 45–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/009182960102900103

——. "Jesus and an African Woman's Experience." In *Jesus in African Christianity*, edited by Jesse N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, 121–33. Nairobi: Initiatives Publication, 1989.

——. "Polygamy: A Feminist Critique." In *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, 101–18. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992.

Odaga, Asenath. *Simbi Nyaima*. Kisumu: Lake Publishers & Enterprises, 1983.

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. *Introducing African Women's Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001.

——. *Daughters of Anowa*. New York: Orbis, 1995.

Ongong'a, Jude. "Towards an African Environmental Theology." In *Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays*, edited by Mary Getui and Emmanuel Obeng, 50–70. Nairobi: Acton, 1999.

Penxa-Matholeni, Nobuntu, Georgina Kwanima Boateng, and Molly Manyonganyise, eds. *Mother Earth Mother, Africa and African Indigenous Religions*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2020.

Phiri, Isabel Apawo. "The Chisumphi Cult: The Role of Women in Preserving the Environment." In *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*, edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether, 161–71. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996.

Pui-Lan, Kwok. "Ecology and Christology." *Feminist Theology* 5:15 (1997), 113–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/096673509700001508

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature/Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o*, London: Currey, 1986.

Schneider, Sandra. "Feminist Hermeneutics." In *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, edited by Joel B. Green, 349–369. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1995.

Segundo, Juan. *The Liberation of Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976.

Ucheawaji, Josiah. "Viewing Biblical Hermeneutics from an African Ecological Lens." *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 31, (2013), 21–34.

Wane, Nathani Njoki. "African Indigenous Knowledge: Claiming, Writing, Storing, and Sharing the Discourse." *Journal of Thought* 4:2 (2005), 27–46.

Young, Pamela Dickey. *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990.

Zachariah, "Decolonizing Eco-Theology: A Commons Perspective Affirming Subaltern Social Movements as Theological Texts." In *Continuing the Conversation on Method in Christian Theology*, edited by Mendoza, S. Lily and George Zachariah. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2022

Method in Ecotheology: A Perspective from the Belly of the Beast

Cynthia Moe-Lobeda[1]

Part One: A Conclusion and a Question

I write about a haunting conundrum, a challenge at the core of doing theology and at the heart of being human in our time. It is, I believe, a central challenge for ecotheological method. We will move to it shortly.

We begin with the conclusion that this essay elaborates. Part One identifies that conclusion, explores its implications, and lands on a question stemming from it. Part Two responds to that question. The response points to three methodological moves for ecotheology.

My conclusion is this: Ecotheology, which arose in response to a contextual reality shaping life on Earth now and into the future—the constellation of ecological crises—will fail in its purpose if it does not attend to a companion

1. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda serves as a Professor of Theological and Social Ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS), Church Divinity School of the Pacific, and the Graduate Theological Union. She is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

How to cite: Moe-Lobeda, C 2022, "Method in Ecotheology: A Perspective from the Belly of the Beast", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?,* An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 115–140. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.06

contextual factor. That corollary factor is the colonization of life by the material manifestations and ideological underpinnings of white superiority yoked to wealth-based superiority embedded in an extractive, exploitative economy as way of being.[2] (That economy is capitalism in its current expression as corporate-and-finance-driven global capitalism and its historical trajectory.) By "life," in this case, I mean human life in its micro, macro, and ideological dimensions—practices of daily life, social structures, and consciousness or worldview.[3] Ecotheologies in dominant streams of academic theology in the North Atlantic world have tended not to address this second crucial contextual reality that is inextricably intertwined, materially and ideologically, with the first (the ecological crises).[4]

This conclusion of course depends upon what the purpose of theology is understood to be.[5] One might say that it is to hear, see, or otherwise perceive God's revelation, to "read" what God is saying and doing so that we might know God more fully and heed God. Said differently, theology is to help human beings align life with what God is creating and in the direction that God is saving. Humans do theology to perceive ever more fully what God is creating and saving us to be (as individuals, humankind, and all of creation), and to "become" in that direction—to know this God and to live in the stream of God's creating, healing, liberating presence and activity on Earth. In short, theology is meant to equip us to know and to heed the Holy One.

Let us consider this purpose of theology more closely: Its first part (to know God more fully) hinges on the verb "to know." The English term "to know" translates two very different verbs in Spanish: *saber* (to know about) and *conocer* (to know as to be in relationship with). The implications of the distinction are immense. More often than not in modernity, academic theology has centralized knowing *about* and has eclipsed knowing in the sense of *conocer*. It is this meaning (*conocer*) that I emphasize here.

2. I use "ideology" in the sense that Iris Marion Young uses the word: "a constellation of ideals" that "helps reproduce relations of domination or oppression by justifying them or by obscuring possible more emancipatory social relations." Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference,* 112.

3. This conclusion holds meaning only if its many controversial terms are clarified. Most of the terms bear myriad connotations and denotations. We unravel them in the course of this essay.

4. Since the 1970s, and in part due to the early influence of the World Council of Churches, some streams of ecotheology have insisted on holding ecological well-being as inseparable from economic, racial, and gender justice. This commitment is becoming more widespread with increasing recognition that climate change is—in general—far more deadly for the world's economically impoverished people and people of color, yet is caused largely by the world's high consuming people who are also disproportionately white. Yet, even this vitally important attention to social justice does not necessarily mean explicit attention to the white superiority, wealth-based superiority, neoliberal capitalism nexus.

5. Theological method includes presuppositions regarding the purpose of theology.

The second part of this purpose (to heed God by shaping life in accord with God) hinges on the understanding of what God is forming or molding human beings into. I will go with the ancient claim, articulated by second-century theologian Irenaeus of Lyons, that God's purpose is to bring all of creation into communion with God. Irenaeus of course is not alone in this understanding. It has been articulated variously throughout time, including in recent decades. As stated by theologian, Willie James Jennings, speaking of Jesus: "and now in him we see what God wants: communion." The "original trajectory of [...] God" is "to gather together [...] reforming us as those who [...] gesture communion with our very existence [...]. This [...] is God's dream." "By communion," he writes, "I mean the deepest sense of God-drenched life attuned to life together."[6] Describing Eastern Orthodox theology, in the lineage of Irenaeus, John Chryssavgis declares: "[T]he world is a sacrament of communion with God and neighbor." Humans must think "in terms of communion [...]. That is our truth as humans within the created cosmos. That is what we are called to 'remember'."[7] The biblical witness instructs the human creature into two primary paths of communion-building: serve and preserve garden Earth (Gen 2:15) and love your neighbor (Lev 19:18, Matt 22:39).

Some hold that God already has given the communion and humans are called to recognize it and then actualize it in relationships, both personal and structural. I am struck by suggestions, even from outside of theological discourse that this communion has been provided for us to recognize and embody. Social theorist and activist intellectual, John Powell, for example, asserts that: "Sometimes people talk about 'We need to do things to connect.' [...] that understates what it is. We are connected. What we need to do is become aware of it, to live it, to express it."[8] Einstein said as much: "A human being is part of a whole, called by us the universe. [...] He experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings, as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness." So too did, Martin Luther King Jr: "We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly [...]. This is the way God's universe is made." Canadian biologist, David Suzuki, writes of a "vast story of cooperation and quest for communion that enabled life to emerge on earth and then to evolve into more complex forms."[9] Feminist physicist, Karen Barad, suggests that the cosmos is wired for communion.[10]

6. Quotations from Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 152, 152, 152, 13–14.

7. Quotations from Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humber Prayer*, 218, 315, 28.

8. Powell, "Opening to the Question of Belonging."

9. Suzuki, *Sacred Balance*, 131.

10. Barad, "What Flashes Up," 21–88.

Humans may have evolved out of the capacity for highly sophisticated collaboration.[11] These accounts of nature's cooperation and quest for communion resonate with Jennings' claim: the purpose of theological education is to form people along the contours of God's hunger for communion.

I recall the moment in a film called "As it is in Heaven," when a brilliantly sensitive composer is asked what he is doing when he composes and conducts music. After a pause, he muses, "I am calling down the music that already exists." In a sense, human creatures (and perhaps all of creation) may be charged by God to "call down" the communion that already exists as divine gift.

If "what God wants" is communion, and if theology's purpose includes enabling humans to know and heed God, to align our life with God's desires, then theological method must enable theology to cultivate communion with God and within creation. Thus, the purpose of theology includes fostering communion—communion between the created and the Creator, and communion within the created world—and countering what thwarts communion, especially what in theology itself undermines communion.

This may be seen as a timeless purpose of theology. But what of context? Understandings of theology's purpose have shifted over the centuries as a result of context. A salient dimension of the current context is that we are running out of time. Very little time remains, perhaps a few years, in which to prevent the most catastrophic extent of communion's destruction wrought by the fury of climate change. Never before has moral-spiritual agency for heeding God's fundamental communion-building instructions—to serve and preserve Earth's web of life and to love neighbor—been more urgent. The crisis of our day begs for profound moral-spiritual agency for radical repentance, for turning from what is destroying communion and turning to ways of God (right relationships).

This is to say that theology's purpose of enabling people to know and to heed God is called to the fore by the existential crisis of climate change, and the urgency of this crisis extends the purpose of theology to include building moral agency for addressing it. Ecotheological method must aim at cultivating communion and moral-spiritual agency for countering what destroys communion, in this case climate change and the failure of people to counter the forces that cause it.

Thus, our question for this essay becomes: What methodological moves would enable ecotheology to fulfill theology's purposes: (a) to facilitate knowing God more fully; (b) to build communion with God, among humans, and among all of creation; and (c) to cultivate moral-spiritual agency?

11. See Harari, *Sapiens*, 32–37.

This includes identifying forces that thwart knowing God, building communion, and engendering moral-spiritual agency to counter those forces.

Enter here the importance of social theory. Theology must take seriously what gets in the way of knowing God, living in communion, and exercising moral-spiritual agency—the obstructing factors or forces. This is the work of theology in dialogue with social theory.

In broad strokes, I see two obstructing factors. (There are many other such factors. I note these two because, in the belly of the beast, they are particularly central barriers to knowing God and building communion:[12])

- The socio-political-economic force of white supremacy entwined with wealth-based supremacy, with both wed to profit-maximizing extractive racialized capitalism, is a primary obstacle to communion.
- The tendency to ignore the "first book of revelation" (creation itself) profoundly limits knowing God and thus limits communion with God as well as communion with the other-than-human parts of creation.[13]

In this essay, I focus on the first of these for reasons of space, and because I have found that addressing the second is inherent in addressing the first.

Here we arrive at my conclusion, articulated at the outset. Ecotheology will fail in its purpose if it does not attend to this contextual factor: the life-shaping impact of white supremacy and wealth-based supremacy embedded in extractive / exploitative capitalism in both its historical trajectory and its current manifestation as neoliberal capitalism.[14] This complex factor obstructs and destroys communion. In fact, to an extent, white supremacy was constructed for the purpose of blocking communion. John Powell writes that Bacon's Rebellion created fear among English elites, "because of the cooperation it revealed between the growing number of Africans and poor English. At the original hearing on Bacon's Rebellion [...]. What was salient was the need to prevent cooperation between these different groups against the propertied classes." The rebellion was "the wake-up call to those classes to begin constructing barriers to separate the poor English from the Africans." It was "an important development in the racial plan that would be developed over the next several decades. At its inception, then, the creation of whiteness

12. In other works, I have explored other barriers to moral-spiritual agency. See especially: *Resisting Structural Evil*, and "Climate Debt to Climate Justice."

13. The term "first book of revelation" (creation) related to the second book (the Bible) is problematic. In fact, the second book (Bible) is a chapter in the first book (creation), just as humans are a part of "nature" not separate from it. Despite the problem, I refer here to the first book in order to emphasize (later in the essay) that for centuries, Christians have claimed all of creation as God's first book of revelation.

14. I have identified defining features of neoliberal capitalism (or the neoliberal global economy) as well as its role in subordinating democratic processes to economic powers, and the myths undergirding it in Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, chapters 1, 2,and 3.

was a deliberate strategy to keep poor Europeans, mainly English, and Africans from uniting."[15]

One may articulate my conclusion in a positive note: If communion is at the center of God's intent for life and if theology is to serve that aim, then theology must identify and challenge or transform what breaks or precludes communion and must cultivate what fosters it.[16]

Therefore, our question in this essay, compelled by the conclusion, becomes more focused: *What methodological moves would enable ecotheology to (begin to) overcome this obstacle to realizing its purpose: the formative impact that white supremacy and wealth-based supremacy embedded in extractive/exploitative capitalism have had on life and on theology including ecotheology?*

A word about location is necessary: I write from the North Atlantic world as a white woman situated in the academy, the church, and the activist community, and I approach the first two of these locations with a duo-hermeneutic of appreciation and deep long-standing critique. In this essay, I address challenges of ecotheological method in that context and in other contexts where theology has been influenced heavily by white supremacy, wealth-based supremacy, and extractive, exploitative economies. From my location, "we" and "our" are dangerous words unless their referent is clear. In this essay, the first-person plural is used in four ways. Frequently, it refers to this essay's readers and author. Occasionally, especially in Part One, it designates human beings in general. Third, it refers to doers of theology in contexts substantively informed by North Atlantic academic theology. Finally, "we" and "our" appear in quotations by other people. I have endeavored throughout to make the referent clear.

Part Two: Response and Methodological Moves for Ecotheology

My response is incomplete, only a beginning. It draws on anticolonial and decolonial thinking and movements, in particular the decolonial theorizing of Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her work on decolonizing research methodologies. In drawing on Smith's thinking, I acknowledge that it is born of struggle against colonization and the horrors that it engenders

15. Powell, *Racing to Justice*, 151. The so-called Bacon's Rebellion was an unsuccessful uprising by a militia including both enslaved black people and poor white indentured servants in Virginia in 1676 against the colonial government.

16. Christian theology is suited for this work in myriad senses (e.g.: announcing the reign of God and denouncing what thwarts it; seeing sin as broken relationship with God, others, and Earth; recognizing Trinity as a perichoreses of communion; and so much more). Religion, for that matter, comes from the Latin *religio* which implies to bind together.

(both historically and contemporarily), and that I cannot fathom the magnitude of that struggle or of those horrors. I hope that my employment of her theory and work may in some small way contribute to the struggle against on-going colonization.

I first suggest that decolonizing, especially as applied to epistemologies, is a useful framework for addressing the question of this essay. I then note four aspects of decolonizing minds and actions. The fourth aspect calls specifically for action. The final section in Part Two of the essay explores that action as it pertains to ecotheology. More specifically, I suggest action in the form of three methodological moves whereby ecotheology may become an anticolonizing force (and, as such, a redemptive force) within ecotheology and theology in general, and thereby also an anticolonizing force in the broader society.[17] These three methodological moves may help ecotheology to address the aforementioned factor which, if unattended, will obstruct it from fulfilling its purpose. That factor, again, is the colonization of life by white superiority and wealth-based superiority housed in a profit-maximizing economy as way of life.

Decolonizing as a Useful Framework

Smith notes that colonialism is "an expression of imperialism" and that the word "imperialism" has varied uses or interpretations.[18] One, she argues, "has been generated by writers whose understandings of imperialism and colonialism have been based either on their membership of and experience within colonized societies, or on their interest in understanding imperialism from the perspective of local contexts." This aspect of imperialism pertains to what counts as knowledge. "Knowledge and the power to define what counts as real knowledge lie at the epistemic core of colonialism." "The reach of imperialism into 'our heads' challenges those who belong to colonized communities to understand how this occurred, partly because we perceive a need to *decolonize our minds,* to recover ourselves [...]".[19]

17. The term "decolonial" is used in varied ways, at times juxtaposed with anti-colonial or post-colonial. Some theorists assert that decolonial should be use only to refer to actual efforts to repatriate land stolen in the colonial enterprise: "Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. The easy adoption of decolonizing discourse by educational advocacy and scholarship, evidenced by the increasing number of calls to 'decolonize our schools,' or use 'decolonizing methods,' or, 'decolonize student thinking', turns decolonization into a metaphor." See Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," 1. I respect this position. Yet I also see that some Indigenous scholars and scholars from other colonized communities use "decolonize" much more broadly to apply, for example, to the "unlearning of settler colonial mentality." See Lily Mendoza, "Transdiasporic Indigeneity and Decolonizing Faith." I recognize also the tremendous insight and agency offered by applying "decolonize" beyond explicit land rematriation / repatriation, especially to epistemologies and their material implications.

18. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 23.

19. Quotations from Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 25–26 [italics mine].

While in Smith's work "our heads" and "our minds" refer primarily to Indigenous people, Smith too acknowledges that in colonialism "[...] it is not just the Indigenous populations who had to be subjugated. Europeans also needed to be kept under control, in service to the greater imperial enterprise."[20] The poet and seminal decolonial and anticolonial thinker, Aimee Cesaire, too described the "mutually dehumanizing consequences of colonization" on the colonizer as well as the colonized.[21] The life-shaping force of white supremacy linked to wealth supremacy and neoliberal capitalism reaches into all of "our heads," albeit with differing impacts. We are all damaged by the socialized practice of this force and by key *assumptions* undergirding it. In the North Atlantic world (and elsewhere), assumptions undergirding colonization have shaped our psyches, epistemologies, public policies, economies, legal systems, educational systems, theologies, and more. Ecotheology in the North Atlantic academy functions within power systems and knowledge systems that (unwittingly) reinscribe these assumptions and practices related to them. Nevertheless, ecotheology also *is uniquely situated to challenge them*. *How it may do so, is the focus of this essay*.

If such colonial assumptions and practices linked with them are a primary force against the communion that theology is supposed to enable, and if theology has been shaped by them, and if theology's capacity to cultivate communion is truncated by these assumptions, then theology must find ways to counter them and their enactment. This is a necessary task of ecotheological method if ecotheology is to fulfill its purpose of cultivating communion with God and all that is. Raised here is the vexing challenge presented in this volume's introductory essay to theologians formed by the assumptions undergirding historic and contemporary colonization. It is the challenge of doing and redoing theology in ways that counter and dismantle the very assumptions that have shaped it: "What methodological moves in ecotheology will enable decolonizing from the forces of white supremacy, wealth supremacy, and neoliberal capitalism intertwined, so that ecotheology may fulfill its purpose of helping people to know God and realize the communion that God gives?"

For perceiving how ecotheology may move to decolonize itself and the worlds it addresses, Smith's insight is vital. "The exercise of decolonizing methodologies has to do more than critique colonialism. It has to open up possibilities for understanding and knowing the world differently." "[K]nowledge and culture were as much part of imperialism as

20. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 26.

21. Walker, "Transformational and Enduring Vision of Aime' Cesaire," 756–63.

were raw materials and military strength" with the "inherent dominance of Western knowledge" being presupposed.[22]

Four Aspects of Decolonizing Minds and Actions for the Sake of Communion

One may note four aspects of decolonizing minds and actions, and thus also decolonizing theological method, in particular theological epistemology. (This sentence has two meanings, both of which I intend; decolonizing serves as an adjective to describe minds, actions, and method, and as a verb acting on minds, actions, and method.)

First Aspect

One aspect of decolonization implied by Smith is gaining a "more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values which inform research practices" and, one may add, theological work.[23] The question of underlying assumptions bares the hidden bones of the factor we are scrutinizing: socio-political-economic forces of white superiority and wealth-based superiority embedded in the profit-maximizing economy of late capitalism. In this essay, I refer to these underlying assumptions as myths.

Four life-shaping myths—and their material enactment in individual behaviors, institutional policies and practices, and larger social structures—undergird the interwoven forces of white superiority, wealth-based superiority, and profit-maximizing capitalism. Note these myths closely, for they are central to what follows in this essay, and they have produced terror and terrible suffering. They are:

a. the assumed and enacted superiority of whiteness (frequently linked with Christian superiority);
b. the assumed and enacted superiority of people with wealth relative to people without it;
c. the inevitability of economies that prioritize wealth concentration through maximization of profit, consumption, and growth over human and ecological well-being and equity; and
d. the separateness of the human mammal from the rest of creation, with the former having singular claim to subjectivity and moral standing, and the latter assumed to exist for the sake of the former.

22. Smith, xiii, 67,114. Smith describes the "West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of 'civilized' knowledge (72)."

23. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 22.

These myths are unacknowledged building blocks of Western intellectual paradigms including theological method.[24] Held together they constitute what I have identified as a powerful obstacle to communion. Acknowledging these myths raises the profound challenge (presented in this volume's introductory essay) at the heart of theological method including ecotheological method today, because the epistemologies and disciplinary methodologies that have shaped Western consciousness, have reshaped the world, through colonization, have been exposed as dangerous. Horrors upon horrors have been rooted in these myths and related ideological coding that structure theological inquiry in the Western world. Until recent decades, these myths have gone largely unrecognized as human constructs developed to serve particular interests; instead they have existed, for many people, as presupposed features of reality.

When I began this essay, I thought that this (immediately preceding) paragraph described the problem. I now realize that it only partially does so. The problem is not only that these myths have shaped modes of thinking including theological thinking, but also that they "determine how our very being is constituted."[25] With these words John Powell is describing the impact of whiteness. I assert that not only whiteness (related to the first myth) but also the other three myths "determine how our very being is constituted." Said differently, their impact is not only on how we think, but also on who we unconsciously experience ourselves to be; our sense of reality, values, and who or what is worthy; and our enactment of these. Moreover, ways of life grounded in these myths are propelling the world toward climate catastrophe.

One might protest that these four myths cover too much terrain to traverse in a single essay. That is true; understanding the mechanisms of these four myths, their impacts on theology, and the paths to resisting them is far too much for a single essay. Yet, paradoxically, because the four are inseparably imbricated, the terrain of one cannot be seen clearly without holding it in light of the others. Hence this essay does hold them together while not claiming in the least to grapple fully with any of them. We hold them together through the focusing lens of a single question: "Given that theologies (including ecotheologies), consciousness, and assumptions about reality, values, and what is understood to be possible, have been shaped by these myths, what methodological moves would enable ecotheology to counter these myths, and overcome the barriers that they present to communion?"

24. These four assumptions are integral to the colonial enterprise beginning in the fifteenth century. They are among its central ideological pillars. They are key instruments of the hegemonic power of white supremacy, wealth superiority, and racialized capitalism to shape life today.

25. Powell, *Racing to Justice*, 100.

A crucial distinction is in order. My assertion is not that theologies have supported these four myths explicitly, although some theologies certainly have done so and that is part of the problem. My assertion is that even where theologies have explicitly countered these myths, such theologies still have been informed by them and may implicitly have reinforced them, especially through theological method.

Certainly, the epistemologies and disciplinary methods of modernity are not only dangerous. Epistemologies, intellectual frameworks, and disciplinary methods of the last five centuries also have wrought tremendous good. My task here is not to weigh the goods against the damages rendered.

Rather, the point here is to raise up and blaze into our consciousness the astounding and challenging conundrum: The deadly trajectory on which humanity races—a trajectory toward unimaginable climate catastrophe that destroys communion and is imbued with racism and economic violence—has been forged by myths and ways of knowing that are foundational to North Atlantic Christian theology and how it is done (method). These epistemologies and myths, so foundational to theology, thwart the very purpose of theology. This is the haunting conundrum with which this essay opened.

For people and communities whose theologies have been informed by these myths, how is theology itself, including ecotheology, grounded in such destructive and deadly foundations, to form and reform itself in ways that counter and dismantle these myths? That is the question. *If theology is to help people know and be in communion with a God who hungers for communion in the Earth community, then the very doing of ecotheology (method) must eschew processes that obstruct or damage communion*. This question, this challenge, is at the heart also of this volume.

Let us put the question differently: How will ecotheology proceed without re-inscribing the very epistemologies and other aspects of method that inhere in the DNA of theological reflection as shaped by the myths and logics of domination and dualism that undergird cultures in which dominant streams of Christian theology formed over the last five centuries?[26] By what methodological moves will ecotheology counter and help to dismantle the aforementioned myths and their material manifestations? This is a matter of life and death because, if I am right, then our knowing of the very force that could save us (God) is profoundly truncated by assumptions that undergird both theology and life lived under the influence of white supremacy, wealth supremacy, and profit-maximizing late capitalism.

26. Moe-Lobeda, "Faith and #BlackLivesMatter."

Second Aspect

A second aspect of decolonizing minds and actions implied by Smith is understanding how these myths infiltrate people's heads and hearts.[27] From there we may understand more fully by what processes they have entered into theological formations and practices. Ecotheology will ask: Where do these myths hide (reside unrecognized) and, in hiding, shape us unconsciously (get into our heads)? Do they hide in what are assumed to be valid sources for doing theology (e.g., the Wesleyan Quadrilateral)? Do they hide in the whiteness of whom is footnoted in theological writing or invited to contribute to edited volumes? According to Smith, one means by which they get into our minds is the "dominance of Western knowledge." Jamaican anticolonial writer, Sylvia Wynter, agrees: "Empire's most powerful apparatus is the education system."[28]

Third Aspect

The third aspect of decolonizing is recognizing the impact of the colonizing myths. What behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs do they invite? In what ways do they shape lives, societies, and, in the case of this essay and volume, theology, including ecotheology, ecotheological method, and the practice of faith? For example, in what senses has white supremacy informed and deformed theological and ecotheological method? How has it informed and truncated our capacity to know (be in relationship with) God and cultivate communion. In *After Whiteness* Jennings argues that theological education has been profoundly "distorted" by being "born in white hegemony" that idealizes and promotes the ideal of "white self-sufficient masculinity." This term "is not first a person or a people; it is a way of organizing life with ideas and forming a persona that distorts identity and strangles the possibilities of dense life together." This formation, he insists, mitigates against "communion."[29] What Jennings claims about theological education holds also for theological reflection.

For the purposes of this essay, our concern is how the four aforementioned myths inform how we do ecotheology and our capacity to know God and to move toward communion. For example:

27. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* 25–26.

28. Wynter, Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 259. See also Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism, 54.* Speaking of dominant (Western) science, he writes: "a single knowledge becomes the touchstone for all other knowledge systems, which either can dismiss and erase other forms of knowledge or can place those knowledges in the waiting room of modernity as late, quaint, cute, curious, undeveloped, and consumable for settler desires [...]."

29. Jennings, *After Whiteness,* 5, 6, 8, 8–9, 10.

- How has being infiltrated by unconscious assumptions of white superiority and wealth superiority choked the flowering of communion?
- How has being defined and groomed as consumers corralled into maximizing profit in ways that exploit people and Earth's life systems malformed our capacity for communion?
- How has our relationship with God been truncated by knowing God primarily through these epistemological lenses?
- How have white supremacy, wealth supremacy, and the high valuation of wealth-maximizing contributed to the climate crises which destroys communion in so many ways? How have they shaped our framing of the climate crisis and responses to it?

Consider the last of these queries. One impact of the first three aforementioned myths has been failure of climate privileged people to recognize what many in the Global South refer to as climate colonialism and climate debt. This is the reality that climate change is and will continue to strike most brutally the people least responsible for causing the crisis—impoverished people the world over who are disproportionately people of color and Indigenous people—while the world's high consuming people who are more responsible for causing the crisis, are in general more protected from it, at least in the short term. In any moral universe, guided by basic human rights principles, these "victims of a crisis of other people's making would be owed justice."[30] My point here is that white supremacy, wealthy supremacy, and valuation of profit-maximization feed into failure to recognize the moral nature of the climate crisis and to respond. Rationales for not responding reflect the myths that we are examining. For example, one-time climate deniers are shifting from denying climate change to denying:

> [*T*]hat the nations that are the largest historical emitters of carbon owe anything to the black and brown people impacted by [*it*]. This will be denied based on the only rationale possible: that non-white and non-Christian people are lesser than, are the other, are dangerous invaders [...] and that is all the more reason for wealthy, majority-white countries to fortress their borders, as well as their identities as white Christians, and wage war on any and all 'invaders'.[31]

Uncovering impacts of the four myths is a third aspect of decolonizing ecotheology (with ecotheology here as both object and subject of decolonizing).

30. See Klein, "Only a Green New Deal Can Douse the Fires of Eco-Fascism." That justice would take many forms (a commitment by wealthy countries to lower emissions more rapidly and dramatically, resources provided to nations of the Global South for mitigation and adaptation, immigration rights, and more).

31. Klein, "Only a Green New Deal Can Douse the Fires of Eco-Fascism."

Fourth Aspect

These three aspects of decolonizing—recognizing the myths, how they infiltrate minds and lives, and their impacts—are essential. Yet, getting out from under the power of these myths requires also action that contradicts (defies, resists) them in particular historical contexts. That action is the fourth aspect of decolonizing. (Types of action range broadly, from land repatriation/rematriation to new forms of education, to shifts in research methods, to public policy that recognizes the rights of "nature" or supports marginalized groups, to many other actions at levels of individual behaviors, social structures, and consciousness.) Such action, as it pertains to ecotheology in or shaped by dominant streams of North Atlantic theology, includes shifts in how ecotheology is done. This essay refers to these shifts as methodological moves.

Methodological Moves for Ecotheology

How will ecotheological method in such contexts defy, counter, and resist the four potent myths we have identified as undergirding a primary obstacle to communion? That obstacle is the ideological and material manifestations of white supremacy and wealth-based supremacy yoked to profit-maximizing extractive racialized capitalism.

I argue that ecotheology may be uniquely situated to counter the four myths that we have identified, thereby also helping to dislodge a monumental block to communion. Three methodological guideposts are vividly present within the purview of ecotheology:

1. continuing to elevate the subjectivity of the other-than-human;
2. accounting for the epistemological inadequacy of reason (and conscious cognition) alone by practicing ways of knowing beyond reason and conscious cognition; and
3. turning to sources that the colonizing enterprise dismissed, thus enacting liberation theology's epistemological privilege of those on the margins of power and privilege.

One Methodological Move: Continue to Elevate the Subjectivity of the Other-than-human[32]

By subjectivity I mean the power to respond, to do, to communicate, to act, and to heed the beckoning of God. On what theological grounds may one

32. This move is fraught with complexity beyond the scope of this essay to address. To illustrate: How do we understand the subjectivity of the trees, the stones, the atoms? How do moral obligations to them as subjects differ from moral obligation to humans as subjects? The list of questions to probe is multi-disciplinary and vast. That complexity is no excuse to relinquish this move in method.

claim that the human creature does not stand alone as subject in creation? Ecotheology and biblical scholarship have demonstrated the biblical witness that creation is replete with subjectivity and moral standing.[33] The Earth collaborates with God in creation (Gen 1:1–25), fears God (Ps 33:1–9), reveals God (Rom 1:18–23), sees and understands God (Rom 1:18–23), and embodies God's justice-seeking love (Ps 33:1–9).

Consider the testimony in Psalm 33 that the Earth actually is an abode of God's love. The NRSV translates the text as asserting that God's steadfast love fills the earth, translating the Hebrew חֶסֶד (*hesed*) as God's steadfast love. *Hesed* connotes a steadfast commitment to serve the well-being of whomever or whatever is loved. A further look at the text reveals that, while the NRSV says that the Earth is full of God's steadfast love, the Hebrew text says more. The Earth, it says, is full of God's *hesed*, *mishpat* and *tsedaqah!* Both *mishpat* and *tsedaqah* are rich and textured terms; neither is adequately translated by any single English word. *Tsedaqah*, commonly translated as righteousness, refers to right relationships. Right relations enable the needs of all to be met in a way in which relationships can flourish and community can be preserved. *Mishpat*, commonly rendered as justice, righteousness, or judgment, has broader connotations including upholding the rights due to every person.[34] God's *hesed*, *mishpat* and *tsedaqah* are powerful. They act. The text claims that the earth itself is filled with them! The Hebrew word אֶרֶץ (*'erets*) indeed refers to the earth, the land. The psalmist does not say the *kosmos* which is a less earthy word including inhabitants of the earth. No, the psalmist says the earth itself, the land, is full of God's *hesed*, *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*.

With Paul's letter to the Christians in and around Rome, we see yet more dimensions of the earth's subjectivity. "Ever since the creation of the world," Paul writes, God has been "*understood and seen* through the things God has made" (NRSV). What an electrifying claim: God has been understood and seen for billions of years *before* humans came onto the scene. Who or what then was understanding and seeing the power and nature of God? This text suggests that the creatures and elements of this earth, even the elements that existed eons before plants and animals came into being, have "understood and seen" God. This is subjectivity of the highest order; the elements of earth are doing what might be seen as the highest quest of the human: to see and understand God more fully. They have been doing this "ever since the creation of the world."

Held together, these few texts lead down paths largely eschewed by colonization and the epistemologies grounding it. These paths open into a space that honors and learns from the other-than-human parts of creation as

33. Seminal work was done in the five volumes of the *Earth Bible* series with Norman Habel as chief editor.

34. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 154.

players in the story of God's creating, healing, liberating presence in and with the world. The Earth is active in that drama, as teacher, see-er and understander of God, co-creator, obeyer of God, body of God's love, and, for our purposes here, teacher of communion. The earth is a subject, not merely an object.

These texts are not alone. Many texts portray earth's subjectivity.[35] They insist that other-than-human creatures and elements embody and reveal Divine agency toward creation's flourishing. Earth is full of God's creative, saving, revelatory, empowering presence. The Earth becomes a *subject* with divine energy. The inhabitants of a modern Western worldview do not customarily think of such agency in creatures and elements other than human. "We" commonly assume that a unique characteristic of humankind is our capacity for hearing, heeding, and teaching who God is. These texts suggest otherwise.

The implications abound. Two pertain here. First, it would be wise to hold up and acknowledge the Earth as subject with moral standing rather than what the epistemological regime of colonialism insisted and inculcated into the modern Western psyche: That the Earth is resource to be conquered and used for human wants and is merely a stage on which the consequential dramas of life (human-human and God-human) take place. Second, it would be wise to attune our ears to and learn from the creatures and elements about what they have seen and understood of God, and about embodying the love of God. (More on this shortly.)

By elevating the subjectivity and moral standing of the other-than-human and re-embedding the human as a part of rather than apart from the rest of nature, ecotheology has the potential to "unsettle and undo" the fourth of the aforementioned myths. However, if decolonial theorists are correct, this move also indirectly "unsettles and undoes" the other three. According to Sylvia Wynter, colonialization was predicated on a new construction of the human which depended on racial, class, and gender hierarchies and the subordination of some into subhuman. The Western conception of what it means to be human, established in modernity as a part of colonialism, is a Euro-white wealth-owning male with right and divine mandate to dominate all else because he is of higher worth than all else. In addition, thanks to the economic theory dimensions of colonialism (though this is not Wynter's language), the human also is *homo economicus* and has the right to concentrate wealth and to maximize profit. This "central ethnoclass" notion of "Man," Wynter asserts, gives rise to various forms of systemic domination at play today including ecological degradation. That is, in this conceptual context, the myth of human superiority is inseparable from the myths of white superiority, wealth superiority, and the right to maximize profit. Exposing one as a myth exposes the others. Thus, elevating the subjectivity and

35. Examples include Job 12:7–10; Psalm 19:1; Psalm 148; Deuteronomy 30:19–20; Job 38:1.

moral worth of the other-than-human inherently has the power to challenge all four of the intertwined myths that we have said work against communion.

A Second Methodological Move: Account for the Inadequacy of Reason (and Conscious Cognition) Alone

If the four myths infiltrate our being not only by means of reasoned assent to ideas but also by other means of knowing, then method must do more than attend to ideas. If colonization of the mind is a function not only of reasoned ideas but also of other means of knowing, including practices, then ecotheological method must venture into other epistemological terrain: ways of knowing other than the world of reasoned ideas.

Since the essay by Lynn Smith, vitally important critical work has been done by ecotheologians to expose, critique, and reconstruct theological ideas that undergird environmental degradation. Liberating and healing ideas are being generated and taught: God indwells the earth; humans are a part of nature not apart from it, sharing *Adamah* and divine breath with the other creatures; redemption is cosmic; etc. The display of Earth-honoring theological ideas is breathtaking and life-giving.

However, the irony is that while ideas shaped the colonial onslaught of extraction and exploitation, counter ideas alone are not sufficient to unshape it. We do not have time. Moreover, the power of theology to shape society is far less today (at least in the North Atlantic world). The point is that theological *ideas* alone cannot be the extent of ecotheology. The doing of ecotheology must also be practice, practice with power to shape consciousness, behavior, and social structures.

Modernity, and with it colonialism, grounded in liberalism with its focus on the essence of the human as our capacity for reason, insisted that the human mind functions by what it thinks. Negated were the validity and value of other forms and modes of knowing. Reason, and knowledge obtained through it, reigned. The capacity for cognitive reason defined the human. Descartes' statement that "reason [...] is that alone which constitutes us as men and distinguishes us from the brutes" became accepted as truth.[36]

Modern humans shaped by these assumptions came to believe that decisions and behaviors are a consequence of rational processes of cognition. If we think differently, we will change. If we know (*saber*) more accurately, we will act more truly. This is the enlightenment fallacy of the rational autonomous agent. Neuroscience is telling us quite the opposite. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff writes that over 90% of human thinking is below the level of

36. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*.

consciousness.[37] The point is that consciously learned and asserted ideas alone will not change behaviors, attitudes, policies, structures.

Therefore, ecotheology, to have impact, will need to address, learn from, and teach beyond conscious cognition of ideas. This includes teaching to and learning from the body (including emotions and the subconscious) and learning from practice.

Entire disciplines have emerged to study kinesthetic knowing, to understand how people have life-giving knowledge in our bodies and how we might draw upon it. Here is not the place to elaborate or analyze but simply to make the methodological point and illustrate it. The point is that mainstream academic theology has not accepted or affirmed knowing through the body. Ecotheology, however, is situated to affirm and elevate bodily knowing.[38]

An illustration will suffice for a glimpse of the role of the body as knower and teacher:

> We sat in silence for a time. Then a friend asked, "What is it like to die?" Eventually, I replied: "I would like not to tell this. But, I could [...] I could tell you of awaking." When I awoke in ICU, I was alone. It was night. Distant monitors cast eerie light. I began to sense my legs. My feet and arms were bound. Slowly, consciousness returned. In my throat, a machine there, for breathing. Another machine, hydrated. Another was circulating blood, someone else's, in my body. I felt alone. Waking up was the most horrifying moment I have ever lived. But, as the night wore on, dawn began also. In the night and dawn, something my body knew began to be revealed to my mind: the truth eternally held within the body, the truth of which it is made. I began to hear from my heart, skin, my blood, bones [...] that I belong. This is the clearest moment I carry with me from this experience and the clearest moment of my life. Biological life can be sustained by machines. That is incredible. However, life does not have meaning simply because of one's ability to live. What gave life meaning was not that I was alive. Rather, it was knowing that I belong to everyone on this Earth and them to me: this commonplace. Something else breathed for me, someone else's blood moved in me, someone else was responsible for me, and yet, nonetheless, on this bed, in this state, I was no more nor less than I ever have been or shall be. For we are and forever shall be, simply and miraculously, beloved. Belonged. Kin. May we make it so.[39]

And what of *practice* as tutor? Imagine a class in ecotheology beginning with and oriented around practices. I mean not only practices of individual or household behaviors, but also an array of practices aimed at all three levels of change: change in behaviors, social structures, and worldview/consciousness. "[T]he primary way out of colonial subjection," writes Lily Mendoza, is "a mandatory recovery of a different mode of relation with living Earth as spiritual

37. Lakoff, *The Little Blue Book*. See also Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*.

38. Of course, practices and learning from the body are shaped in part by the very myths that I seek to undo, so learning from the body and from practices alone will not suffice.

39. Mohr, "Making Known the Sacred," 14–15.

practice."[40] A "different mode of relation" means different practices. We will not *think* our way into a different mode of being in relationship to land, air, fauna, flora, and water. We will dare to experiment and practice behaviorally and through fighting for change in social structures including public policy.

Might an orientation around practice and learning from the body enable ecotheology more aptly to cultivate communion and knowing God? How might teaching to emotions and the subconscious as well as to the conscious and reasoning mind enable deeper entry into communion and relationality with the Divine? Might these moves inherently subvert white supremacy and wealth-based supremacy, given the linkages between these myths and colonizing epistemologies?

These two methodological moves—elevating the subjectivity of the other-than-human, and moving past the sufficiency of reasoned ideas and cognition for generating change in behaviors and systems—lead to our third methodological move: reclaiming sources that the colonizing West cut down.

A Third Methodological Move: Reclaiming Sources that Colonization Dismissed

If as Wynter, Smith, and other decolonial and anticolonial thinkers assert, epistemological hegemony is at the heart of colonialism and its central assumptions of white superiority, wealth superiority, and profit-maximizing economy, then foregrounding sources excluded by colonization cuts at the heart of those assumptions and their power to thwart communion. We consider here two sources of wisdom and knowledge that were dismissed by Western epistemologies and their material enactment. The first is Earth's elements and creatures (other-than-human creatures), and the other is the knowledge of subaltern communities. I will spend more time with the first, in part because the second is well argued already in this volume, especially by George Zachariah, Maina Talia, and Jocabed Solano Miselis.

Earth's Elements and Creatures (Other-than-Human) as Source for Knowing

For centuries, Christians claimed that God provided two books of revelation: Creation itself and the Bible.[41] How is it that Christian theologians (at least in the Global North) learn tools of exegesis for reading the second book of revelation, but not how to exegete trees, waterways, or electrons in order to read the first?

If, as we noted in discussing Earth's subjectivity, Earth reveals God, praises God, bears God's voice, embodies God, and has been knowing and seeing

40. Mendoza, "Transdiasporic Indigeneity and Decolonizing Faith," 15.

41. See the essays by Conradie and Eaton in this volume.

God for four-and-a-half billion years before our species appeared, then might we glimpse more fully just who this God is, and how this God bids us to live if we attune our ears to and learn from other creatures and elements about what they have seen and understood regarding the God who makes them Her/His/Their dwelling place? Might we glimpse more fully the communion into which this God creates and saves us?

The move to read the book of the cosmos as a necessary element of ecotheological method points to ambiguity, uncertainty, paradox, and unknown terrain, especially since, as Luther asserts, creation both reveals and conceals God. Reading the book of creation does not mean that "nature" necessarily models morality (any more than does the book of Scripture). One predator taking down the mother or offspring of another, the agonized faces of tsunami survivors, the fierce onslaught of disease, or slow and agonizing death dispel that notion. What is natural is not necessarily moral. The point is not to hold up nature as a blueprint for morality. Rather, the point is to cultivate receptivity to hearing the voice of God in the other-than-human parts of creation; learning from them about God and about how to live rightly; and being nourished for lives of communion-building by God's Spirit at play in creation. Doing so may help to dispel the assumption/myth that the other-than-human parts of creation are subordinate to human creatures and exist to serve human desires—an assumption that we have identified as bound up with white superiority and wealth superiority in rationalizing the extractive/exploitative economy. Catherine Keller sums it up well: "[/]f Earth is the matter with us we had best read its matter mindfully [...]. It might help us undo [...] the exceptionalism that takes us out of our creaturely condition."[42]

The words of black feminist theorist and activist, Adrienne Maree Brown, ring true. She advises learning from "the sacred systems of life all around us." "Many of us," she writes, "have been and are becoming students of these systems of life, wondering if in fact we can unlock some crucial understanding about our own humanity if we pay closer attention [...]."[43]

How are people who have never "read" the book of creation to begin doing so? I have only hunches. One, as noted by Maina Talia, is to learn from how Indigenous cultures do so. A second, highlighted by Heather Eaton, is through delving into and engaging in holy dialogue with the earth sciences and life sciences.[44] A third is by being deeply present to and with the world beyond the human. Students in my climate justice course, for example, keep an "Earth encounter log" in which they record the experience of sitting for some time

42. Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 100.

43. Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 2.

44. See the essays by Talia and Eaton in this volume.

each day with a particular tree, plant, piece of Earth, or other constellation of elements that is not human.

And what of learning in particular about communion? My hunch is that humans may learn a great deal from the other creatures and elements about God's gift of communion, the creative cultivation of communion, and who we are created to be as beings in communion. Two illustrations point to that potential. One is from forest science and the other from feminist physics. Reading the earth through these lenses points to human being as "in communion" or "in quest for communion" even though we may not know it.

Trees, some scientists say, talk with each other by forming a vast system of underground fungi, connecting their roots to one another. Through these fungal highways, trees exchange nutrients. A Douglas Fir may share excess sugars with a neighboring Birch in the spring and fall, for example, and in return the Birch sends sugar to the Doug Fir in the summer. This underground fungal network is a way to communicate, like the internet or telephone lines. One article calls it the "Wood Wide Web." Recall the biologist, David Suzuki's observation of a "vast story of cooperation and quest for communion that enabled life to emerge on earth and then to evolve into more complex forms."[45]

If humans' telos is communion and if we are ontologically communion-in-the-making disrupted by anticommunion forces such as racism, colonialism, oppression of all kinds, ecological destruction, and warfare, then the mysteries of communion being uncovered by physics also might herald "astonishing insight." Feminist physicist Karen Barad writes that according to quantum field theory, *"even the smallest bits of matter are an enormous multitude!* [...] there is no such thing as a discrete individual [...]," but rather "an eternal link among all living beings" and all forms of matter past, present, and future.[46]

She goes further, locating "messianic" power of the infinite within all matter; it is "flashing up" or "shot through every bit of matter" at all times.[47] Christians claim that God's "kindom" is inbreaking; it is at once both now and not yet. With striking resonance, Barad writes: "The messianic, the flashing up of the infinite [...], is written into the very structure of matter-time-being itself." "Matter has this messianic structure written into its finitude, *no matter how small a piece*."[48] Might this matter with its inbreaking infinite and its "eternal" internal linkages have something to teach human beings about communion?

45. Suzuki, *Sacred Balance*, 131.

46. Barad, "What Flashes Up," 71–72, 75.

47. Barad, "What Flashes Up," 72. The resonance with Martin Luther is striking. The finite bears the infinite, he insisted, and the infinite is salvific.

48. Barad, "What Flashes Up," 63, 73.

Yet another illustration of honoring otherkind as source of knowledge or wisdom comes from theologian Jennifer S. Leath. She asserts that, "the physical properties of things, in this case water, may provide resources for reflecting on social and moral life." Leath goes on to derive instructions for liberative living from the properties of water.[49]

God's Spirit, the Spirit of boundless justice-seeking love at play in and among otherkind, may nurture human capacity to know God and live into God's communion for all. Ecotheology is marvelously situated to explore how humans may learn from the other-than-human languages of this Earth. (As noted previously, the exploration is complex, given that "nature" does not necessarily model morality, any more than does the book of scripture.) It is uncharted terrain—creation as abode of God and sacred teacher.

Subaltern Communities as Source for Knowing

A second source of wisdom and knowledge that was dismissed by Western epistemologies is the wisdom of subaltern communities. For guidance on the move to rehonor this source, I point the reader to other essays in this volume, especially the ones by George Zachariah, Jocabed Solano, and Maina Talia. Zachariah argues compellingly that social movements of people who have suffered under colonization and capitalist plunder and who have developed collective resistance to dominant epistemologies and modes of living can lead the way to alternative and life-affirming says of living. These grassroots movements from the margins, he asserts, can inform the ecotheologies of people who are in solidarity with them. Solano demonstrates the insight into biblical texts that comes from an indigenous people's theology of a sacred cosmos.

The invitation from Maina Talia to read biblical texts in the light of Indigenous knowledge and to perceive the norm of neighbor love through a lens of Tuvaluan knowledge systems and value systems is compelling in part because he writes: "Poverty does not exist in Tuvalu." One reason for this, he asserts, is the understanding of *tuakoi*, the neighbor. What might people whose societies are racked by poverty learn about the biblical norm of neighbor love from people whose relations with neighbor render a society without poverty? How might communion become clearer for people doing ecotheology if we learned from a language, worldview, value system, and mode of practice that has many words translated as "land," and these words "tend to assume a sense of belonging and being a part of the land?" If the heart of our mad dash into climate catastrophe (and its disruption of the communion into which God creates us) is grounded materially in misshapen relationships to land (including oil, coal, water, soil, and more), and if radical reorientation toward communion includes change in worldviews, then learning from worldviews in which land is

49. Leath, "Waterways," 24.

not private property and tool for private wealth creation may be invaluable.[50] This is not to idealize subaltern communities and their knowledge. Rather it is a challenge to imagine wisdom exchange as a method in ecotheology.

The essays by Zachariah, Talia, and Solano bear out the profound and revolutionary epistemological claim at the heart of LA liberation theologies and the epistemological upheavals instigated, for example, by Franz Fanon and Paulo Freire: the epistemological privilege of people and peoples on the margins of power and privilege. Many theologians from within subaltern communities have made this epistemological move. Ecotheologians will be wise to build on this strong heritage which refutes the myths of white superiority, wealth superiority, and the inevitability of exploitative and extractive economies.

This third methodological move suggests that learning from the wisdom of subaltern communities and from the Earth's other-than-human voices might be a crucial element of ecotheological method if it is to nurture the capacity for communion and knowing God.

In Closing

The gift and role of theology, including ecotheology, is to assist the human creature in coming to know God more fully and to enter into "God's dream" of bringing all into communion, communion with God and communion within creation. Ecotheology will fail in this purpose if it attends to ecological matters without attending also to another factor, because this factor obstructs and destroys communion. This factor is the colonization of life by white superiority and wealth-based superiority yoked to an extractive, exploitative economy as way of being.

Therefore, we have asked: "What methodological moves would enable ecotheology to (begin to) overcome this obstacle to realizing its purpose?" Said differently, what methodological moves would help ecotheology to counter the colonizing forces of white supremacy aligned with wealth-based supremacy in the context of extractive/exploitative capitalism?

Noting that decolonial and anticolonial theories provide a useful framework for pursuing this question, we identified four relevant aspects of decolonizing. They are:

50. To illustrate using the words of Julius Nyerere: "To us in Africa land was always recognized as belonging to the community. Each individual within our society had a right to use the land, because otherwise he could not earn his living and one cannot have the right to life without also having a right to some means of maintaining life. But the African's right to land was simply the right to use it; he had no other right to it, nor did it occur to him to try and claim one." Nyerere, "Ujamaa," 5.

- Becoming clearer about the life-shaping myths undergirding white superiority, wealth superiority, and the hegemony of late capitalism.
- Discovering how these myths "get into our minds" and direct our actions and perceptions.
- Recognizing the impacts of these myths.
- Acting in ways that counter them.

Finally, we honed in on the last of these aspects of decolonizing (acting) by identifying three methodological moves in ecotheology to counter the identified myths underlying the white supremacy, wealth supremacy, neoliberal capitalism matrix. Those moves are to:

- Continue to elevate the subjectively and moral standing of other-than-human parts of creation.
- Account for the inadequacy of reasoned ideas alone by turning to epistemological terrain other than cognitive reason, in particular the terrains of affective knowing and bodily knowing.
- Elevate sources that the colonizing enterprise dismissed, in particular Earth's other-than-human elements and creatures, and the knowledge of subaltern communities.

As argued in the section on methodological moves, the first of these three moves undoes a central premise at the heart of profit-maximizing capitalism—that Earth is primarily a resource for human beings, is meant to be exploited for profit, and has no intrinsic worth or subjectivity. This methodological move also challenges indirectly the superiority of white people and people with wealth by undercutting the "central ethnoclass" notion of "man" whose right to dominion over Earth was inseparable from the right to dominion over people (and peoples) who are not white, propertied, and male. The second and third methodological moves subvert the epistemological underpinnings of white supremacy, wealth-based supremacy, and profit-maximizing capitalism.

Ecotheology is uniquely situated to adopt these methodological moves and unearth the wisdom and moral-spiritual agency to be garnered from them. These three moves are ingredients of "epistemological repair."[51] I propose them as lynchpins for ecotheological method that may help ecotheology to serve the classical purpose of theology: to enable human creatures better to know God and align life with God's dream of bringing all of creation into communion. The wedding of white supremacy with wealth supremacy in the context of profit-maximizing capitalism destroys communion. So too does climate change. Never before has the world so needed theology to foster human capacity to know and heed God, build communion, and challenge and transform what thwarts that communion.

51. Walker, "Transformational and Enduring Vision of Aime' Cesaire," 761.

Bibliography

Barad, Karen. "What Flashes Up." In *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, edited by Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, 21–88. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017.

Birch, Bruce C. *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.

Brown, Adrienne Maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Chico: AK Press, 2017.

Chryssavgis, John. *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Descartes, René. *A Discourse on Method, and Selected Writings*. Translated by John Veitch. New York: Dutton, 1953.

Habel, Norman C., ed. *Earth Bible*. Vol. 1. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000. The series also included 4 further volumes.

Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2015.

Jennings, Willie James. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020.

Keller, Catherine. *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Klein, Naomi. "Only a Green New Deal Can Douse the Fires of Eco-Fascism," *The Intercept*, September 16, 2019, https://theintercept.com/2019/09/16/climate-change-immigration-mass-shootings/ (last accessed 4 February 2022).

Lakoff, George, and Elisabeth Wehling. *The Little Blue Book: The Essential Guide to Thinking and Talking Democratic*. New York: Free Press, 2012.

Leath, Jennifer S. "Waterways–Paths of Freedom and Justice for All." In *Gonna Trouble the Water*, edited by Miguel De la Torre, 24–42. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2021.

Liboiron, Max. *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

Mendoza, Lily. "Transdiasporic Indigeneity and Decolonizing Faith." In *Decolonizing Ecotheology: Indigenous and Subaltern Challenges*, edited by George Zachariah, 261–81. Eugene: Pickwick, 2022.

Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia. "Faith and #BlackLivesMatter: Future Directions and Current Directives for White Folk." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 49:1 (2022), 51–58.

———. "From Climate Debt to Climate Justice: God's Love Embodied in Garden Earth." In *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, edited by John Hart, 203–19. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

———. *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002.

———. *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013.

Mohr, Javney C.A. "Making Known the Sacred: Presence and Dissent, Grounds for Freedom." In *An Occasional Paper.* Camrose: Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life, December 02, 2012.

Nyerere, Julius Kambarage. *Ujamaa: The Basis of African Socialism.* Newark: Jihad Productions, 1971 [April 1962].

Powell, John Anthony. "Opening to the Question of Belonging." In *On Being,* moderated by Krista Tippett, 10 May 2018, https://onbeing.org/programs/john-a-powell-opening-to-the-question-of-belonging-may2018/ (last accessed 21 March 2021).

———. *Racing to Justice: Transforming Our Conceptions of Self and Other to Build an Inclusive Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 3rd ed. London: ZED Books, 2021.

Sylvia, Wynter. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation." *New Centennial Review* 3:3 (2003), 257–337. doi:10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.

Suzuki, David. *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature*. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2007.

Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1:1 (2012), 1–40.

Walker, Keith L. "The Transformational and Enduring Vision of Aime Cesaire." *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 125:3 (2010), 756–63. doi:10.1632/pmla.2010.125.3.756.

Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

How Would We Know What God is Up To?: What We Could Learn from Asian Ecofeminism

Jea Sophia Oh[1]

Doing Ecotheology as an Asian Woman

Talking about nature and our ecological crisis from a received Christian perspective might present challenges much more complex than similar conversations stemming from other religious traditions such as Indigenous traditions (e.g., North American Indigenous, African Indigenous, Australian Aboriginal, African *Voodoo*, Korean *Donghak*), process-oriented cosmologies, and Asian traditions (e.g., Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Korean Shamanism, Shintoism). This is largely because of the anthropocentric, Eurocentric, individualistic, androcentric, logocentric, and other-worldly tendencies and practices of the historically world-dominating forms of Christianity. Although no one religious tradition or philosophical perspective can offer an ideal solution to the environmental crisis, it is still useful to highlight this discrepancy from the perspective of discourse on "world religions."

1. Jea Sophia Oh is Associate Professor of Philosophy at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. She is a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

How to cite: Oh, JS 2022, "How Would We Know What God is up to? What We Could Learn from Asian Ecofeminism", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?,* An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 141–157. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.07

If I describe myself as an Asian ecofeminist theologian, luckily and inevitably perhaps, I find the distinctiveness of my own theological method emerging from my experience of "Asian" and "woman" identities. Ironically, as a result of this identification, one could easily disregard my perspective as the "subaltern" or "invisible" within white male–oriented societies including much of academia in the field of theology. Nevertheless, I have set my heart-mind on being an Asian comparative, postcolonial, ecofeminist theologian-cum-philosopher. Here I will disclose my theological method as stemming from three major perspectives: comparative, postcolonial, and ecofeminist. Through sharing my theological journey, I hope to creatively unfold these three crucial methods at the heart of my theological-philosophical practice. Each of the essay's next three sections addresses one of these approaches. All can be fruitfully exemplified by introducing exemplary theologians and how their work has influenced my own trajectory. The three examples of contemporary theologians are Heup Young Kim for comparative theology and philosophy, Kwok Pui-lan for postcolonial theology, and Catherine Keller for ecofeminist theology. The essay's final section explores what can be learned from these theological methods held together, for addressing contemporary planetary challenges such as the climate emergency, racism, and gender injustice. Thus, I have chosen my own embodiment in Asian and comparative, postcolonial (not imperialistic), and ecofeminist (rejecting both androcentric and anthropocentric paradigms) commitments to discern the guiding theological methods within which I work.

Why Do We Need Comparative Theology for Doing Ecotheology?

I have studied Christian constructive theology since my undergraduate studies at Ewha University in the late twentieth century. At Ewha, majoring in Christian theology, my favorite courses were mostly in philosophy and theology. In my undergraduate and graduate programs at Ewha, I spent many days and nights engrossed in reading systematic theologies of prominent German theologians such as Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Paul Tillich, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, along with philosophical works by Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and so forth.

While I was immersed in reading great works by European theologians and philosophers, not surprisingly but ironically, what opened my eyes to shift from Eurocentric to comparative ecofeminist theologies were Korean "Multitudes" (민중—*Minjung*) theology and Sallie McFague's ecotheology. Studying received European philosophies and theologies, I experienced innumerable gaps in understanding, even to the point of feeling that many unfillable holes had appeared in my heart-mind, caused by many differences between my biocultural heritage and the experience of the androcentric/anthropocentric/logocentric

biases of dominant Western theologies and ideas. I eventually came to claim my unique subjectivity and agency as a Korean theologian by learning *Minjung* theology, which views *Minjung* as the "subjects of history" and is disposed to define "Jesus as *Minjung*" (the multitudes).

Witnessing the all-too-frequent imprisonment of my respected professors who taught me systematic theology (Park Soon-kyung, a famous theologian of Korean unification) and philosophy (David Kwang-sun Suh, a pivotal *Minjung* theologian and philosopher) for supporting democratic movements and working for the unification of Korea under the military regime, I learned that theology should be done by hearts and feet in the streets via "living and doing theology" or "godding" and not by abstract, systematic thinking alone in the mode of "faith seeking understanding." However, I was still largely blind to the potential of education, despite all my efforts in studying so-called Western theologies and philosophies. I eventually opened my right eye by studying *Minjung* theology and my left eye by reading McFague's *The Body of God* (1993). The organic cosmos including this planet and my Asian woman's body are all the body of God, which may sound like a rejection of classical notions of the church as the body of Christ. Nonetheless, it was fascinating for me to understand Jesus with reference to the multitudes, not as a singular historical "one and only savior," but as the earth or the geobody of God including all particular and diverse bodies.

After moving to the United States of America to study at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, I studied missiology and comparative religions along with other theological and philosophical courses. It seemed to be a weird combination in which one course taught me *missio Dei* (God's mission), while another course taught me how to study world religions comparatively, including Christianity as one of the world religions. Through my struggle to harmonize my rootedness and vulnerability between *missio Dei* (as the spread of Christianity) and inter-religious dialogues, I realized that all religious traditions are finite, and none can be said to possess all truth. I was impressed with the various kinds of wisdom that seems relevant to the always pressing task at hand of making sense of the world and addressing ethical emergencies.

At Yale Divinity School, I studied feminist theologies with a pioneer feminist theologian Letty M. Russell and postcolonial theologies with Kwok Pui-lan who is at the forefront of Asian feminist theology and postcolonial theology. My interdisciplinary background led me to deal with many urgent issues in society when studying for a PhD at Drew University with the prominent process ecofeminist constructive theologian, Catherine Keller. At Drew, I concentrated on postcolonialism, ecofeminism, ecotheology, and process theology as a constructive theologian.

I often felt caught up in a dilemma of doing largely Western theology as an Asian ecofeminist theologian. I grew up as a third-generation Christian in

Korea and I have been educated as a Christian theologian for longer than two decades in America. Notwithstanding, my gut feeling was to invite Asian spirituality (sacredness) into my theology, which could allow for a more authentic expression of my unique perspective. My PhD dissertation entailed a comparative theological study of process theology and Korean *Donghak* (東學/동학, an Indigenous religious and philosophical movement in Korea in the nineteenth century), with a particular focus on "Life." My dissertation utilizes the work of Asian ecofeminist thinkers to supplement a Eurocentric and androcentric worldview, reconstructing an alternative theology that enables a new interchange between Western theology and Asian philosophies.

Since writing the dissertation, I have had the privilege of teaching world religions. My interest in comparative theologies has grown to include all world religions. I am simultaneously impressed by the need on the part of people in many different traditions to develop forms of awareness that are sensitive to the value of the more-than-human world and to engage in dialogue with one another for the sake of peace and mutual transformation. My dissertation gave birth to my first published book, *A Postcolonial Theology of Life: Planetarity East and West* (2011). My book is a path-making contribution to Korean ecofeminist theology and comparative philosophy with the use of Asian spirituality (살림, *salim*—enlivening in Korean) as the philosophical underpinning for the argument that all forms of life are sacred and divine through the eyes of an Asian-American theologian. Postcolonial theology fuses with ecotheology, and that amalgam combines with comparative theology, transnational feminism, and contextual theology.

How, then, do we study comparative theology and how is that related to ecotheology?

First, I understand comparative theology as a truly constructive theology. Thus, it should be distinguished from comparative religions or religious studies per se. Theology means discourse about God while religious studies are devoted to research on religious beliefs, practices, and institutions. Therefore, it is important to start from one tradition and to engage with other religious traditions respectfully with a clear idea of their standpoint in doing theology comparatively in complementary dialogue. Loss of commitment to the home tradition may make the work of comparison no longer theological. Moreover, there are risks of both rootedness and vulnerability. I may call this location of deep cultural conversations a hybrid practice or a hybridization of theologies. In the process of hybridization, comparative theologians produce constructive theological works with a sense of double belonging.

Second, for me, doing theology comparatively, as an approximation of "godding" that can be another name for "faith seeking understanding," has been an experientially embodied phenomenon. I understand godding as doing theology practically and constructively. As constructive theology, comparative

theology should be an ongoing reflective process. It should be nuanced in response to current issues of culture, society, science, economy, ecology, race, gender, etc. Thus, as a relatively new discipline, comparative theology should deal with a wide range of interdisciplinary studies such as theology and science, ecological ethics, feminist theologies, comparative religious ethics, postcolonial theologies, global Christianity, religious pluralism, justice and society, religion and culture, Asian studies (non-Western) and philosophies, history of religions, and religions of the world.

Third, I understand comparative theology as theological *dharma* or ethical responsibility. Thus, the core of comparative theology lies in the field of comparative ethics. Doing theology comparatively requires ethical decision-making and responsible actions with a practical urgency. As a comparative theologian, I should be sensitive to social issues facing our world: the construction of sexuality and gender, social justice, violence, and ecological destruction most of all. Practically, comparative theology should be an exercise in ethics for fulfilling our *dharma* (theological responsibility) for the world and responding to God's calling for mission, and therefore also to the question what God is up to.

The Korean eco-Daoist theologian Heup Young Kim introduced a theology of *Dao* by using a comparative theological method. In *A Theology of Dao* (2017), Kim's starting point is proceeding not from a Western-centric theology but from a Korean-centered spirituality of the *Dao* by calling God, Jesus Christ, and the Trinity, triadic aspects of *Dao*. As a theological method, Kim suggests a trialogical practice of relational humility. He denies the singular existence of absolute theology and *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothingness). In a pluri-religious Asian context, the dialogue between religion and science is shown to be insufficient unless it becomes a trialogue among Christian theologies, Asian religions, and natural sciences.[2]

It is not surprising, then, to encounter people who have pluralistic religiosity with multiple religious belonging and to discover that these individuals can belong to more than one religious tradition with varying degrees of challenge or discomfort. In an Asian context with its many religions, religious scholars have begun to discuss multiple forms of religious belonging with respect to religious traditions such as Hindu-Christian, Buddhist-Christian, Confucian-Christian, or Daoist-Christian. We can easily find Confucian-Christians in Korea. Although contemporary Koreans are not obviously Confucians, they are still deeply permeated and guided by Confucian values. Confucianism was the official philosophy and the way of life throughout the *Joseon* dynasty (1392–1910) in Korea. Confucianism has influenced Korean culture more than any other philosophies of Asia. It is not wrong to say that neo-Confucianism

2. Kim, *A Theology of Dao*, 197.

has been institutionalized and proliferated in every part of life of the Korean people throughout time to the present.

In this regard, Kim calls an encounter between science and religion a "fusion of hermeneutical horizons" that is the "*dao* of how to be fully human."[3] Kim found *Dao* and God equal in value. His preliminary suggestions for optimizing theological methods are listed as follows:

1. The primary locus for the dialogue between science and religion is the *dao* of life in the common quest for a new cosmic humanity through "mutual self-transformation".[4]
2. The East Asian notions of vacuity as the reality of non-Being is significant for the dialogue in that Kim criticizes the process notion of becoming as insufficient to save us from the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*.
3. The traditional Christian notion of linear time should be scrutinized in the light of physics and East Asian religious thoughts that underscore the significance of spatiotemporality and the possibility of "synchronicity,"[5] which is the ground of East Asian cosmology in 易經 *Yijing* (*The Book of Changes*).
4. The Greek word *kenosis* (emptying), being the opposite of fullness, is by itself insufficient to understand nature, while the Daoist notion of 無爲 *wu wei* (let it be itself or non-action) indicates an ongoing spiral of East Asian concepts of nature (自然 *ziran*, meaning "self-so," or "spontaneity").
5. The East Asian cosmological paradigm envisions organismic wholeness in which everything is interconnected in harmony with the "theanthropocosmic" (theos+Anthropos+cosmos) trajectory as the *Dao*.

Kim's comparative ecotheology is presented as a triadic harmony or trialogue (sciences, theologies, and Asian religions) alongside "the Triune Great Ultimate" (三太極, *samtaegeuk*; heaven, humans, and myriad things).[6]

Korean ecotheology can be explored through the symbolic number "3" and its polydoxical triadic reality. The number 3 symbolically signifies 10 000 things (萬物, *manmul/wanwu,* a myriad things including living and non-living) and a multiplicity of multiplicities, in which everything is interdependently connected as a pluri-singular cosmic wholeness. In the *Book of Changes* (易經, *Yeokgyeong/Yijing*), *samjae/sancai* (三才) refers to "heaven" (天, *cheon/tian*),

3. Kim, *A Theology of Dao*, 198.

4. Kim, *A Theology of Dao*, 200.

5. In his "Foreword" to Richard Wilhelm's translation of *The Book of Changes*, Carl Jung recognizes the eventual time which contains "spatial reality" or "spatiotemporality" as "synchronicity": "Synchronocity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as the subjective states of the observes" (xxiv).

6. These five crucial points are my reflective summary of Kim's preliminary suggestions for future studies. See Kim's *A Theology of Dao*, 200–203.

"earth" (地, *ji/chi*), and "human persons" (人, *in/ren*). Over the course of transforming and living traditions, its meaning has come to refer to the myriad things (萬物, *manmul/wanwu*) existing in a dynamic *cosmos* (宇宙, *uju/uchu*) understood as "the unsummed spatiotemporal entirety" of the world. This triadic integrity of *samjae* is the foundation of a socially inflected soteriology in East Asian cosmologies, which Tu Weiming has called an "anthropocosmic" view to describe the dynamic interconnectedness of heaven, earth, and humanity.[7] Kim's "theanthropocosmic" vision then deconstructs both anthropocentrism and cosmocentrism and interweaves a more inclusive and holistic "theanthropocosmic" theology.

An anthropocosmic paradigm of divine multiplicity and immanence is also at the heart of the distinctively Korean philosophical and political movement of *Donghak*'s triune reverence (三敬, *samgyeong/sanjing*) developed by Hae-Weol (崔時亨, i.e., Choe Sihyeong, 1827–1898). This ethico-religious stance is directed to heaven, human beings, and the myriad of things. *Donghak*'s notion of revering the triple material potency (三才, *samjae*) of heaven not only foregrounds the locus of divine immanence but also invokes the divine by calling rice (밥, *bab*) the divine (한울, *hanul*).

Such triune thinking calls a weaving woman *hanul* (the divine), which transcends any theistic classification of so-called "Western learning" (서학/西學, *seohak*, which refers predominantly to European Christianity and Western philosophy). *Donghak*'s anthropocosmic paradigm and Kim's comparative "theanthropocosmic" theology further help to shift an anthropocentric paradigm to a more inclusive anthropocosmic or ecocentric ethics by relocating and expanding the hermeneutical horizons of divine immanence. 三才 (*samjae*) is indeed the eco-trinity of heaven, earth, and myriad things, including humans—which saves Asian ecofeminist theology from the patriarchal dangers of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity understood as Father-Son-Spirit. Sandra Schneiders has given a wake-up call to end patriarchal interpretations and practices of the Christian Trinity as "two men and a bird."[8] It is obviously true that the traditional Christian Trinity is lacking femininity and may even be matricidal. Nevertheless, I recognize the Trinity as a strong basis for polydoxy and as a sign of a multiplicity of relations. As Keller and Laurel Schneider maintain, this is a gift of the Spirit:

> The Christian tradition does not refer to a singular lineage, nor do Christians speak with one voice even when they attend to the same line of scripture. In this sense, the Christian tradition is always already polydoxy; it is irreducible to any one voice or lineage that may claim exhaustively to represent Christian faith, thought, and practice.[9]

7. See Tu Weiming's lecture at the Beijing Forum 2005, "An Anthropocosmic Perspective on Creativity."

8. See Schneiders, "God Is More than Two Men and a Bird."

9. See the "Introduction" to Keller and Schneider's *Polydoxy*, 2.

Ecological Hope in Postcolonial Theology

At the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 1999, Kwok Pui-lan and Catherine Keller, two prominent constructive theologians and pioneers of postcolonial theology, presented together at a panel on the theme of hybridity. Kwok's presentation was "Jesus the Hybrid: What Do You Say That I Am?" Against a (Western) imperialistic Christ, Kwok reconceptualized the meaning of Christ from an East Asian perspective. In her paper "Hybridity and Chaos: Theology on the Face of the Deep," Keller connected the postcolonial term hybridity to chaos theory and argued that hybridity can be construed as the cultural opening where "the ocean of heteroglossia" has already leaked into the system.[10]

Telling Asian women's stories is Kwok's theological starting point and standpoint. She writes, "As Asian Christian women, we have our own story, which is both Asian and Christian. We can only tell this story by developing a new hermeneutics: a hermeneutics of double suspicion and reclamation."[11]

Similarly, my former teacher from Ewha University David Kwang Suh, a Korean *Minjung* theologian, emphasizes that for Korean people, biblical hermeneutics should focus on the confluence of two streams/stories, namely the Bible stories and Korean cultural narratives. *Minjung* theology has grown out of telling Korean *Minjung's* stories, that is, it stems from "socio-political biography."[12]

Hybridity is a powerful concept in postcolonial studies which can allow for an eventual third space between the colonizer and the colonized beyond the binary logic of East and West. The postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha adopts the concept of hybridity for the subversion of authority in colonial discourse and resistance against the dominant imperialist power as "a problematic of colonial representation."[13] In a similar vein, Keller also recognizes the decolonizing power of hybridity: "hybridity has for a decade played a key role within conversations theorizing the cultural complexity within which progressive movements might learn to forge more effective alliances."[14] Keller and Kwok develop similar theological resonances so that hybridity can be relevant in analyzing the Korean concept of *salim* (enlivening) from an ecotheological perspective. In terms of the multiplicity and the power of hybridity, *Minjung* women are not powerless, even though they are generally excluded from

10. Keller's paper fed into her *Face of the Deep*.

11. Kwok, "Claiming a Boundary Existence," 121.

12. Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, 1.

13. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 114.

14. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 14.

sovereign *imperial* power. Instead of blurring significant differences or defining Korean women as the mere victims of history, it is crucial to recognize Korean women as the subject of *salim* and history. In order to do that, we must tell and listen to the stories/voices of Asian women.

Postcolonial notions of "hybridity" challenge any simple dualistic caricature of the uneven power dynamics of the colonizer and colonized. Kwok's postcolonial theological method insists that a woman should not be treated as a mere victim of men's history or a sexualized subject because of her gender, class, language, ethnicity, and so on.[15] In her most recent book, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World* (2021), Kwok deals with multilayered socio-political issues in today's world such as #BlackLivesMatter, the environmental crisis, the struggle for democracy in Hong Kong, and the COVID-19 pandemic as theological problems. She shows how postcolonial Asian feminist theologies can contribute to the construction of a more sustainable and just society. Kwok declares that salvation will be utterly impossible without "planetary solidarity" as a part of creation. She emphasizes the Pauline depiction of salvation of the whole cosmos instead of salvation of the soul through the redemption of Christ and suggests a shift in our thinking of salvation from anthropocentric to earth-centric terms, "from soul care to earth care."[16]

For decolonizing Asian women's environmental movements, the Taiwanese eco-activist Wan-Li Ho refuses to use the term "ecofeminism" and offers a new concept of "ecofamilism" for planetary familial care. This serves as a guiding thread within a broad-based theoretical and activist platform for thinking through environmental movements. Ho deploys a traditional Confucian family values' outlook in her conceptual framework to reconstruct a new framework of "ecofamilism."[17] Although there are patriarchal dangers in using such a concept of family experience, operating beyond any selfish patriarchal familism or hypernationalistic imperialism, I suggest the vital importance of a planetary expansion of family (ecofamily) as *hanul* (an infinite becoming of life as the divine in Korean). This intimates an interconnected ecosystem and an extended meaning of the Korean concept of *salim* (enlivening) as an enacting of an ethically desirable planetary symbiosis. *Salim* is a counterpower which demands not any particular action or praxis as such, but the creation of eco-intelligent ways of life or forms of life. *Salim* is also a planetary love and life energy, a force which deconstructs any oppositional walls of *oikos* (the etymological root of economy and ecology) and dismantles all bad *polis* (authoritarian police/politics) through its diffusion of a vitalizing

15. Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 62.

16. Kwok, *Postcolonial Politics*, 193–95.

17. See Ho, *Ecofamilism*.

and nurturing familial energy that functions without centralization of power but can be expanded toward planetary care. As a holistic ecofamily, *hanul* transcends mere biological ties, deconstructs patriarchy, eschews hypernationalism, and fights against territorial imperialism, all of which have once again conspired to split humans from other humans and humans from other planetary beings. *Hanul* can be an extended planetary family system functioning as a caring organismic community. This unlimited boundary breaking becoming(s) can be a key to unravel the entanglement of nature in the systemic sadness and to weave an ethically beautiful eco-familial horizon of care and caring practices.

In a similar spirit, many current thinkers working in the field of postcolonial ecofeminism are not only talking about non-Western feminism, but also developing critical theoretical tools and strategies to better address the task of decolonizing destructive neoliberal capitalist colonization in the "Anthropocene" epoch.[18] In 1996, Rosemary Radford Ruether, a pioneer ecofeminist theologian, edited an anthology entitled *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* as a collection of women's voices from Latin America, Asia, and Africa on religion, ecology, and feminism for presenting an effort at cross-cultural communication and solidarity between women throughout the world struggling against the effects of Western colonization.[19] To celebrate Ruether's ecofeminist legacy, eighteen ecofeminist theologians, including Ruether and myself, from different cultural, biological, ecological, geographical, and social locations all over the world, gathered together essays in a volume, *Valuing Lives, Healing Earth: Religion, Gender, and Life on Earth* (2021). We need multiple eco-caring voices for overcoming our planetary crisis as Kwok concludes in her book *Postcolonial Politics and Theology* (2021), including a remarkable essay on ecotheology, entitled "Christian Mission and Planetary Politics." She writes: "The Christian church must carry out its mission in the context of global warming and other planetary emergencies and in the ecological turn of theology. Postcolonial theology can facilitate this turn by challenging anthropic exceptionalism, decentering the colonial mind, and espousing mutuality between humans and other species."[20]

For the sake of decolonizing this planet we certainly need to hear more women's voices, especially non-Western and marginalized voices. Called by many names—ecofeminism, postcolonial ecofeminism, ecofamilism, and so on—women's movements are vitally important, more than ever before as we stand on the brink of climate catastrophe and hoping for viable futures.

18. Oh, "Salim, Women, and Oikos," 55. I am drawing here from this earlier essay.

19. Ruether, *Women Healing Earth*, 1.

20. Kwok, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology*, 200.

Doing Ecofeminist Theology amid the Pandemic and Ecological Precarity

With her process vision of becoming and interconnectedness, Catherine Keller proposes a counter-apocalyptic ecofeminist theology. Her recent book, *Facing Apocalypse* (2021), suggests that the Apocalypse of the Book of Revelation can be read as an aggressive teaching of nonviolence resistance like what Judith Butler calls "the force of nonviolence." To Keller, the Divine wrath shades into "a politics of nonviolence."[21] In her article "Pandemic Pandemonium" in *Pandemic, Ecology and Theology* (2021), Keller notes that a pandemic has no utopian or theological reassurance. As virologist Luis Villarreal has warned, "regardless of whether or not we consider viruses to be alive, it is time to acknowledge and study them in their natural context within the web of life."[22] Keller points out that the virus is in its "gray zone" between life and nonlife as part of the web of life.[23] Pandemics such as the current COVID-19 pandemic serve as a kind of stress test to uncover and clarify a variety of social and economic problems, which to a degree have become simply the way things are—an habituated "acceptable normal." Keller quotes Arundhati Roy, "[h]istorically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew."[24] Keller's insights here are echoed by Joshua Gentzke in his essay "Viral Visions and Dark Dreams" when he says: "The virus reveals myriad ecological and existential emergencies that constellate around an overarching crisis of relationality, which in turn threads together environmental, economic and social justice issues."[25]

Keller recognizes the fever of the earth and the fever of COVID-19 as symptoms of the same planetary pandemonium although they have different causes: "So, yes, what of the earth-sized demon of ecological demise and its choir of deniers? *No one* blames the pandemic on climate change or carbon emissions. But neither can it be explained apart from the relentless human destruction of non-human habitats. Nor can it be separated from the global capitalism and travel that both carry the virus and warm the planet."[26]

The "no one" to whom Keller refers does not include our Mother Earth. If viruses are natural, one may ascribe blame for the pandemic to nature as Mother Earth. Perhaps the pandemic as plague is an earthly response to

21. Keller, *Facing Apocalypse*, 96.

22. See Villarreal, "Are Viruses Alive?"

23. Keller, "The Gallop of the Pale Green Horse," 43.

24. Keller, "The Gallop of the Pale Green Horse," 47.

25. Keller, "The Gallop of the Pale Green Horse," 13.

26. See Keller's "Pandemic Pandemonium."

climate crisis and human emissions, overconsumptions, and destructions. After all, from Mother Earth's perspective or through the ways of nature, human beings are an infestation and the virus merely a natural kind of insecticide or insectifuge intended to alleviate sufferings of Earth and her non-human inhabitants and constituents. The notion of Mother Earth as having an intention will escape human's concept of rationality. Perhaps it is the Earth's kind of "meta-rationality." While scientists seek an answer, the virus mutates. Mutating viruses are one of Earth's affects amid the environmental crisis.

Beyond and besides such responses to God's urgent call (or *missio Dei*), Judith Butler in an article entitled "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation" explains an ethics of precarity and proximity. She maintains that vulnerability is not just the condition of being potentially harmed by another. It names the porous and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives.[27] Butler writes, "I hope to address here ethical obligations that are global in character and that emerge both at a distance and within relations of proximity."[28] What Butler is up to here is explaining that we can have ethical obligations that extend across the globe, and that we are responsible for things that go on within relations of proximity or intimate closeness, but we also have obligations to distant regions of ethical space. The argument is that we cohabitate the earth with all humans, near and far, and therefore our ethical obligations are global in nature. We share the earth with animals, so it would follow that we also have an obligation not only to animals but also to the earth itself. Such precariousness is an ontological condition for all life forms and situates our ethical politics around a recognition of mutual vulnerability and interdependency. With our fellow creatures, we humans all suffer and are undone in grief and mourning. As Butler observes in *Precarious Life* (2004), the recognition of suffering and grief in others allows us to feel "a shared social vulnerability."[29] Butler argues that sufferings of others (even the ones you feel like you did not cause directly) bring up larger questions about our ethical obligation.[30] For Butler it is precarity that makes the ethical obligation arise as we can see that animals, earth, and other humans are endangered because of the environmental crisis. That is our sensibility of feeling other's sufferings which we call "compassion" because we too are all vulnerable in various degrees in intersecting environmental crises with unseen levels of racial discrimination and gender inequality. Theologians must respond to this ethical call which is our theological imperative. All forms of theology require such an ecological sensitivity while all theological ethics must be eco-ethics

27. Butler, "Mourning Is a Political Act."

28. Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," 134.

29. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

30. Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," 135.

as a result of the increasing fragility and vulnerability that we all face amid this apocalyptic climate crisis. We need to rethink of our vulnerability and interlocked sufferings in relation to the pandemic in terms of our earthly cohabitation with human others and more-than-human others.

There is no way we can deny our planetary interconnectedness with others including more-than-human others as the pandemic has proved. Keller writes that "[t]he virus—through no pedagogical intention of its own—offers a chance to strengthen the pandemically spreading sense of our creaturely connectivity."[31] The pandemic exposes a global vulnerability as the term "*pandemic*" comes from the Greek words "*pan*" (all) + "*demos*" (people) = "*pandemos*"—"all the people." Everyone is vulnerable to the virus because everyone is vulnerable to viral infection from surfaces or other human beings without establishing immunity. Indeed, our vulnerability is another name for our interdependency. As Keller discovered, the gray zone of nature through the pandemic, we can no longer deny or only romanticize the fact that we are all connected. We should acknowledge that this seemingly beautiful web of life is and can be also a killing machine. The disruptions of the pandemic have illuminated the flaws that exist and the compelling need for ethical and just relations. A return to that normal—*the status quo*—is clearly not the best outcome in this regard. We may turn to religious faith in order to comfort and sustain us during such difficult times—times characterized by fear for our survival and the survival of our closest loved ones, but comfort is not sufficient. Our religious faith must be deployed to stir ethical convictions which will compel us to understand and address the environmental, economic, and social injustices, now so clearly revealed. We realize now that our "normal" was never as great as we once thought and now we have the opportunity to create the world as a more sustainable place, a new creation. Nonetheless, we cannot blame the interconnectivity of the symbiotic mechanism of our planet. We realize this radical intimacy of interconnectedness and it is time to be aware of our responsibilities for healing and restoring the pandemoniac sufferings of the earth.

Learning from a Korean Comparative, Postcolonial, Ecofeminist Theology: Salim for Healing

At this juncture, what we need is indeed "healing." Keller in her new book, *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances* (2021), poses a serious counter-apocalyptic question regarding our common belief/hope for a healing erotic metaphor of cosmopolitan synonyms of peace and love:

> We have never lived elsewhere, anyway. Perhaps a down-to-earth *regenesis* of our life together is what the new heaven and earth was always about. Or does such

31. See Keller's "Pandemic Pandemonium."

> improbable *shalom, salaam, salim* – reveal itself as all too utopian? [...] Could we, some critical mass of the species that has trashed the earth, yet recognize it as "cosmic sanctuary"?[32]

As I have noted earlier, *salim* (살림) is a Korean term that means making things alive, restoring, healing, and enlivening. *Salim*, in a narrow and traditional sense, refers to women's everyday embodied tasks such as cooking, educating children, cultivating gardens, and managing household economics and affairs. *Salim*, in a more expansive sense though, can also include all of the diverse ecological activities that enliven and sustain all of planetary living. Beyond managing a household, for keeping a sustainable living of this planet, Korean women have consistently been at the frontlines of Korean ecological movements for ecojustice and sustainability that are referred to as *salim* movements. Korean *salim* movements (ongoing since 1997) are a radical collective or expressive collaborative community of ecological resistance movements that initially formed as responses seeking to resist and remedy the destructive consequences of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis. When the IMF and South Korea negotiated the largest IMF rescue package in early December 1997, of approximately US $57 billion, it came as a shock to most Koreans. The situation became popularly known as the IMF crisis. Confronting the IMF crisis, Korean women, mostly mothers and wives, led the *salim* movement to save their family, children, and the country as an extended family.[33] The *salim* movement functions as an ecological movement in saving the economy and ecology as a valuable *oikos*, our living organism, and the household. Recovering is an important activity of recycling as healing and mending the creation (*tikkun olam* in Hebrew)—as such exemplary Korean women have been and continue to be the agential subjects and forerunners of the *salim* movement. The *salim* movement is also predominantly carried out by Korean women in the everyday practice of caring for their homes.[34] Regardless of the prejudicial assumptions that Korean women are apolitical and excluded from the patriarchal national politics, many Korean women have actively participated in the Korean decolonizing movements throughout the Korean history, e.g., *Donghak* movements of 1894–1895, the March 1st Independence Movement (against the Japanese invasion) in 1919, the post-*Sewol* candlelight protests of 2016–2017, Korean Me Too movements in 2018, and so on. Even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Korean women in their households have been working at the frontline to save their families by taking care of family members while at the same time often working outside the home in all different occupations. Seventy percent of the world's health and medical workers who are active at the forefront of COVID-19 are women.

32. Keller, *Facing Apocalypse*, 185.

33. See Oh, "Salim, Women, and Oikos," 52.

34. See Oh, *A Postcolonial Theology of Life*, 36.

Women are showing their capabilities as agents in overcoming this pandemic and incumbent geopolitical crisis.

Learning from Korean women's *salim* activities (including healing and caring for all along with environmental movements) as subjects of *Life* throughout the male-dominant history and global patriarchy, I call for a new name of my theological method, "*salim* theology," which embraces Asian comparative, postcolonial, and ecofeminist theological method.

Using a comparative theological method, I used *salim* as the philosophical underpinning for the argument that all forms of life are equal and divine comparing with the process/Whiteheadian "God of becoming." The Korean term *hanul* (the divine) is actually the divine immanence in one's body in terms of practicing the divine ethics as "godding" rather than a transcendental omnipotent God. Indeed, "godding" is *salim* (enlivening and healing). *There is divinity in the act of cooking rice, and there is rice in divinity.* God is embodied in a woman of *salim*, cooking rice over a stove, weaving clothes, recycling, reusing, recreating, caring, and healing *Life*. In this aspect, "God is a gerund or a verb," which resonates with God for process theologians who are at once eternal, and becoming is "a living process of interaction."[35]

Second, a theology of *salim* is also a postcolonial theology. I introduced such Korean Indigenous concepts as *Donghak* (Eastern learning), *salim*, *bab* (rice/foods), and *hanul* (the divine), which are not only contextually relevant for Korean *Minjung* theology but also conceptually heavy-lifting in terms of postcolonial theology. Both postcolonial studies and a theology of *salim are* concerned mostly with the physical and spiritual suffering and degradation caused by oppression of those whom we deem to be "subaltern." Going one step forward, we need to think of human's colonization and subalternization over more-than-human. The same colonial mindsets have created similar damaging illusions about human mastery over nature. *Salim* as *Life* (process of becoming) enlivens "one and many," "*Nature* as the symbiotic organism of all." As I mentioned earlier, Korean women's *salim* movements arise from *salim* spirituality. *Salim* creates and recreates life abundantly and sustainably in terms of quality, and heals and overcomes the brokenness of natural harmony. The holistic vision of my *salim* theology inseparably embraces the theological method I proposed in the beginning of this chapter. Therefore, *salim* theology is a comparative postcolonial ecofeminist theology, a theology of Life.

Notwithstanding, *salim* should not belong to women or humans only. We all are and should be subjects of *salim* (enlivening practice) and healing or *salim* for healing our extended/expanding planetary family. Going beyond a narrow and gendered meaning of *salim* as simply women's mundane household tasks, a concept that could easily be degraded along with the women to

35. Keller, *On the Mystery*, 23.

whom it normally applies, *salim* can and should be reimagined in a broad sense to indicate all activities that are critically and caringly directed toward realizing a sustainable planetary living.[36] Embracing the other is a way of living and expanding self with others as a transcending whole via our symbiotic care. Nonetheless, it has become more and more difficult to touch the other under self-quarantine to prevent the spread of pandemic virus. Above all, the scarier thing must be demonic ideologies that separate us from a community of *salim* (enlivening). *Salim* can be transformed into a tremendously powerful healing energy of *Life* when we all together (the triadic unity of cosmos, humans, and myriad things, *theo-anthropo-cosmos*) participate in holistic eco-caring activities and create therapeutic communities of symbiosis, which is *missio Dei* in our time.

Bibliography

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2004.

———. "Mourning Is a Political Act amid the Pandemic and its Disparities," *Culture and Media*, *Truthout*, April 30, 2020, https://truthout.org/articles/judith-butler-mourning-is-a-political-act-amid-the-pandemic-and-its-disparities/ (last accessed 20 February 2022).

———. "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26:2 (2012), 134–51. doi:10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0134.

Ho, Wan-Li. *Ecofamilism: Women, Religion, and Environmental Protection in Taiwan*. St. Petersburg: Three Pines, 2016.

Jung, Carl G. "Foreword." In *The Book of Changes*, translated by Richard Wilhelm, xxii–xxv. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.

Keller, Catherine, and Laurel C. Schneider, eds. *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation.* London: Routledge, 2011.

———. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming.* New York: Routledge, 2003.

———. *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2021.

———. "The Gallop of the Pale Green Horse: Pandemic, Pandomonium and Panentheism." In *Pandemic, Ecology and Theology: Perspectives on COVID-19*, edited by Alexander J. B. Hampton, 41–53. London: Routledge, 2021.

———. *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.

———. "Pandemic Pandemonium." In *ABC blog, Religion and Ethics*, May 2020. https://www.abc.net.au/religion/pandemic-pandemonium-catherine-keller/12281594.

Kim, Heup Young. *A Theology of Dao.* Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017.

Kwok, Pui-lan. "Claiming a Boundary Existence: A Parable from Hong Kong." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3:2 (1980), 121–24.

———. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000.

———. *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unravelling Empire for a Global World*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021.

Oh, Jea Sophia. *A Postcolonial Theology of Life: Planetarity East and West*. Upland: Sopher, 2011.

———. "Salim, Women, and Oikos." In *Valuing Lives, Healing Earth: Religion, Gender, and Life on Earth,* edited by Lilian Dube et al., 47–55. Leuven: Peeters, 2021.

36. See Oh, "Salim, Women, and Oikos," 53.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford ed. *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*. New York: Orbis, 1996.

Schneiders, Sandra M. "God Is More than Two Men and a Bird," *U.S. Catholic* (May 1990), 20–27.

Suh, David Kwang-sun. *The Korean Minjung in Christ.* Hong Kong: The Christian Conference of Asia, 1991.

Tu, Weiming. "An Anthropocosmic Perspective on Creativity," *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2 (2010), 7305–7311. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.05.084

Villarreal, Luis P. "Are Viruses Alive?," *Scientific American*, August 08 2008.

Nabgwana's Memory (Mother Earth): An Approach from the Gunadule People

Jocabed R. Solano Miselis[1]

The *Gunadule* nation located in Panama and Colombia is an ancient people that lives in Abya Yala, the name used by the *Gunadule* people to refer to the continent that known as America. Abya Yala is a land in full maturity, a vital land, a land of blood.

Gunadule spirituality is known as the Bad an Nan Igala, the path of Mom and Dad. In the social imaginary of the *Gunadule* people, the manifestation of divinity is expressed through the Great Mother and the Great Father, whom they call Nana and Baba. The divinity is Mama and Papa and is seen in daily life and in everything that the *Gunadule* people do. It is from this spiritual framework that the *Gunadul*e people for many centuries have developed their spirituality in close relationship with the land which they call *Nabgwana*, the heart of the Mother and the Father. Nabgwana is Mother Earth from the

1. Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis, from the Gunadule Indigenous nation in Panama, is a theologian, activist, and the Director of *Memoria Indígena*. She is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

How to cite: Solano Miselis, JR 2022, "Nabgwana's Memory (Mother Earth): An Approach from the Gunadule People", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?,* An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 159–176. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.08

philosophical conception of the Gunadule people. The *Gunadule* are people of the earth; we have immersed ourselves in it. We are grateful to receive the benefits of Mother Earth, and when we die we are cultivated in it, which allows us to recognize that we are the image of Mother Earth as the oral songs of the people suggest. *Gunadule* are part of the earth; we are united with it. Just as the umbilical cord unites the baby with its mother, so we understand our relationship with Mother Earth, we are united with her. That is why, in order to understand the heart of the *Gunadule* people, it is important to know the spirituality of this, one of many ancient peoples in Abya Yala, and from there recognize the wisdom to live in harmony with the land.[2]

Memory of the Earth and Its Influence on the Daily Life of the Gunadule People

From the hissing of birds, from the moaning of wild animals, from the sobbing of *dumbirgessu* trees, from the whispering Ologwadule,[3] we learn to live in harmony. We learn from what we see, what we smell, what we feel. We learn with the senses. Every story, every dance, language, food, relationship, silence, and much more make or break a nation. The grandparents of the *Gunadule* nation know this well. Therefore, since ancient times, they have worked so that the new generations can continue singing and not die.

Spirituality is important because our political actions which emanate from it are reflected in our daily lives. We do not separate public life from private. And we do not disintegrate the life of the sacred from the secular. The whole of life is sacred. Every act, no matter how small, is a political act. That is why the *Gunadule* nation is taught from childhood the importance of being a Gunadule.

The highest ethic of the *Gunadule* nation is community life. Without that community we are beings alienated by our selfishness and we have many of those stories. In the songs we are reminded of this so that we do not forget and do not repeat these stories of regret that we have lived when we have not recognized the importance of each other and one's others. Therefore, when we go to one of the sacred places of the *Gunadule* people called the *ommagenednegga* we know that paying attention is important. We hear the *sualibgan* or Suwaribgan,[4] when they alert us: *Gabidamalarggenueiddomalargge* (Pay attention, do not fall asleep). It is through this song that the community

2. For insights on the Gunadule culture and cosmology I draw from various unpublished sources as listed in the bibliography, without any particular references.

3. This is one of the 72 names that the Gunadule people give to Mother Earth.

4. Sualigban or *Suwaribgan:* custodians or guardians of the community, people in charge of putting order in the communities and of alerting the people who listen to the *saglagan* (elders in the Gunadule community) in the Gunadule general congress house.

understands what our behavior should be. Thus, we join the heart of the Great Father, the Great Mother, the heart of Ologwadule and we remember, we bring to memory, the memories of the Earth, of our grandmothers and grandfathers, their celebrations, struggles, laments, hopes, and cries of resistance. In this place and moment we live in community where co-existence is not passive; we listen actively, to the voice of God, of Mother Earth, of the cosmic community, and we recognize that Mom and Dad have been. We are invited to listen to what Mom and Dad tell us through the memory of the Earth. The secret of the *Gunadule* people has been that we listen to God[5] through the voice of mother (Mother Earth). And the invitation is that you have to listen to mom to live in harmony.

That is why we see the influence of the memory of the Earth in everything we do: from the birds, we learned to dance. One day, the children who were looking at the sky noticed that the birds were circling and they began to do the same. But they also learned to walk as birds walked, imitated their steps and jumped, and they saw that the birds looked united as if they were holding each other in their arms. So they also did the same. From the birds we learned to defend ourselves against the threats that we have experienced or are experiencing, for example, in ancient times due to the Spanish invasion, or currently due to neocolonialism or climate change. In the Gwibloni Season,[6] which is the time of the warrior birds, they defend the territory with their own lives, they fly in flocks. And we, the *Gunadule*, learned from them to defend ourselves, we know that we must live as a family, that we have to defend ourselves from the threats that want to dismantle our identity. In ancient times we defended ourselves from the genocide carried out by the conquerors. In February 1925,[7] we rose up against the Panama State that wanted to "civilize" us. The hegemonic systems have tried to superimpose their ideologies of life economically, politically, religiously, and culturally. We have been resisting and insurgent for hundreds of years, loving the Earth, defending the autonomy of the territory. We learned from the birds. They taught us the best strategy, but the same birds showed us the dangers, through their chirps and whistles, heralding good times or alerting us to prepare to face an extremely dry season, when *gigga*[8] flew very low and almost brushed against a person and with desperate shrieks, presaged something very unpleasant, a surprise that could be violent. But if it gurgled with slow and paused whistles, it was a sign of a pleasant message, maybe there was a herd of peccaries a short

5. For the Gunadule people God is known as Nana and Baba.

6. *Gwiblonii*: in this month, due to the abundance of butterflies, the birds (gwiblo) come down. They fly in flocks. In the Gregorian calendar it would be October.

7. The revolution of 1925 was carried out by the Gunas against the Panamanian state.

8. *Gigga*: a messenger bird that alerts the Gunadule people to danger.

distance away.[9] We, the *Gunadule*, perceive the combat and the message as signals to be alert.

We also plant timber trees such as *binnuwar* (espavé), *gaobanwar* (mahogany), *urwar* (cedar), and *nugnuwar* (ceiba). The canoes, for the *Gunadule* people, are a sign of autonomy because they are used for work and daily transportation. Trees have been among us and interacting with them gives us life. For this reason, most of the territories in the Gunadule nation are not inhabited by the *Gunadule*, because the earth is sacred, and this land is inhabited by other living beings with whom we maintain a harmonious relationship. These lands are full of trees and medicinal plants. Medicinal plants are sacred texts that tell us about health, strength, energy, and vital air that we can breathe to live. Medicinal plants are female and are our great protectors. Memory tells that Inabundorgan (women specialists in guna medicine) went down late at night, while the evil spirits slept. And when they woke up, they heard thousands of female voices singing beautiful melodies and they were such plants. For this reason, before uprooting the medicinal plants, a dialogue is held with them, and Mom and Dad are invoked together with them.[10]

Indigenous knowledge about medicines is ancestral and has been transmitted from generation to generation. An inaduled[11] claims to be a "a *duleina* dreamer" and remembers that "I learned everything from my ancestors for 20, 30 years and I continue to learn other treatises, and I did not study for ten years, as happens in waga universities.[12] Our forest is a true university, there we practice and extract ina (medicine)." Another *inaduled* comments that, "the ancestral knowledge in our ina does not exist, the ancestral is the present, it always exists (...) because our ina is an entire health system that has been kept alive thanks to the effort and defense that we have made through the centuries."

This is a timeless wisdom, it is a wisdom that comes from Nabgwana—Mother Earth. My grandfather Guillermo Solano was an *inaduled* who knew the properties of plants. One of the recipes he recommends for sterile men and women is to mix dagamo[13] (bark), male fern, banana, add it to water, *urua* (leaves), *sugsukan* (little crabs), tree bark and cut it into pieces, *maro*.[14]

9. Martínez, *The Legacy of the Grandparents*, 71.

10. Martínez, *The Legacy of the Grandparents*, 71.

11. *Inaduled:* A person knowledgeable about medicinal plants, the one who cures.

12. *Wagas*: foreigner, ladino, non-guna, non-Indigenous.

13. *Calycophyllum candidissimum* is a species tree belonging to the Rubiaceae family.

14. For Maro as a medicinal plant, see https://www.tusplantasmedicinales.com/maro/ (last accessed 10 February 2022). This is not a verified recipe and the proper process to make this is not explained here, because I am not an *inadule*. The only intention is to point out and describe the importance of plants for the Gunadule people, not the process.

The *Abior*[15] is a medicinal herb *and* the plant parts used as medicine are the stem and leaves crushed in cooking; the extract obtained is used as a lotion for the treatment of skin peeling (falling epidermis). It is also recognized as an effective remedy against other skin conditions. The leaves, dried at room temperature, are pulverized over a fire and then used as talc to spread to the affected parts.[16]

There are many recipes that are used for respiratory ailments, stomach ailments, headaches, rheumatism, and skin ailments. In addition to the relationship with the medicinal plant, there are also medicinal baths that help to give people energy. When I was a child I bathed frequently with these medicinal plants, as my grandfather used to say, to have strength. One day, I was in the house together with my sisters. Mom and Dad told us that Grandpa called the whole family. It is one of these experiences that impact you and you do not forget. I was nine years old and when I entered the house of my grandmother and grandfather, the whole family was gathered. From the oldest to the smallest. Grandpa told us a story about the importance of plants and trees and gave us a medicinal drink called *Nigoganoee*. It was to give us strength. When it was my turn, I really did not want to take it, but I had no choice because it was a time when we all *came together* through the roots of the plants and recognized that this medicine is good for us. Memories give energy and *Ologwadule* has an energy that feeds us and sustains life.

If we listened to *Muubilli* (grandmother sea) when she speaks, she would tell us our story. If the canoes recorded memories, they would reveal to us the secret of the peoples who have lived surrounded by the sea, they would tell us a story that has never been heard, of the people who saw their freedom fighting and always finding themselves and the other, paddling on the high seas. The sea is known as "Muubilli" and his mother "muuOsis"; she is the great-grandmother who looks after her grandchildren and protects the marine abysses and their species. That is why the grandparents speak of caring for the seas, so that the great-grandmother distributes better the marine species. She is protecting them. The grandparents say that everything is complemented on *Ologwadule*.[17] According to the *argar*, once the earth settled down and began to rotate more slowly, the wind created the sea and its functioning.

15. *Abior*: Lizard eye, scientific name: *Dieffenbachiapittierin*. It is a herb between 40 cm and 50 cm tall and any part of the plant, when cut, produces a very strong and irritating odor. It is found on the banks of rivers, in open areas and under the shade.

16. See http://gubiler.blogspot.com/2011/06/plantas-de-uso-tradicional-en-la.html (last accessed 10 February 2022).

17. Martínez, *The Legacy of the Grandparents*, 103.

With the help of the wind, water and coral reefs appeared.[18] The sea is a fertile place, where many creatures are born and develop. The sea is the place where the *Gunadule* people look for fish, lobster, or shrimp to feed the people. In addition, it is a mysterious place; it contains many stories about mermaids and fishermen. In the congress house, the *saglas* speak of the importance of the sea and the residents are urged to take care of it. And since the sea is the grandmother, it is compared to the story that, just as grandmothers love their grandchildren, we should love the grandmother. It is not a utilitarian relationship but a close family relationship. There are many animals that, in the *Gunadule* stories, are used to compare and help us learn some lesson of moral character, as is the case of the shark.

Gunadules should not be tricky and aggressive like the shark, nor should spouses fight like rays. Problems among couples should be resolved without violence. There is an animal that is very dear to the *Gunadule* people. It is from the Bindipilele dolphin (*Uagi*) that we learn to live in harmony and peace. In addition, the *Uagi*, together with the stork, is the one who brings the *Gunadule* babies.[19] From different animals we learn different lessons for life. The interpretation made by our old men and women gives the word the spirit of us, us and the Earth, because for the *Gunadule* the stories are not just stories, fables, or myths: every time we tell a story the words become alive; we are united with Mother Earth when we tell these stories. We say: *Son Yar Burba, Anmar Burba* (Spirit of the Earth, our Spirit). There is a character in the *Gunadule* stories who is very important because he had extraordinary gifts. He is Wagibler who knew about life, songs, and the flight of birds. He interpreted for the community of Darganguyal the language of the turtle doves, the low or calm whistle of the canaries, the violent creak of the jaguars, the screech of the monkeys, the flapping of the *turpiales*. He knew the axes of the universe, the various forms of *Ologwadule* communication, studied the roundness of the Earth, and scrutinized the laws followed by birds. He taught: "Early in the morning the birds leave their nests and cry out with their whistles to Baba and flutter about looking for food for their little ones. They bring you worms. They don't eat first; they let their youngsters feed first."[20] It is one of his teachings to show the responsibility of the community toward the little ones. Those who live in a close relationship with Mother Earth have a life experience that allows them to hear the voice of Mother Earth. Animals, plants such as chili conguito, cocoa, have names of people because they are considered animated beings.

18. Mauri, *Kuna Yala, Land of the Sea*, 33.

19. "Song to the dolphins (Uagi Bibiye)-Gunayala." Video on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bxRxzHzEp8.

20. Wagua, *In Defense of Life and its Harmony*, 50.

To understand the Ologwadule, it is necessary to understand several stages in its evolution: growing, having children, fighting with the "animal men" that look like humans or behave like humans. The stories, for the most part, speak of the maturation process of Mother Earth. Through the behavior of animals we learn about the morals and ethics of life. Animals respond to our care, to our tenderness. That tenderness must be expressed when interacting with animals. Animals also show their anger, they understand our rage and suffer with us.

Gunadule Values that We Have Learned from the Memory of Mother Earth

Among the values that are learned from the memory of the Earth, we highlight that of being a faithful companion of their fathers and mothers at work. It is necessary to value work, learn the techniques of cultivating the land and fishing, recognize the benefits offered by Mother Earth, obey the elders, and leave no room for laziness. We must be supportive and share what we have because what we have belongs to everyone. There is no need to hoard because generosity comes from Mother Earth. You must love parents and the elderly, help the elderly and not let them carry heavy things, respect the fruits and trees of those who work the Earth; it is not okay to make fun of the elderly because we will all grow old one day, nor to make fun of others. You have to be a person of your word, words have power. It is necessary to feel the pain of others. When laughing, do it in a moderate way so as not to disturb others. The elders teach: "*Get up before the sun rises, shake off laziness and sweep the house and the streets.*" The practice of getting up early before the sun rises is to teach the disciplined life to work the Earth. Grandmas say: "You must take a bath before the sun rises, otherwise you will be lazy." The father tells the child: "I will not last long, I must teach you how to plant bananas, cocoa, corn." The boys, at the age of nine, already know how to cultivate the Earth, just like the girls. They also know how important it is to manage the house. To be a man or a woman among the *Gunadule* people is to know about life and that means knowing the Earth, cultivating it and knowing how to manage the house. When the young man and the young woman grow up they can be autonomous and live because their relationship with the Earth is very close.

Hammock Singing Method to Listen to the Biblical Story

From this approach of how the *Gunadule* people living in the cosmos with the cosmic community, I would like to propose a reading of the book of Genesis from a *Gunadule* perspective. For this I propose a method, the song of

the hammock. This methodology is based on *Gunadule* orality by transmitting from generation to generation the Guna treatises that express, through a language and logic very typical of the Gunadule people, the path of Nana and Baba, which means Mother and Father, the name for the Supreme Being, as mentioned earlier. From this feeling of the cosmos we can weave our own wisdom to continue learning from the sap of the *Gunadule* tree. I apply this wisdom to read the text prioritizing the voices of the grandmothers.

Among the *Gunadule* people, since ancient times, song specialists have transmitted oral stories in various ways to others who want to specialize in songs. But they have also been passed on to the community in other ways. These ancestral pedagogies have allowed the *Gunadule* nation to continue maintaining its identity. If we believe that it is necessary for Indigenous communities to be able to read the biblical text based on their identity, it is necessary to explore methods that are part of the community that help in the interpretation of biblical texts. For this I would like to propose an autochthonous hermeneutic method to read the Bible among the *Gunadule* people that allows us to approach the reality of life of the *Gunadule* nation.

The hammock singing method alludes to the singing performed by the *saglas* in the *Gunadule* house of congress. Their ancestral songs are sung, including the story of Ologwadule, Igwasalibler, Ibeorgún, Giggardiryai, and Duiren, among many others.[21] The *Gunadule* people have learned to live life through songs. They are sung since being in the mother's womb and when we are girls and boys. They teach us to sing, they sing to us so that our spirit, the *Gunadule* being, does not die; "we sing so as not to die." In the hammock, a sacred place for the *Gunadule* people, the grandmother rocks the grandchildren, the mother sings to the new-born baby and the growing infant, the Guna doctors (*inadule*) sing for the sick to heal. God speaks to us singing. God's rhythmic language proposes us the song to dance in life. And in singing we can connect with the heart of God.

It is a community that sings. That is why it is said that we sing so as not to die. The hammock is a sacred space that reminds us of the Earth that rocks in the cosmos. When you sing in the hammock you connect with Nana and Baba; it is therefore a sacred place. When I thought about this methodology I also considered how some parallels could be used to make it easier to apply the method. As in the Bible, there are founding stories in the *Gunadule* nation. The method may best be structured to then also allow working within the structure. That is why I propose elements in this method to consider when interpreting the biblical text. Here I mention only two elements of this proposal, which is developed further elsewhere.[22]

21. These are leaders of the Gunadule people who have influenced spirituality and, therefore, Gunadule politics.

22. See Solano, "Ologwadule-y-Genesis."

Gunadule Grandmothers and Grandfathers

What presuppositions would a Guna grandmother have when she hears this biblical story for the first time, without the influence of an intermediary who explains the meaning of the biblical text? The grandmother as a hermeneut, as a voice that speaks from her community, in this case as part of a *Gunadule* community, is the voice of the grandmothers and grandfathers. Their voice allows us to have new views of a passage and open up a world of possibilities that we would not imagine because only they have a cosmos existence, a very particular worldview that allows us to understand the biblical text in the light of the story of Ologwadule. Recognizing this is important because it leads us to reflect on the theological assumptions from where we start. In this proposal we recognize a God who is revealed to humanity in a particular culture, adopting the language and the symbolic universe of the people. God has made Godself known. God is the one who has communicated in many ways since ancient times (Heb 1:1a) and continues to communicate today in various ways. God is the one who is very interested in being known to humanity. God is not a respecter of persons and does not privilege some cultures over others when communicating because God is the God of all humanity. God's intention is to speak in a way that could be understood. God is not in favor of colonization, nor of colonialities and epistemicides. Several questions can be explored here: Is it possible for God to speak to Indigenous peoples from the stories of the Gunadule people? Is it possible for God to speak to us about a cosmogonic story like that of the people of Israel, to *Gunadules* who listen to this story from their presuppositions? Could it be that the life experiences of a people other than Israel can also be the manifestations of the Spirit of Life in that people? Who can assure that the ancestral peoples who lived in Abya Yala did not come to know "the God of the Bible," either via natural revelation or via hermeneutical mediations similar to those I am proposing? If we prioritize the voice of the grandmother, we must take into account these questions.

Principles of Reference of the Gunadule Nation in Their Stories and Memories

Each town has ways to think about its own culture. God for the *Gunadule* people is Nana and Baba (the Great Mother and the Great Father). The emphasis in their stories is Nana and Baba, Mother Earth. Mother Earth has different names according to the cycles that the Earth has experienced. Ologwadule (Mother Earth) has its origin in the act of love of the Great Mother and the Great Father; the Great Mother had her in her mother's womb. The existence of the Earth has implications of relationship in community. Water is life, the human being is the image and likeness of Mother Earth; the different names of Mother Earth tell us about her origin. From there the biblical text can

be analyzed in the light of prioritizing the voices of the grandmothers and the *guna* stories.

An Analysis of Genesis 1:1–3 Using the Hammock Singing Method

First you hear the oral story:

a. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
b. And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
c. And God said: Let there be light; and it was light (KJV).

Then we must take into account the reference principles of the *Gunadule* nation in their stories and memory, prioritizing the voice of the grandmother, the grandfather with this question: How would my grandmother listen to the story of Genesis 1:1–3 from her symbolic universe? What is your perception of God? Who is God and what is God like according to grandmother's symbolic universe? If God is Nana and Baba (Mom and Dad), what does creation mean to Grandma *Gunadule*?

For the Gunadule nation there can be no creation of the Earth without relationship, without union, without communion of Mom and Dad as a deep act of love, which in human language is expressed through the sexual act, which reaches its climax with the pleasure of Mom and Dad to gestate the Earth.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." For the *Gunadule*, this expresses that every living being that exists in the cosmos arises from the creation of the Earth. This creation of Nabba (Earth) opens a range of meanings because the Earth from the Gunadule conception means the Earth when it was created and the processes of how it was created. This illustrates why, in this hermeneutical method, the terms of reference are important. The grandmother and the grandfather have a broad vision of the Earth and that breadth is expressed very well in the different names of Earth. Therefore, the word "created" has very particular connotations: "Created" and "Earth." "God created" leads the grandmother to think about all the cycles that Nabgwana has lived through. According to the symbolic universe of the *Gunadule* people, Nabba comes etymologically from the name of Nana (the Great Mother) and Baba (the Great Father) (whereas "God" expressed the Westernized Supreme Being). When an elision is formed, the word "Nabba" arises, which means that the earth is the heart of Mom and Dad. The earth comes from God. This gestation process that occurs from the consummation of love of the Great Mother and the Great Father gives rise to the earth. This land, in order to be born, had to go through the gestation process in the womb of the Great Mother. Therefore, the Great Mother had the earth in her womb and from her

receives her essence and image, who is God, but the Father was accompanying her and taking care of her during her gestation. Therefore, the memory of the earth has its essence in the Great Mother and the Great Father. The memories of her, of Ologawadule in her gestation stage, are in Nana's womb. When the grandmother and the grandfather hear that God created the heavens and the earth, they know that the earth (Ologwadule) had other names that can broaden the meaning of this creation process.

For the Gunadule nation, the land has different names. The name that best expresses this moment of creation, that of Olodilisob, tells us that wisdom begins from Nana's womb and that the Earth is then a living being that feels, thinks, relates, and therefore communicates. In the womb of the Great Mother she takes care of herself, the whole Earth grows, it is made in image and likeness of the Great Mother (Nana). The word "sob" means to create. The shape of the earth is round (*olo*); this suggests a sense of importance, illustrated by the Gunadule metaphor of the spinal column.

The word "dii" which means "water" and "lili" (beginning) expresses that the beginning of the Earth originated with water, in a narrow place such as the womb. The Spirit of God in *Gunadule* is understood as the power of God, the force of Mom and Dad moving on the origin of life (water). Mom and Dad moved over the waters and are the origin of the life that emerged in the creation of the Earth. But this Earth, which was in the womb, was born. The *Gunadule* word that best expresses this moment of Ologwadule (Mother Earth) is Ologwadilyay/Manigwadilyay. It is the second name given to Mother Earth and refers to how the earth, gelatinous and slippery, gradually hardened. "Gwadil" means that the liquid mass began to curdle, to harden; that is to say, that Mother Earth began to have her own body.[23] This is the moment when Earth was ready for giving birth. The word "yay(a)" means hole, opening and emphasizes that the opening expands so that Ologwadule is born. So the Great Mother is ready for the birth of her daughter Nabba (daughter of the Great Mother and the Great Father), therefore in the image of God. In the Gunadule nation, the grandparents remind us that every time a Gunadule woman gives birth, she is recalling the birth of Ologwadule, Mother Earth. Every time a woman giving birth resignifies the sublime act of God to create. When midwives receive the baby, they remember that giving birth is an act of giving life and that if women stop giving birth, we will be close to the end of humanity. Each childbirth is an act of creation that is recreated day by day both in the human being and in every living being that has this capacity that comes from God.

Every living being that is born from the Earth therefore cannot live without the Earth, because this would lead us to a feeling of emptiness. Without the

23. Green, "Meanings of Life," 83, 84.

Earth, without Ologwadule, there is no life. Without the Great Mother and the Great Father (God), Ologwadule would not exist. Our origin is in the Earth, but the origin of the Earth is in God, and if we are part of the Earth our origin is from God. We are the image and likeness of the Earth, as the Earth reflects the image and likeness of God. Therefore, the crisis that humanity is experiencing is due to forgetting its relationship with mother (Earth), as a being that has its essence in God. The crisis then is the crisis of not understanding the community in terms of a harmonious relationship between God (Nana and Baba), the Earth (Ologwadule), and us, as part of it. When we understand that feeling of emptiness that exists without the Earth, we will understand that we cannot exist without it. Recognizing the meanings of the words "created" and "Earth," we can see that the Gunadule's relationship with Ologwadule has other dimensions and implications. The varied and rich connotations of "grandmother" are fundamental for hermeneutics.

The dialogue between these understandings and the Genesis text is a dialogue between oral traditions and written tradition based on orality. The understandings of grandmother are located in oral tradition. When we enter the world of orality we must keep in mind another essential element, namely to know the rhythm of the story. In order to recognize its rhythm, it is necessary to be silent, to listen, as an act of praying in community, where we recognize the sacredness of the story as a life experience of a community whose memory is linked to Ologwadule as the mother is united with the baby in her mother's womb.

For the Gunadule people, when the grandfather and grandmother sing, there is silence and it is recognized that what is to be sung is sacred. In this case, the cosmogonic story that will be heard is that of Genesis 1:1–2:15, a story that was constructed from other cosmogonic stories of peoples of Mesopotamia.[24] Now the grandmother is a participant in this story that introduces her to a new panorama of experiences that is the Gunadule's life, the understanding of the beginning of the cosmos, and the Gunadule's understanding of God and of the Earth. Dialoguing with this story from our experience and being participants in an intercultural dialogue now allow us to be enriched and enrich our view of God and of the Earth and to live more fully on Earth. When a *Gunadule* hears the expression "and God said," he knows that in the rhythm of the story what is going to be said is important, because it is the source of life for everything, even Ologwadule (Mother Earth). When Mom and Dad talk, they do not just use words and it is not just about the Word; they create with the fullness of their senses. When the God-Community creates, he thinks, he says, but his own story is manifested in God-Community, that is, in what God says is what God is.

24. This multiplicity of cosmological texts is not peculiar to Israel. It can also be seen in Egypt, in the Near East, and further afield in India, in China, and even in Africa. See Castel, *Beginnings*.

On the other hand, "the light" responds to the mandate in an active way. It is the action of the one who orders and Mother Earth obeys creating light, becoming Ologwadule, co-creator with Mom and Dad as creators who give creative capacity to the Earth, so that there is light. Every living being responds to God's mandate, bringing reciprocity in the language of the sender and the one who receives. The one who receives the message acts by responding to the sender. In this way, they enter into the dance of the relationship that develops with Mom and Dad, who collaborate creating everything and giving creation capabilities. The Spirit is the power that gives energy, that is, life. Therefore, the Earth is a living being that feels, thinks, obeys, is reciprocal, and is thankful.

In verse 3 the principle of reciprocity can be observed. God is the source of all things, the Earth responds. He says "Let there be light" and the light exists. The Earth responds to the mandate. In various psalms we can see the articulation between God and creation with rhythms, with dances. God has a relationship with the Earth and therefore with the human being who is part of it. For the Gunadule people, this light is the path to a new dawn because light is understood as the path that leads us to live in community. Darkness is a symbol of emptiness and chaos. When there is no light, there is darkness. It is because we do not live in community, because we cannot see each other and we do not recognize each other. In the story of Ologwadule, it is said that in the beginning, everything was dark, a darkness as thick as if both hands were squeezing your two eyes. Genesis 1:1–2:15 relates that, in the beginning, the Earth was without form and empty. The story of Ologwadule suggests that darkness, emptiness, and disorder occur when one lives in chaos, without community life. That is why an important hermeneutical criterion is to listen to the founding story in the light of other stories. In the case of the Bible, this includes reading the text in the light of other canonical texts. Doing so helps us to discern what it means not to live as community. Several biblical stories illumine times when the Gunadule people lived in chaos because they did not live in community.

"And God said: Let there be light; and it was light." This verse expresses the path for a new dawn because if the passage says that the Earth was disordered and empty, it is worth asking what that sense of emptiness and disorder entails. A Gunadule grandmother would perhaps think of some re-readings of other stories that shed light on this question. For the *Gunadule*, disorder, chaos, and emptiness come with violent systems that oppress. This characterizes people who do not live in community and covet everything for themselves. That is to say, if the greatest ethic of *Gunadule* life is life in community, the worst thing that can happen to us is to live without community and this is what produces emptiness and the exploitation of the Earth because we attack the mother. For the *Gunadule*, the Earth is Mother because it was formed and learned to receive love from God (Nana and Baba). When the

Earth is born, God overflows with joy and the Earth feels full when it is able to act as its creator acts, because it shows signs of God.

These signs of God can be felt in the rhythm of the story and this story can be understood from the perception of Gunadule time. Given the story's cycle, one may also consider of the role of a spiral that is typical of an Indigenous worldview. For the Gunadule, time is perceived in a spiral manner; the image of the snail is used in dimensions where time goes, returns, passes, returns, passes, and returns. It is in the center of the snail that everything begins and returns. Time is not conceived as a linear production process where "progress" makes its nest. Progress together with production instrumentalizes the Earth and every living being. Accordingly, we are because we progress and we produce. The spiral gaze of time frees us from the gaze of progress, seeing the human being as a being that advances to a better state. According to the lens of progress, "development" is linked to competition but detaches us from memory, history, and origin. A Gunadule spiral concept of time clashes with the myth of progress in the West that requires a linear and ascending concept of time.

Following the rhythm of the story, we can become part of the narrative so that it encompasses the one who tells it and, later, the one who listens to it. The listeners are not passive entities because they are people who have a transforming function in the place where they live and coexist with the symbolic pluriverse of the *Gunadule*. That implies that the autonomy that each receiver has, is dynamic.

The narrator unites with the person who originally narrated that story and the listener dialogues with the narrator. In addition, as the *Gunadule* are a people of poets, our songs include poetry, color, images, symbolism, contrasts, imagination, magic, amazement, perplexity, the hidden, the mysterious, and the sensual. In the *Gunadule* perspective, the symbolism of the poetry in Genesis 1:1–2:15 allows us to imagine the experiences of the poet. Hearing that God saw that the light was good evokes the beauty of creation. The Great Mother, the Great Father has made everything beautiful, the grandfather sings.[25] Every detail heard, every act of creation is good and beautiful. The rhythms of the separation of light and darkness point out the importance of each moment. "The voice of God is heard everywhere," sings the grandfather, "we can hear his voice in the plants, rivers, mountains, in the animals, in the birds." For the *Gunadule* people "and God said," means the song of God:

> God sang and life arose. God was inspired and sang, sang and created life. His voice orchestrated the symphony that we had never heard, life brought to the entire cosmos. The beginning of the note was good living, Shalom, peace for all. The waves of his rising voice mixed with color bringing greenery, fruit, movement, the waters

25. Phrase adopted from a Gunadule chant.

> moved over the face of the abyss. Yes, there was movement of life everywhere. Diversity was part of this majestic moment and it kept multiplying, new shapes, new colors, new sounds, new flavors. Heaven and earth came together to witness this work of art.[26]

When God says something you have to listen carefully. That is why when grandpa sings and someone falls asleep in the Gunadule congress house, you listen to the *sualibed* who says *Gabbidalamargge Nuevaritomalo* (do not fall asleep, pay attention). The *sualibed* is a person who, among his functions, has to ensure that everyone is attentive and does not miss this spiritual moment. He wakes up those who fall asleep because Grandpa has something important to say from God. "God said" is a sacred expression for the *Gunadule*. When the Great Mother and the Great Father speak, their daughters and sons listen to their wisdom, the wisdom that was in the beginning (Prov 8:30). "And God said" expresses the feeling of God as a God who likes to create while playing. This God created the heavens and the earth in the beginning, with tenderness. Each layer of Earth, dressed in gold and silver, shows us in Gunadule thought the tenderness and importance of the earth. Each part that constitutes it is made with great care. God is like the potter who kneads the clay to give himself and show the best of the clay's essence. God continued recounting his poem and God said: "And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:12, KJV). The Earth, as creator of life, was not alone the creator; God gives Earth the ability to co-create with the Great Mother and the Great Father. It is the Earth that creates the food so that we human beings can eat; the *Gunadule* story says that we receive goods from her. The Earth gives us milk and breastfeeds us, that is why she is Mama. In the *Gunadule* story, the emphasis is on the Earth. She received the gift of God to create, give, care, feed, protect, and speak of his glory. That is why she has God's image.

In the *Gunadule* story, there have been different moments in the creation process until humanity emerges as one of the newest creations. So how can we think that we human beings are the "crown of creation" if the Earth has existed long before us and has lived without us for a long time? In this maturation process, the Earth continues to create, because the Great Father and the Great Mother gave it the capacity to continue creating when they gave it life, their breath is in it. In the beginning, when God created, according to the Christian faith he did so in community, the Triune God participated in creation. For the *Gunadule* people, creation was made by the Great Mother and the Great Father, and by giving life to the Earth, the community spread. Not only God created, the earth creates together with God and it is this

26. See Jocabed Solano's personal blog, "God sang", https://jocabedsolano.com/ (translated from the Spanish original, last accessed 12 February 2021).

reproductive capacity that we see with new species that emerge in different epochs.

Therefore, a sense of intimate community is expressed in the *Gunadule* story. There can be no creation without community. Genesis declares that God saw that everything was very good. God celebrated and contemplated what was created. In celebrating the art that God creates, the *Gunadule* express satisfaction with the words "and the flowers celebrated and there was a great party." This is the cosmic community party. Then God rested, as the culminating act of his creation. For the *Gunadule* celebration also means rest, because they can only contemplate when they can feel the Earth. When *Gunadule* grandmothers and grandfathers mention that they are feeling the *nega* (home), it is a deeply spiritual act that is done in silence, where they can feel the cosmos. It is difficult to explain the experience in words.[27]

Conclusion

For the *Gunadule*, among the Indigenous peoples of Abya Yala, the Spirit of Life has been interweaving the ways we live.[28] We can recognize the Spirit of Life in everyday life, in the close relationship with Mother Earth. This essay has not *described* a method of doing ecotheology; rather it has *expressed* or *practiced* or *manifest* a method. One might call that method a hermeneutics of relationship with Earth, or rather a hermeneutics of communal intergenerational relationship with Earth. Said differently, this essay is an example of doing theology through relationship with the Earth that is intimately communal and extends from ancient times into the future. It is a way of doing theology that sees and knows all of reality—be it God, the cosmos, the Bible, daily life, or existence itself—through communal time-unlimited intimacy with Earth as parent, teacher, creator, and sacred guide. In this sense, all theology is ecotheology. We note other central features of this method, rooted in the ancient wisdom and practice of the Gunadule. Song and story are integral to hearing and knowing God. So too are memory and all of the senses, and no distinction separates sacred from secular.

Learning from the ancient Indigenous wisdom in the Abya Yala reveals the Indigenous face of God. This enriches and fertilizes the global church with Indigenous theologies. Moreover, other societies may be enriched by learning from Gunadule ways of living and relating in community in a holistic and

27. Interview with Avelino Brenes.

28. Cosmovivencia refers to the intrinsic relationship of the Gunadule people from their wisdom and relationship with Nana and Baba, Mother Earth, and the communities of living beings fertilized by the Gunadule spirituality in daily life. This term is used in contrast to cosmovision, which is a Western term that focuses on the source of knowledge in what is observed, while Indigenous people posit that cosmovivencia (literally translated "living in the cosmos") recognizes the Indigenous ways of knowing life through all the senses.

complementary way, honoring the sacredness of the land, being fed and guided by the wisdom of Mother Earth, and being in relationship with the Creator. This may enable all of us to learn to live in harmony and balance with all creation.

Bibliography

Castel, François. *Beginnings: The First Eleven Chapters of Genesis*. Pamplona: Divine Word, 2016.

——. "The Word became India", *Magazine of Latin American Interpretation*. Quito: DEI, 2001b.

Green, Abbadio. "Meanings of Life: Mirror of our Memory in Defense of Mother Earth." D.Ed. thesis in Intercultural Studies, University of Antioquia, 2011. ("Significados de vida: Espejo de nuestra memoria en defensa de la madre tierra." D.Ed. thesis, Estudios Interculturales, Universidad de Antioquia, 2011.)

Guerrero Arias, Patrick. *The Chakana of the Heart*. Quito: Abya Yala, 2018.

Martínez, Atilion. *The Legacy of the Grandparents*. Panama: EBI Guna Team, 2012.

Mauri, Mónica Martínez. *Kuna Yala, Land of the Sea*. Quito: Abya Yala, 2011.

Solano, Jocabed. "Dulamar gagga: anmar bubble gangued Abya Yalagi" (Indigenous Voices: Spiritual Strength of the Peoples of Abya Yala). The Global Church Project (2018). https://theglobalchurchproject.com/jocabed-english/ (last accessed 12 February 2022).

——. "La Memoria de la Madre Tierra: Relato de Nana Ologwadule y de Génesis" ("The Memory of Mother Earth: Story of Nana Ologwadule and Genesis 1–2:15". Masters thesis, Community of Interdisciplinary Theological Studies, 2021.

——. "Las narrativas como resistencia política – La experiencia de la nación Gunadule". In *Juventudes: Otras voces, nuevos espacios Confrontando la teología y la mission*, edited by Priscila Barredo Pantí and Nicolás Panotto, 65–77. Lima: Ediciones FTL, 2018.

Ventocilla, José, Heraclio Herrera, and Valerio Núñez. *The Spirit of the Earth: Plants and Animals in the Life of the Kuna People*. Quito: Abya Yala, 1999.

Wagua, Aiban. *In Defense of Life and its Harmony*. Panama City: EBI Guna Project/Panamanian Hispanic Mixed Fund, 2011.

——. *That's how I Saw it and that's how they Told Me*. Panama City: Mixed Hispanic-Panamanian Cooperation Fund, 2007.

Unpublished Sources

The Gunadule people have two important congresses, the congress of culture Onmaged Namaggaled and Congress General from Gunayala (Onmaggeddummad Sunmaggaled). The General Congress of Guna Culture, better known as Onmaggeddummad Namaggaled, is the highest cultural and spiritual organization of Gunayala, which has the main mission of protecting, consolidating and developing all cultural expressions, among other knowledge. Its existence dates back many years, but in 1972, in the community of Gardi Sugdub, it was reorganized and institutionalized. The oral songs mentioned form part of such cultural congresses where experts of the Guna oral songs would sing them. On occasion there are comments from other specialists. These were recorded at different times when the Guna leaders gathered. In Gunadule education, oral songs are collective memories of the experiences of

the Gunadule people in different situations. These are taught from generation to generation. They are powerful because they hold teachings for the life of the community. These meetings are held with the purpose of deepening the wisdom of the people. Those who sing it are specialists, as are those who comment on the songs and in this way the meaning of the songs is enriched given contextual realities.

Commentaries sung by saila Horacio Méndez, 04 May 1985, Aggwanusadub, 22–24 March 1990.

Commentary on Baluwala (an oral story), sung by saila (community leader) Horacio Méndez, Usdub, 1975.

Commentary on Buna Nelegwanelegwa (the story of a Gunadule woman-leader), sung by saila Manuel Smith, Usdub Sasardi Nuevo, 18–21 September 1991.

Commentary on the story of Dad Galibe (a grandfather who lived according to the heart of Baba and Nana), sung by saila Manuel Smith, Usdub, March 1991, Gardi Dubbir, 04–07 April 1991.

Commentary on the story of Diegun, sung by saila Horacio Méndez.Miria Ubigandub, 23–26 July, 1987.

Commentary on the story of Gubler, sung by saila Manuel Smith, Usdub, May 1993.

Commentary on the story of Ibeler and his brothers, sung by saila Horacio Méndez, Usdub Niadub, 26–28 March, 1987.

Commentary on the story of Ibeorgún and the Organization of the People, sung by saila Manuel Smith, Usdub, 03–05 April 1989.

Commentary on the story of Mother Earth and the Struggle of Ibeler, sung by saila Horacio Méndez, Usdub, 29 July 1985 and 01–04 August 1985.

Commentary on the Wagibler (Guna collective memories), sung by Saila Manuel Smith, Usdub Arridub, 22–25April, 1992.

Congreso General Guna/Kuna. *Anmar igar-Normas Kunas*. Panamá City: Instituto para el Desarrollo Integral de Kuna Yala, 2001.

Departamento Ecuménico de Investigación. "La Palabra se hizo India", *Revista de Interpretación Latinoamericana*. Quito: DEI, 2001a.

IV Simposio Latinoamericano De Teologia India, *El sueño de Dios en la creación humana y en el cosmos*. Bogotá: Centro de publicaciones CELAM, 2013.

Interview with Gardi Sugdub, 10–13 April 1986.

Kuna General Congress. *Anmar igar – Kuna Norms*. Panama City: Instituto para el Desarrollo Integral de Kuna Yala, 2001.

Tribute by Ner Dummagan (the great Neles-Sages) to Carlos Lopez (my great-grandfather), Dadnaggwe Dubbir, 13–16 September 1990.

Unpublished records of my grandfather, Guillermo Solano, from the year 1990.

The *Fakalofa* Lies Before You: Re-reading Scripture in Tuvalu

Maina Talia[1]

The Daunting Situation

The eight coral atolls and island reefs that make up the low-lying nation of Tuvalu are among the most vulnerable on the planet to the effects of that deceptively simple umbrella term "climate change." For the people of Tuvalu, it is experienced through rising sea levels, tidal inundation of land and coastal erosion, increasing maximum temperatures, more erratic rainfall patterns, a greater intensity of tropical cyclones, and the problems of a deepening incidence of ocean acidification and increased ocean temperatures. Climate change is not an abstract issue: for us it is a matter of life and death; our very existence as a people, as a culture, is at stake.

Those who describe Tuvalu as a "canary in the mine" with regards to the dangers of climate change are more than likely to comment upon any one of the following: the compromising of fresh water on account of the saltwater

1. Maina Talia was born and brought up on the island of Vaitupu in Tuvalu and is currently completing his doctoral research at the Charles Sturt University in Sydney. He is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'."

How to cite: Talia, M 2022, "The *Fakalofa* Lies Before You: Re-reading Scripture in Tuvalu", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?,* An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 177–190. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.09

bubbling up from under the coral; the inability to grow the staple foods of an Indigenous diet—in particular, the root crop, *pulaka*; and the decline in fish stocks. The traumatic shock of Cyclone Pam (2015), an extreme event in its own right that adversely affected half the population of the islands, its intensity seemingly a consequence of what Charles Funk[2] describes as "climate change attribution,"[3] is but a harbinger of other social and cultural ramifications. The storm surges and king tides expose the graves and remains of ancestors in a culture that values its elders, its forebears, its genealogies.

The loss of land and the capacity to sustain a customary life beg the question whether our people will need to leave their homelands and become climate-displaced peoples in a world of geopolitics that does not yet recognize in international law the concept of climate refugees. In the event of such a need, how will our people leave and retain dignity—will they do so as individuals, as a family, as an island, a whole culture? The idea of an earthed faith assumes so much—too much—when that land, that slice of earth, is submerged under water: the waves of the great ocean—the *moana*—which is so often celebrated on other island groups in the Pacific constitutes for us a threat that is more threatening than it is for them. Will we retain our sovereignty when our piece of the Earth is no longer earthed on land?

Land + God = Life

In this time of *krisis* what is God doing? What is God "up to"? To speak of an earthed faith in Tuvalu is both an affront and a yearning. The very terminology of an "earthed faith" touches a wound that refuses to heal. Our land is disappearing; one might reply our faith is becoming "all at sea—salted faith." And yet at the same time the language of an earthed faith reminds us of how the land is held in trust from one generation to another and is considered sacred. It is difficult to express in English the full range of meanings for the words in Tuvalu signifying land.[4] They tend to assume a sense of belonging and being a part of the land.[5] That close link is evident through the literal meaning of the word *fanua* being equivalent in meaning to the placenta.[6] This land is the same land in which our ancestors are laid to rest; if we are compelled to leave our ancestral lands we must take their remains with us.

This is our *kairos* moment. We cannot ignore "the signs of the times." They are all about us. They overshadow and stalk us. They dominate our political life.

2. Funk, "Drought, Flood, Fire," 1–20.

3. Funk, "Drought, Flood, Fire," 1–20.

4. There are many Tuvaluan words that describe land—*fenua, fanua, laukele, manafa, potu, nuku,* and *tia.*

5. Campbell, "Climate-Induced Community Relocation in the Pacific," 60.

6. Falefou, *Toku Tia*, 144.

They leave us wondering about the future and whether our children and their children will still be able to live in our much-loved spiritual home. For us, climate change is the perfect moral storm; it is the most profound existential threat our peoples have ever faced.

There is much irony in this state of play. In the first instance, our carbon emissions are minuscule: the peoples of Tuvalu have followed a traditional lifestyle gathered around a number of core Indigenous principles that are woven into harmony with the environment. This Indigenous knowledge revolves around what is called *tafatolu;* it refers to *te moana* (ocean and sky), *te umaga* (cultivation of land), and *te uaniu* (the management of fruits and resources). Cliff Bird has identified how or Oceanians, the "landscape, seascape, and airscape" are texts to be read and interpreted.[7]

This type of lifestyle has led to Tuvalu contributing less than 0.000005% to the global count of carbon emissions.[8] It is not uncommon for those who advocate for climate justice to declare that those who suffer most in this stage of climate change are the innocent and the poor. It is no surprise that Tafue Lusama, the former General Secretary of the church in Tuvalu, referred to the problem of global warming in terms of "the punishment of the innocent."[9]

God, What Have We Done Wrong?

This wounded cry should be set within a theological context. Even at face value, Lusama's description is like a point of entry into the problem of theodicy. In recent times the plight of Job-like nations—like Tuvalu—has led Clive Pearson to wrestle with issues to do with theodicy as they specifically relate to island life, although the (rather Western) theological language and logic of theodicy is scarcely known in Tuvalu. The level of discomfort for theology is related to innocent suffering, but mainly because nearly every one on these eight islands is predominantly Christian. Immediately, that state of play raises the question: how is the prospect of noneconomic loss—the likely loss of land, the need to migrate, the fear of king tides and rising waters —to be understood in a way that draws upon the Christian faith andmakes sense for Indigenous peoples?

Welcome to the "Anthropocene"

Pearson describes a visit to Tuvalu. With not much notice he was asked to give a public lecture in the public hall in the capital, Funafuti. He describes

7. Bird, "Hermeneutics of Ecology," 23.

8. Government of Tuvalu, "Intended Nationally Determined Contributions," 4.

9. Lusama, "Punishment of the Innocent."

how he referred to that new word and concept, the "Anthropocene." He explained its meaning and why it is important for our understanding of faith to be mindful of how we are moving into a new epoch. It was the first time that word—the "Anthropocene"—had been uttered anywhere on Tuvalu. On its first hearing I was skeptical of the term. I was skeptical because of my focus on the causality of climate change arising out of the political and economic exploitation of the Earth's resources and the consequent production of carbon emissions. That charge remains but in the course of time, through my research, I have become much more accustomed to the term. It signifies a shift in epochs and assumes that the planetary crisis impacts the well-being, the survivability of the human species. According to Clive Hamilton, the "Anthropocene" is "a term describing a rupture in the functioning of the Earth System as a whole."[10] It presumes threatening shifts to the Earth system and a future without analog and precedent in recorded human history.

On the completion of his lecture, Pearson was confronted by a church leader who asked a question that he says has since haunted him: the *faifeau* asked, "What am I now to preach?" This seemingly rather innocent question is far from easy to answer. It masks a deep concern, for how are we to discern what God is "up to" as our faith, one might say, is being relentlessly unearthed.

Noah—Job and Climate Change

When considering climate change through the lens of Scripture, the default practice in Tuvalu is to privilege two core texts: the first is the account of God's covenant with Noah, signified by a bow in the sky and the promise that "the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh" (Gen 9:15). It has an obvious appeal in this threatening situation for Bible-conscious people. Writing in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, David Green describes how the then-60-year-old Faaui Siale sitting at the northern end of Funafuti recalls her faith in God while "[o]cean waves thump the land to her left and a lagoon laps the shore on her right." The "sliver of coral sand is barely fifty meters wide." Siale is strong in her conviction that the Lord God "made a promise during those days that there won't be another flood in the world." In support of her position she sings along with hymns being broadcast on the radio and then worships with her neighbor, Lusama, who is only too conscious of these "human-induced" rising sea levels.[11]

For some Western climate scientists, this citing of Noah and the covenant is reckoned to be a form of climate denial. It is seen as arising out of a biblical fundamentalism that a postcolonial critique would say has its origins in the

10. Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, 9–10.

11. Green, "Tiny Islands Face Change that is Hard to Believe In."

work of the evangelical missionaries to this group of islands. Wolfgang Kempf understands this argument but interprets this use of the Noah narrative rather differently. For him, this appropriation of the covenant is a symbol of islanders expressing some semblance of resistance to the traumatic experience of the sea's inundation and an alternative discourse to that of the alien language of technical disciplines that describes changes in the sea and weather. In a rather startling way, the Noah story can yield some different perspectives: Hannah Fair cites "Ezekiel"[12] arguing that the ark provides shelter for the rich, wealthy nations that have benefited most from neoliberal capitalism—what Jason Moore has described as the "Capitalocene." The Indigenous islanders are those who were left to fend for themselves in the waters: they were not able to board the ark.[13] In another variation to the interpretation of the Noah cycle lies the work of a Pasifika group led by Seforosa Carroll. They turn their attention to the period immediately before the rains began to fall: they pay more regard to how Noah, given due warning of imminent disaster, used the time to prepare for what was to come and, thus, demonstrate a capacity for resilience.[14]

The second text is the book of Job. It presents the problem of theodicy: why do the innocent suffer? Why does a good God who is all-powerful allow these things to happen? Where is God to be found in this *kairos* moment? What did we do to deserve this? And, rather sadly, why is God punishing us? The questions tumble over one another and are rather removed from a cultural worldview and time when fish were plentiful, in-shore, the rains filled our water tanks, the *pulaka* grew, and the waves did not roar through our homes. In a time of climate change and undeserved menace, the book of Job alters our self-understanding away from being worthy of punishment to a condition of innocence. It restores our honor and dignity, so important in an honor and shame culture—but it does not deal with mounting demands this "super-wicked" problem is confronting us with.

In coming to terms with our plight, we cannot ignore the evidence each year being collated by diverse Earth system and climate scientists. It cannot be ignored. It provides an abstract description of what we know through our daily lives. Under the circumstances we are faced with a daunting task. On the world stage we are "weak actors" in terms of smallness, a lack of resources and our ability to negotiate on the international stage. We are easily silenced and denied a voice and presence. In these circumstances our task is to find a way in which our stories are made known and carry moral weight in the geopolitical arena. The other side to this coin is the question: how do we help

12. Ezekiel in Hannah Fair's article happens to be me. She mistakenly used Ezekiel to refer to me—Maina Talia.

13. Fair, "Three Stories of Noah."

14. Carroll, "A Theology of Disaster Resilience."

create a framework of meaning for our peoples that is not swamped in the details of research and disciplinary jargon that is hard to understand?

In these circumstances it becomes a strategy ploy—a hermeneutical tool—to interpret well-known, familiar, biblical texts in the light of Indigenous knowledge. The anthology on a *Sea of Readings* edited by Jione Havea places "the Bible story" inside a "sea of stories" that abound in oral cultures. In the setting, Levesi Laumau Afutiti, for example, describes Samoan proverbial (*alagaupu*) and wisdom sayings (*muagagana*) as "native texts that should be utilized in biblical exegesis."[15] Mosese Ma'ilo situates the kind of practice inside a process o*f talalasi* reading which translated means "telling big": "the same story is told and retold in differing ways and varying perspectives."[16] The story expands.

Here the parable of the Good Samaritan stands out. It does so even though its concern for the distressed neighbor has not featured in any official climate document coming out of Tuvalu and the wider Pacific region, let alone out of Conferences of the Parties (COP) conferences and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment reports. That this should be the case is something of a surprise. The care of neighbor, especially the neighbor in need, emphasizes a common humanity while being a cardinal tenet of the Christian faith and Islam—the world's two largest religions by numbers. The parable, of course, stands alongside Jesus' summary of the two greatest commandments where the love of God is linked to loving the neighbor as oneself. With reference to Islam the duty of care toward the neighbor is found in both the Qur'an and, especially, in the Hadith. This moral and religious value is thus embedded in the two religions that have given rise to cultures that have housed the greatest proportion of carbon emissions and production of oil, respectively.

Tuakoi—Geopolitical Neighbor

The neighbor is thus a timely concept: it could be used both as an ecumenical and an inter-religious category. In the papal encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis strongly argues that the climate is a "common good" and that our vocation is to "care for our common home."[17] There is no reference to Tuvalu and low-lying islands in this encyclical, but Pope Francis' more recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, concerns itself with the neighbor. Although there are very few Roman Catholics in Tuvalu—the Christian presence is mainly Protestant and especially evangelical—the papal turn to neighbor nevertheless includes us, by definition. There are no Muslims on Tuvalu. Through our use of

15. Afutiti, "Native Texts."

16. Ma'ilo, "Islands Prodigals."

17. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*.

the word neighbor, though, we can appeal to those signatories, Christian and Muslim, who have worked together in the years since 9/11 on the interfaith initiative of *A Common Word Between Us and You*. This project was not conceived in response to climate change and discussions surrounding planetary boundaries, feedbacks, and tipping points. It nevertheless depends on the core idea of neighbor in both traditions and suggests, in a sense, that God is seeking to encourage a spirit of neighborly love across religious divides. The side event sponsored by Tuvalu at the recent COP 26 conference in Glasgow on the theme of "Am I Not Your Neighbour?" self-consciously invited a Muslim leader to participate on the panel alongside a raft of Pasifika representatives.

That this should be the case is a sign of how love of neighbor has become part and parcel of discussion around the vexed subject of climate justice. Jeremy Moss suggests that it might be better to talk about carbon justice instead, but, for the present purpose, neighborly love features strongly as an element of climate justice. It is, of course, one thing to cite these ethical concerns; Stephen Gardiner believes that the response to date has been an "ethical tragedy" that has been "evolving" and is "lingering."[18] It is another thing altogether for them—and the need for moral responsibility—to gain traction.[19]

The way in which ethics, religion, and neighbors can be bound to one another is made plain in Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's insistence on the planetary imperative of "neighbor love." Well aware of the tendency to look upon the Christian life as a personal, individual vocation, Moe-Lobeda situates the love of neighbor inside a global ecological and economic order marked by structural evil and the "ongoing grind of [an otherwise] 'hidden' environmental racism."[20] Unlike some brands of contemporary Christianity, Moe-Lobeda does not hold back from the urgency of referring to sin which she binds to the sociological concept of structural violence.[21] It is a vital task in a time of climate change to "unmask the evil that parades as good" and so quickly leads to "moral oblivion."[22]

This emphasis on neighborly love in discussions around climate change is consistent with the recent work of the ethicist Samuel Wells. In the preface to a series of guest lectures delivered in St. Martins-in-the-Fields (London), Wells has shifted the traditional understanding of neighbor away from someone who lived in close proximity to a more geopolitical setting. This shift in understanding is established in the "significant displacement of populations

18. Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*, 128–42.

19. Brown, *Climate Change Ethics*, 220–40.

20. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 37.

21. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 49–80.

22. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 83–111.

[that] is at root [of] the fallout of the global political and economic system."[23] Wells does not fasten in upon climate-displaced persons or the vulnerable neighbor who happens to be a vulnerable fellow human being on the other side of the world. The transition he effects is toward the neighbor who has needed to cross borders and is a migrant, variously understood as an asylum seeker, a refugee, a displaced person, or those "who are simply seeking a better life, sometimes in the face of destitution, we usually call economic migrants."[24]

In a somewhat related way Rowan Williams describes the "neighbour [...] not [as] somebody sitting over there passively waiting for me to be good to them. The neighbour is me already involved in the life of another, already moving toward someone else, not passive but active."[25] Williams' position here is similar to Wells who argues that "Jesus in effect says to us, It's not a matter of deciding who out there deserves to be loved by you; it's a question of your decision to be a neighbour—a decision to be someone who offers life to the 'other'."[26]

The question, then, is: what this means regarding people displaced or otherwise damaged by climate change?

One primary benefit of focusing on the concept of neighbor in the Tuvalu context is how it allows us to tap into our cultural roots and practices. The Indigenous word is *tuakoi.* In our culture there are no fences, no distinct cultural boundaries that stop you from having access to your neighbor. We are a relational and communal culture. In our Indigenous understanding the neighbor participates with us in the "sharing and exchanging of goods." Keith and Anne Chambers bear witness to this "unity of hearts" in the following observation: "While fish is highly perishable and few households have refrigerators, Nanumeans could bake or salt their surplus fish for the future use. Instead, they frequently choose to share their surplus with relatives and neighbors, as local norms prescribe".[27]

This pattern of cultural behavior reaches far back into ancestral values and epistemology. The traditional worldview was of such a nature that the relationship and connection with the spiritual world was a normal part of their lives and shaped by a communal way of living. Family reputation and family dignity are highly prized: Elsewhere I have described how important it is not

23. Carter and Wells, *Who Is My Neighbour?*, 4.

24. Carter and Wells, *Who Is My Neighbour?*, 3.

25. Rowan Williams as quoted in Carter and Wells, *Who Is My Neighbour?*, 15.

26. Carter and Wells , *Who Is My Neighbour?*, 15.

27. Chambers and Chambers, *Unity of Heart,* 134.

to humiliate and bring shame to the family.[28] Helping our *tuakoi* is just part of who we are. This is one of the reasons why poverty does not exist in Tuvalu.

In terms of discerning what God is "up to," in days gone by—prior to the deepening concern over climate change—this worldview seemed to mesh with an understanding of providence understood as "God will provide." That way of thinking has been breached: every king tide seems to wash away its apparent certainty and expose its relative innocence. There is a need to rethink the relationship between a traditional worldview and Christian belief.

Into this space emerges the language of *tuak*oi. It is made up of several root words—*tua* literally means a "location marker, behind, back or it indicates your lineage to your close relatives."[29] The word *ako* connotes a "cherished friend or a close companion"[30] or something that is dear to your heart. Words and roots matter in an oral culture. This core word—*tuakoi*—can also be divided into *tuā* (ancestor) and *koi* (who?). To further enrich the discussion, the root *tū* may mean "to stand" or to immediately "make a stop." For this present exercise, in the manner of an orator, I have opted to use *tū-akoi*—meaning to make an "immediate stop and provide love."

This hermeneutical choice fits well the context of the Lukan parable and our contemporary climate context. *Tu-akoi*—neighbor—traditionally is relational and it is purely based on love and justice. Feue Tipu notes that taking care of your *tū-akoi* is one of the cultural virtues of Tuvalu and that it functions through its capacity to maintain harmony *via* social amity and a relational bond of cooperation.[31] Samasoni Auina likewise alludes to the same principles: "In Tuvalu a very close friend, member of family and neighbours must be given whatever they ask for. This was central to the very strong in-built social security in the community. To be selfish (*kaiu*) is to be despised and a laughing stock in the village".[32]

This way of life was based on the free exchange of goods without expectation of return. If a family gives their neighbor a basket of fish today, tomorrow they might receive green coconuts.[33] The culture of reciprocity emerged as a culture of sharing local resources that nurtured a community where no one was left to live in poverty.[34]

28. Talia, "We Have No Right to be Silent," 13.

29. Jackson, *Tuvalu Dictionary*, 262.

30. Jackson, *Tuvalu Dictionary*, 18.

31. Tipu, "Final Report on the Analysis and Findings of the Cultural Research and Dialogue on Traditional Values, Norms and Practices," 14.

32. Finekaso, "Traditional Marine Ethnobiodiversity," 48.

33. Talia, "Towards Fatele Theology," 34.

34. Timon, "Towards an emerging 'Coconut Tree Missiological Imagination'," 53.

This use of the term *tuakoi* should be seen within its own cultural setting of knowledge and wisdom. It is not uncommon now for transdisciplinary work on the climate emergency to cite the importance of Indigenous knowledge. The United Nations' intergovernmental conferences are setting aside space for such. Over the last several decades, there has been much work done on Indigenous contextual theologies throughout the "liquid continent" that is Oceania. Their purpose has often been designed to establish some distance from Western ways of doing theology and biblical studies while at the same time recovering island processes of knowing (epistemologies) and ideas. It is a method that is not without some risk. Ma'afu Palu from Tonga is especially wary because he argues it can separate the cultural symbols and interpretation from the biblical narrative. In his opinion it removes "biblical truths from their proper literary, theological, and cultural context."[35]

Tuvalu is part of this dynamic, although its way of proceeding will differ in some ways from its larger island neighbors.

Talanoa Versus *Muna o te Fale*

One convention that has emerged in Pacific theological scholarship in recent years is a methodology based upon the regional cultural practice of *talanoa*. It is especially relevant for societies that have valued oratory and the telling of stories. The practice is to roll out a mat for speakers to sit on the floor and for story-telling and the sharing of ideas to ensue. Doing theology by means of *talanoa* represents a potential alternative means of discerning what God is "up to" than the standard ecclesial practices of the delivering of a sermon or hymn-singing. For those of us from Tuvalu, the practice of *talanoa* is insufficient, though, for conveying our Indigenous epistemology.

It does not convey the most intimate forms of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom of Tuvalu: something else is required and that is the *muna o te fale* (wisdom of the house). This is the knowledge of the land, the air, the sea, and the skills, crafts, and proverbs of how we relate to one another that is taught across generations. It is intimate: it is ancestral wisdom and lies behind our practice of being a neighbor, of being *tuakoi* as well as how we manage seasons, plantations, and the resources that sustained our subsistence economy. This *muna o te fale* can in this daunting times inform our reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan and accompany our quest to discern how God may draw near to us in a time like this.

35. Palu, *Pacific Theology*, 6.

A Muna o te Fale Reading of the Good Samaritan

The concept of neighbor has scarcely been used in COP conferences and IPCC Assessment Reports. It has been seldom used in Pacific regional forums; this concern for the *tuakoi* had not even featured in presentations on the challenges posed by climate change to the islands of Tuvalu—until the COP 25 conference in Madrid and, again, in Glasgow at COP 26. With reference to the parable there is a need to move from the story to the present context faced by people of Tuvalu. This theme of the neighbor showing love and compassion has echoed down the centuries. It is an invitation to show the mercy, compassion, and justice that are so central to Christian practice. The response from the Levites and Priest shows how easy it is not to show that concern.

It is not difficult, though, to effect a bridge between Indigenous knowledge and the parable. The neighbor now becomes the *tū-akoi (tu—to stop, akoi—to be loved). This is the term used in the Tuvaluan translation of the story that Luke tells. It is also a word rich in particular cultural associations that have a long history. It possesses the capacity to* unveil all sort of cultural expectations. The benefit of a cross-cultural diachronic reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan from the perspective of the *fakalofa* and *tū-akoi* is that it enables us to recover dimensions of cultural values and virtues at risk.

In terms of a moral and emotive response, the equivalent of the biblical understanding of compassion is what we call *fatumanava*.[36] *This word is* derived from two roots, namely *fatu, meaning* either rock or heart, and *manava,* meaning breath, gut, or rest. In this context *fatumanava* means heart and gut, which corresponds very well with the Greek meaning of the word compassion. However, in Luke 10:33, the Tuvaluan translation of compassion in the Bible is *alofa* which follows the Samoan translation. The one who is set upon is a *fakalofa.* What is of interest is how *fatumanava* often goes beyond the ordinary word *alofa* (love)—it is not just love; it is more about the affection caused by the "heart" so that the "gut" is moved. The phrase *mea na ko toku fatumanava* refers to someone who always remains dear and precious to you. It possesses affective power as can be seen in the customary song and dance—the *fatele*—composed by Misialofa Moeafu:

36. Fatu means heart; *manava* means gut, breath, or rest!

Toku loto se sou i toku fenua	My heart remains steadfast, knowing that my island was created by the
Ne fai ki fatumanava o tagata mo fafine	*hearts and guts (compassion)* of women and men.
Taki tokofia foki (nei la) a pulupasama o fenua e Vaitupu toku tia fagasele au e mate mo to koe	How many skillful people from my island? Vaitupu, my beautiful place/ island, I will die for you

The way in which this parable, re-read through a lens of *fatumanava* and *fakalofa,* can be used in the contemporary context is a form of double vision. It possesses a very necessary domestic function in that it shifts popular talk away from Noah's covenant and the book of Job. It offers a response to the question that troubled Pearson. It delves into Indigenous cultural virtues and practices and does so in a way that embraces the outsider—in Tuvaluan the *fakalofa.*

According to Tofiga Falani, the *fakalofa* are homeless people.[37] It becomes a reading whereby the biblical text allows the people to consider a grim future in which they themselves might become displaced, cast away, homeless. It speaks into their imminent context but it does so in a way that assumes a moral effect and a reciprocal responsibility. This descriptive term of *fakalofa* has already become a name for those individuals or families whose house or properties have been flooded or washed away by the force of the waves. Elsewhere in the Pacific, the sea—*moana*—is often used as a primary metaphor in talk about how God is at work in the ebb and flow of life that connects one people with another; in Tuvalu that is no longer the case. We fear the waves.

That other line of vision is external to the *fakalofa.* The question posed by the lawyer leading into the parable "who is my *tū-akoi?*" remains with a heightened urgency. It is as if God through this parable of Jesus is at work reminding other powers and principalities of their duty of care to the neighbors who are in the throes of becoming *fakalofa*. Now is not the time to play out the role of denial as represented by the priest and Levite in the parable. They are *fakasili*—they pass by without a word.

How Are We to Know What God Is Up To?

In order to address this question, our method must arise out of a local context. It cannot merely be imposed from within, as few other places on earth are in a similar position to my people. The method employed here assumes examining the biblical stories that our people have commonly used to explain what is happening and likely to happen. Those interpretations have needed to be

37. Falani, "Fakalofa," 9. See also Chambers, "Heirs of Tefolaha," 222; Puapua, "Ulu fonu ui—e e!" 69.

critiqued in the light of climate science and demands of climate/carbon justice. For that to have taken place has enabled other narratives—in this instance, the parable of the Good Samaritan—to emerge. The benefit of this parable is that it lends itself so easily to an Indigenous re-reading: it allows us to place it in a wider geopolitical setting. It is enriched through the cultural customs of *talanoa* and *muna o te fale*. It emboldens us to suggest that God is using the plight of our people to help the world to come to its senses on climate change.

For the peoples of Tuvalu, it is hard to address the question of how we would know what God is up to in this time. It is difficult for us to address this theme of an "earthed faith." Our vocation, it seems, is to release the familiar words of good news evident in the call to love the neighbor, broadly understood, and allow it to take moral effect. Can such a message be like the parable of the sower and take root and flourish? Or, will this seed, this parable, fall on stony ground? In the providence of God, maybe these "Job-like nations," these low-lying islands are being asked to represent the *kairos* moment in a way that expects the nations to love justice and act with mercy and compassion.[38] The *fakalofa* of the parable lies before you.

Bibliography

Afutiti, Levesi Laumau. "Native Texts: Samoan Proverbial and Wisdom Sayings." In *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific,* edited by Jione Havea, 53–68. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018.

Bird, Cliff. "Hermeneutics of Ecology and its Relationship to the Identity of the Oikos in Oceania." *Pacific Journal of Theology II* 46 (2011), 19–33.

Brown, Donald A. *Climate Change Ethics: Navigating the Perfect Moral Storm*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.

Campbell, John. "Climate-Induced Community Relocation in the Pacific: The Meaning and Importance of Land." In *Climate Change and Displacement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Jane McAdam, 57–79. London: Hart Publishing, 2012.

Carroll, Seforosa. *A Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate*. Sydney: Uniting World, 2019.

Carter, Richard and Samuel Wells, eds. *Who Is My Neighbour? The Global and Personal Challenge*. London: SPCK, 2018.

Chambers, Keith. "Heirs of Tefolaha: Tradition and Social Organization in Nanumea, A Polynesian Atoll Community." PhD thesis, University of California, 1984.

—— and Anne Chambers. *Unity of Heart: Culture and Change in a Polynesian Atoll Society*. Long Grove: Waveland, 2001.

Fair, Hannah. "Three Stories of Noah: Navigating Religious Climate Change Narratives in the Pacific Island Region." *Geo: Geography and Environment* 5 (2018), e00068. https://doi.org/10.1002/geo2.68

Falani, Tofiga. "Fakalofa: The Concept of Fakaalofa (Stranger) in Tuvalu with Special Reference to the Bible." Pacific Manuscripts Bureau. https://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/pambu/catalogue/index.php/fakaalofa-the-concept-of-fakaalofa-stranger-in-tuvalu-with-special-reference-to-the-bible-94pp (last accessed 28 February 2022).

38. The theme of God's providence will be explored in Volume 4 of the series on *An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene"*

Falefou, Tapugao. "*Toku Tia:* Tuvalu and the Impacts of Climate Change." PhD diss., Waikato University, 2017.

Finekaso, Samasoni A. "Traditional Marine Ethnobiodiversity and its Application to Inshore Marine Resources Management in Tuvalu: A Case Study of Vaitupu and Funafuti Atolls, Tuvalu." MA in Marine Studies thesis, University of the South Pacific, 2005.

Francis (Pope). *Laudato Si': On Care For Our Common Home*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015.

Funk, Charles. *Drought, Flood, Fire: How Climate Change Contributes to Catastrophes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Gardiner, Stephen M. *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Government of Tuvalu, "Intended Nationally Determined Contributions," Communicated to the UNFCCC on 27 November, 2015.

Green, David. "Tiny Islands Face Change That Is Hard To Believe In." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 07 November, 2010. https://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/tiny-islands-face-change-that-is-hard-to-believe-in-20101126-18al7.html (last accessed 28 February 2022).

Hamilton, Clive. *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene.* Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2015.

Jackson, Geoffrey W. *Tuvalu Dictionary,* Suva, 2001.

Lusama, Tafue. "Punishment of the Innocent: The Problem of Global Warming with Special Reference to Tuvalu." MA thesis, Tainan Theological College and Seminary, 2004.

Ma'ilo, Mosese. "Islands Prodigals: Encircling the Void in Luke 15:11–32 with Albert Wendt." In *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific,* edited by Jione Havea, 23–36. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018.

Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia. *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013.

Palu, Ma'afu. *Pacific Theology: Problems and Proposal.* Nuku'alofa: Icthus Publisher, 2017.

Puapua, Fitilau, "Ulu fonu ui—e e! Towards an Indigenous, Pastoral Ministry for Reconciliation in the Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu." MTh thesis, Pacific Theological College, 2016.

Talia, Maina. "Towards Fatele Theology: A Contextual Theological Response in Addressing Threats of Global Warming in Tuvalu." MTh thesis, Tainan Theological College and Seminary, 2009.

———. "We Have No Right to be Silent: The Cry of a Climate Victim." *Theologies and Cultures* 12:2 (2015), 13–17.

Timon, Tioti. "Towards an Emerging 'Coconut Tree Missiological Imagination': An Enquiry into Climate Change and its Relevance for Ministerial formation at Tangintebu Theological College." DPhil thesis, School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2018.

Tipu, Feue. "Final Report on the Analysis and Findings of the Cultural Research and Dialogue on Traditional Values, Norms and Practices: A Research Conducted by the Retracing Our Own Traditions (ROOTS) in Partnership with the Tuvalu Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (TANGO)," October 2018. Unpublished report.

Decolonizing Ecotheology: Subaltern Social Movements as Theological Texts

George Zachariah[1]

This essay participates in the collective search that this volume initiates by engaging with the question, "How does one begin to answer the question of 'What is this God up to and how ought humans respond?'" Drawing inspiration from the concept note of this volume, this essay will critically examine the methodological standpoints of the mainstream ecotheology enterprise and propose alternative methodological reflections affirming the epistemological privilege of the "counter-movements of Spirit" in our midst. A commons perspective is used as the hermeneutical key for this methodological exploration, and subaltern social movements are identified as theological texts to construct decolonial ecotheologies.

1. George Zachariah serves Trinity Methodist Theological College, Auckland, New Zealand, as Wesley Lecturer in Theological Studies. He is registered as a co-researcher at the University of the Western Cape for the project on "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the Anthropocene."

How to cite: Zachariah, G 2022, "Decolonizing Ecotheology: Subaltern Social Movements as Theological Texts", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?,* An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 191–214. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.10

The Mainstream Ecotheology Enterprise: Approaches and Trajectories

Contextual theologies are theological reflections on praxis, emerging from particular communities in response to the realities of death and destruction that they confront in everyday life, and their resolve to enable life to flourish, contesting the idols of death. In that sense, ecotheology is a contextual theology, as it engages in theological reflections and praxis responding to ecological crises. We come across approaches and trajectories in mainstream ecotheologies: Ecotheologies of denial and rejection, and feel-good ecotheologies.

Despite the ecological richness of Christian faith and the scriptures, mainstream Christian theologies and biblical interpretations, in general, have been in danger of perpetuating an earth-denying faith and spirituality, inadvertently offering theological and scriptural legitimization to the plunder and destruction of the earth, created and found good by God. The first creation story has been used to legitimize human superiority over the rest of creation, by declaring nature as devoid of intrinsic worth and moral significance. Nature, therefore, is not considered to be included in God's salvific plan and purpose. Rather, it is a bounty given for human use and enjoyment. Devoid of inherent purpose, the vocation of nature is to become "instruments" for human welfare and progress. This is the theological foundation for the commodification and thingification of God's creation. Colonization of the earth and the earthlings is, hence, a theological project.

Such theological legitimizations of the plunder and colonization of God's creation not only deny ecological crises but also invalidate ecological ministries and activism. The notion of omni-God of an ecotheology of denial and rejection articulates a sovereign God who is in control. The climate crisis is explained as part of God's plan (and as God's wrath), and since God knows how to deal with it, we need to wait patiently for God's time. The eschatological vision of such dominant theology portrays human beings as "sojourners" and "pilgrims" on earth. "This world is not my home/I'm just a-passing through/My treasures are laid up/Somewhere beyond the blue/The angels beckon me/From heaven's open door/And I can't feel at home/In this world anymore"—this famous song of Jim Reeves summarizes such a dominant understanding of Christian hope.[2] The restoration of Earth is, therefore, not a Christian responsibility.

A critical interrogation of such mainstream creation theology is important here. The doctrine of creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) propagates the idea of the creation of the universe as the act of a sovereign God creating

2. See https://genius.com/Jim-reeves-this-world-is-not-my-home-lyrics.

everything "out of nothing." The European colonial theology of conquest is founded on this doctrine. The colonial doctrine of *terra nullius* stems from the doctrine of creation out of nothing. The land God gave to humans was originally "empty" and therefore available to be claimed, conquered, tamed, and commodified for the civilizing mission of Europe. *Ex nihilo*, thus, became the foundation and justification for missionizing, colonizing the Indigenous communities, and cultivating their "wild" and "unoccupied" lands for the benefit of the Christian empire. The Papal Bull of Pope Nicolas V (1452) testifies how creation theology has been used to sanctify colonial plunder of the colonized and their land:

> [...] to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.[3]

Mainstream creation theology's suspicion and rejection of the earth-honoring worldviews and practices of creation care of the Indigenous and subaltern communities also played a major role in destroying the human-nature-divine rhizomatic relationship of mutual flourishing.

The second half of the last century witnessed the emergence of a feel-good environmentalism in response to the disturbing realization of an unparalleled growth in the destruction of Earth. The feel-good environmentalism reduces the ecological crisis into a matter of personal choice and initiates campaigns regarding conservation, wilderness, and lifestyle changes. It is during this period that Lynn White Jr. exposed the role of the Judeo-Christian tradition and its scripture in legitimizing the abuse of earth.[4] Ecotheological responses, insofar as these are influenced by feel-good environmentalism, are attempts to refute such criticisms by "green washing" problematic scriptural teachings and doctrines.

Such feel-good ecotheologies use universal categories to explain the ecological crisis. Their diagnosis identifies anthropocentrism and anthropogenic emission as the root cause of the current problem. We are the culprits, and we are all in the same boat facing the consequences of our sinfulness. Such problematizations of the ecological crises not only legitimize misanthropy, but also absolve the sins of the corporations, the real perpetrators of the present crises. Feel-good ecotheologies conceal the systemic roots of the ecological crisis by not naming climate change as climate injustice. Their reluctance to

3. See https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/dum-diversas/

4. White, "The Historical Roots."

use intersectional hermeneutical keys to discern the signs of the times blinds them from seeing how vulnerable communities are disproportionately affected by the ecological crisis, and how disasters exacerbate their marginalization and vulnerability. Differently said, feel-good ecotheologies cover up the correlation between climate injustice and gender, social and economic injustices, and legitimize and perpetuate the prevailing order through toxic environmentalism.

Such mainstream ecotheology evades or cancels this critique by celebrating "diversity" through "inclusion." These celebrations of diversity represent the colonial logic and practice of "add and stir" and co-opt "differences" into the metanarratives of mainstream ecotheology enterprise. This disturbing discernment is an invitation to go beyond such dominant feel-good ecotheological discourses and practices of romanticizing the earth, and to decolonize ecotheology, privileging the voices of the communities that are disproportionally affected by various manifestations of ecological injustice and their grassroots collectives—the subaltern social movements.

The theological anthropology of feel-good ecotheologies offers us more insights into this trajectory. Here stewardship is the default theological anthropology. As Clare Palmer rightly observes, the stewardship model has been used to redeem the biblical command to subdue the earth and to have dominion over the rest of creation. In this model, God is an absentee landlord, and humans are given a managerial role over God's creation. The idea of stewardship comes from feudal societies where landlords left managerial slaves in charge of their property. The survival of the earth is depended on the decisions made and implemented by such stewards. Stewardship signifies a power relationship of benign dictatorship.[5]

Feel-good ecotheologies, emerging from locations of power and privilege, advocate lifestyle changes through campaigns encouraging people to "reduce-reuse-recycle." Focusing on our consumption practices, they invite us to become responsible and ethical consumers without disrupting the prevailing neoliberal capitalist order. This moralistic notion of voluntary simplicity reduces a systemic problem into a matter of personal choice, without critically engaging with the privilege and power that the prevailing order provides us to make such personal choices. They do not support a redistributive downscaling of production and consumption. Differently said, "saving the planet" is for feel-good ecotheologies an apolitical campaign to convert the individuals to practice lifestyle changes, without destabilizing the prevailing unjust order.

5. See Palmer, "Stewardship."

The Ecojustice Theology Movement

The last three decades witnessed the emergence of ecojustice theological movements that recognize the ecological crisis as a justice issue. These theologies have challenged the mainstream ecotheology enterprise and offered alternative theological perspectives and praxeological mediations to bring about ecological justice. They are inspired and informed by the environmental justice movement and Indigenous and subaltern social movements in the Global South, and liberation, postcolonial and decolonial theories and theologies. They recognize the correlation between the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.[6] They examine the connections between women and nature both as sources of life and as exploited by patriarchy, racism, and capitalism.[7] They contest the claims of neoliberal capitalism and offer alterative ecological and economic visions for healing the earth.[8] They recognize the epistemological agency of subaltern social movements and nonviolent activism in developing alternative ecotheologies and earth ethics.[9] Using the methodological standpoints of political theology, they re-imagine ecotheology as a critique of modernity and Empire that spearheads a broad planetary movement for social and ecological justice.[10] Going beyond conventional methods of ethics, through prophetic pragmatism and intersectional and interdisciplinary studies, they engage with concrete problems and offer ethical responses and a planetary ethic for a just and sustainable future.[11]

There have been creative attempts in the recent past to reformulate Christian doctrines in response to ecological and climate injustices. Recognizing the ecological crises and climate change as theological problems, these collective initiatives expose the ecological bankruptcy and toxicity of mainstream theologies and offer creative and constructive alternative theological re-imaginations that strengthen and flourish the movement of life.[12]

6. See Boff, *Cry of the Earth Cry of the Poor*.

7. See Reuther, *Gaia and God*, Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, Harris, *Ecowomanism*.

8. See McFague, *Life Abundant*, Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*.

9. See Zachariah, *Alternatives Unincorporated*, O'Brien, *Violence of Climate Change*.

10. See Northcott, *Political Theology of Climate Change*, Keller, *Political Theology of Earth.*

11. See Jenkins, *Future of Ethics*, Bauman, *Religion and Ecology*.

12. See Northcott and Scott, *Systematic Theology and Climate Change*, Kim and Koster, *Planetary Solidarity*, Conradie and Koster, *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change*.

Decolonizing Ecotheology: Prospects and Challenges

Why do I consider the dominant strands of ecoconsciousness, ecoactivism, and ecotheologies as colonial and hence problematic? The mainstream ecodiscourses and actions tend to consider human beings as a homogenous entity—one human family, living in the *oikos*, our common home. The assumption here is that we are all affected equally by the ecological crisis. We are all in the same boat is an oft-repeated chorus in this season of pandemic. The diagnosis of the mainstream ecoconsciousness and ecotheologies blames anthropocentrism and anthropogenic emissions for the ecological and climate crises. That is why the present geological age is named as the "Anthropocene." When universal categories and homogenized and standardized perceptions of human beings are used in the diagnosis of the problem, the solutions are also informed and constructed by the same logic and worldview.

The mainstream ecotheology enterprise is problematic because of two major reasons—its neoliberalization of alternatives and its monoculture (single-issue) approach. The neoliberalization of alternatives is the process of neoliberal co-optation of radical ecological discourses and practices. The single-issue approach results from the inability or rather reluctance to recognize how multiple forms of oppression intersect and disproportionately affect communities at the margins. One sees these colonial approaches in such mainstream ecological discourses and movements as well.

The post–world war era witnessed the emergence of new forms of imperial plunder packaged in a new wineskin called "development" and prescribed as the panacea for the ills of "underdeveloped" nations. The governments in the Global South used "development" and "economic growth" to legitimize the occupation and plunder of their land, forest, and waterbodies and the subsistence communities, resulting in the commodification of the earth and the displacement of the subaltern and Indigenous communities from their abodes and livelihoods.

Alternative ecological discourses, initiated in the 1970s and 1980s by grassroots social movements, critiqued capitalism for creating poverty and inequality and threatening ecological sustainability. Sustainability thus emerged as the catchword for the survival of life. The environmental justice movement and other Indigenous and subaltern environmental movements from different parts of the world consistently exposed the correlation between the ecological crisis and racial and economic injustice and challenged the world to broaden the scope of mainstream discourse on sustainability. However, thanks to the neoliberal takeover of global bodies such as the United Nations, capitalism's flourishing, rather than its rejection, became the focus of the alternative project of sustainability. Through the concept of sustainable development, the neoliberal agenda of co-opting sustainability discourses

was achieved by integrating economic growth, eradication of poverty, and ecological integrity as interdependent. The rest is history. Mainstream environmental groups also joined this bandwagon following the ecologically sustainable economic growth model. Environmental activism has thus become meeting targets, changing attitudes, and being responsible consumers—a shift from system change to lifestyle changes. We see this shift in the mainstream ecotheology enterprise as well.

Decolonizing ecotheology is profoundly political as its primary task is to expose and contest the hegemonic politics of those parts of mainstream ecotheology that refuse to perceive the environmental crisis as a justice issue and those that do acknowledge this link but fail to recognize its implications—the need for radical structural change that addresses the racial violence and economic violence inherent in climate change and many other environmental matters. For them, environmental problems are fundamentally technical and technological that can be fixed by economic and scientific experts within the logic of neoliberal capitalism. Environmental problems cannot be solved by reproducing structures of colonialism and capitalism, the very systems that produce these problems in the first place. Colonial paternalism and tokenism are evident in mainstream ecotheological ministries that initiate campaigns on simple living, vegetarianism, planting trees, and the reduce-reuse-recycle paradigm without also prioritizing efforts to challenge the economic policies and structures that result in climate change and climate injustice. Decolonizing ecotheology exposes the locations of privilege from where these colonial, racist, patriarchal, and capitalist ecotheological ministries emanate. Indigenous and subaltern social movements are, hence, epistemological sources that can inform contextually relevant ecojustice theologies that can decolonize our ecotheological reflections and ministries. These movements are intersectional as they recognize and endeavor to annihilate overlapping systems and practices of conquest, exploitation, and exclusion that threaten the flourishing of life. Indigenous and subaltern social movements that problematize the current ecological crisis as CO_2lonialism[13] are hence the epistemological sources for decolonizing ecotheology.

Commons and Commoning: Decolonial Ecojustice Praxis

Commons are nature's gift to the community of creation. They are shared, protected, and nurtured for the community's mutual flourishing. Traditional commons signify an organic connection between land, water, forest, and subsistence communities that are marginalized by the prevailing social order. Commons are intimately and organically intertwined with the struggles,

13. CO_2lonialism is used to expose the correlation between colonialism and climate change.

aspirations, and joys of these vulnerable communities as they sustain each other. For the coastal communities and fishers, rivers and oceans are their mother, while for other Indigenous communities the land is seen as the sacred space where their ancestors dwell. The legal systems of the nation-states do not define or regulate this rhizomatic relationship between the commons and the commoners. Market economies have no sway over their bond with the commons. Commons are therefore alternative spaces and relationships that contest the rules and ethos of the system world by practicing and propagating the politics, ethics, and spirituality of an economy of life.

Massimo De Angelis defines commons as social systems formed by "a commonwealth, that is, a set of resources held in common and governed by a community of commoners who also engage in the praxis of commoning, or doing in common, which produces their lives in common and that of their commonwealth."[14] Commons is a paradigm—a paradigm of organic socioeconomic and ecological relationships, social ethics, shared socioeconomic practices, and a covenant of shared responsibility and obligation. Commons are the commonwealth. It is this distinctive politics of the commons that makes them an alternative economy of life in a neoliberal, market-driven world. For Menizes, "the ethos of the commons knit people together with their neighbors and with the land, plus the local fens, forest and bodies of water, with no one or nothing is treated as exempt, nor as an externality. Inhabitants and habitats are one inseparable whole."[15] The politics and ethics that is practiced in the commons has the audacity to contest the logic of the neoliberal market economy and to offer moral and spiritual energy to believe in the possibility of an alternative to the prevailing order.

De-commoning: Colonization of the Commons

The British enclosure movement is the precursor of de-commoning whereby pastures, forests, and waterbodies used by subsistence communities were stolen and declared private property by the kings, the aristocracy, and the land-holding nobility. As David Harvey rightly observes, the enclosure movement was "accumulation by dispossession,"[16] which resulted in the alienation and pauperization of subsistence communities. More than a mere land grab, the enclosure movement was determined to destroy the potential of the commons paradigm and its politics and ethics of mutual flourishing of the flora and fauna through self-governance.

14. De Angelis, "Commons," 124.

15. Menizes, *Reclaiming the Commons*, 27.

16. Harvey, *A Brief History*, 159.

De-commoning, therefore, is a hegemonic, violent act of erasing the memory of alternative socioeconomic ecological relations and ethical practices at the grassroots. Enlightenment rationality, combined with an anthropocentric Judeo-Christian theology, further contributed to the paradigm of de-commoning. Since the commons defies the logic of market control and state control, it embodies an alternative paradigm to the prevailing models of socioeconomic relations. The organic understanding of everything as interrelated and interconnected affirms the possibility for mutual flourishing through self-governance and a covenantal relationship of mutual custodianship. Elevating the rational human being and considering it the crown of creation endowed with the vocation to subdue the earth and to have dominion over the rest of the creation took away the intrinsic worth of other-than-human persons. As a result, the Indigenous ethics of mutual respect and co-existence was replaced by an ethic of domination and alienation.

A decolonial diagnosis of the current ecological crisis, informed by Indigenous and subaltern communities and their movements, interprets the crisis as caused by the colonization of the commons. This discernment calls for a new problematization of the current ecological crisis as ecological injustice and ecological racism. The crisis of the earth is more than some changes in the mercury level, extinction of different species, and the decrease in the natural green canopy of the earth. Rather, it is the colonization of the commons thanks to corporate appropriation of the commonwealth, which destroys the integrity of creation and uproots the commoners from their traditional abodes.

The colonization of the commons is the crisis that we confront today. When it comes to climate change, the excessive emission of greenhouse gases by corporations and industrial nations is nothing but the colonization of the commons as it destroys the integrity of the atmospheric commons. Commons such as forests, waterbodies, and land are also colonized for mining, mega-dams, agri-business, and even for the cultivation of biofuel, a solution for climate change developed by those who continue to destroy nature. Hence, this problematization of the ecological crisis as the consequence of the colonization of the commons is crucial for theological discernment and praxis. A commons perspective, therefore, has the potential to disrupt and destabilize the prevailing dominant perceptions, diagnosis, and solutions and to re-imagine our theological vocation in solidarity with the subaltern commons and the subaltern commoners in their creative resilience to challenge the forces that continue to desecrate the sacred commons.

■ Commoning: Decolonizing the Commons

The commons paradigm invites and enables us to decolonize our minds and to discern our vocation as commoning—to practise alternative socio-ecological

and economic relations that celebrate life and allow it to flourish. Commoning is reclaiming our rhizomatic relationality with nature and each other by coming out of the imperial worldview of conquest and plunder. It is the ethical courage to denounce the morality of the market forces and to affirm the potential of human solidarity to transform the face of the earth by midwifing the economy of life.

Our search for alternatives should lead us beyond a study of commons to the organic activity of commoning. Commoning is a verb, not a noun. We are surrounded with commoners all over the world who are involved in the everyday practices of commoning. As Bollier and Helfrich observe, "commoning is an attitude, an ethic, an impulse, a need and a satisfaction—a way of being that is deeply inscribed within the human species. But it is up to us to make it thrive. We must choose to practice commoning and reflect on the impact on our lives and the earth, the more consciously, the more (*sic*) better."[17]

Commons and commoning offer alternative ecotheological standpoints to re-imagine our theologies and praxis of earth care and the flourishing of life. Commons and commoning affirm the situatedness of our ecotheologies in the particularities of each commons and thereby reject all attempts to impose dominant perceptions and reflections claiming universal relevance. This paradigm contests all attempts to homogenize human beings and instead privileges the perspectives and politics of the commoners by exposing the correlation between unjust social relations and ecological injustice. Commons further offer a corrective to the dominant Judeo-Christian anthropocentric cosmology and develop alternative understandings of the commons drawing from the earth-honoring cosmologies of the subsistence and Indigenous communities. Commons and commoning enable us to develop alternative reflections on theological anthropology. Commoning as the vocation of human beings to flourish life provides us alternative models of being and becoming the church amid death and destruction.

Commoning is an organic activity that breathes life into the commons. Commoning happens outside the logic of private property. Commoning is a multigenerational activity. Commoning requires a context of mutuality and relationality. Commoning is not possible where systems and practices of exclusion and domination are prevalent. Since commoning allows for the flourishing of life, a commitment to contest and defeat the colonization of the commons is essential for commoning.

17. Bollier and Helfrich, "Finale," 393.

Social Movements as Theological Texts: Methodological Musings[18]

Decolonizing ecotheology entails a methodological transgression. The distinction that Mark Lewis Taylor proposes between "Theology" (with a capital T) as a professional guild discipline and the "theological" as the agonistic political articulations of the subalterns is paradigmatic here.[19] The sheer weight of the imposed social suffering, thanks to mass incarceration, torture, and exclusion, and the theological legitimization of imposed social suffering are the contexts from which Taylor's theological re-imagination emerges. The "weight of the world," for Taylor, is the imposed social suffering caused by white racism, economic injustice, gender discrimination, and the diverse ways in which communities are being constructed as the "other." Emancipatory politics is the agonistic politics of communities that are forced to bear the weight of the world. They are not merely weighed-down victims, rather they are communities with moral agency—the new subjects of the emancipatory politics, who are committed to "weigh-in." This weighing-in occurs wherever weight concentrates like the colonized commons and the uprooted commoners.[20]

The term "mainstream ecotheology enterprise" is used in this essay to qualify the dominant strands of ecotheology as a professional guild discipline that theologically legitimizes the social suffering of the earth and the earth communities. The "theological," as Taylor proposes, "traces and theorizes the ways that persons and groups rendered subordinate and vulnerable by agonistic politics and its systemic imposed social suffering nevertheless haunt, unsettle, and perhaps dissolve the structures of those systems. The theological traces and theorizes the way this haunting congeals into specters and forces both threatening and promising alternative patterns and lifeways."[21]

The subalterns articulate the theological in songs, poetry, narratives, slogans, graffiti, and the like, and "they convey and constitute the haunting power of peoples bearing the weight of the world, but weighing-in spectrally with resistance and flourishing."[22] This is precisely what is happening in grassroots social movements.

18. This section is partly based on my article "Re-imagining God of Life from the Margins."

19. See my review of Mark Lewis Taylor's, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), at http://postcolonialnetworks.com/review-zachariah_on_taylorstorrar/.

20. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, 46.

21. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, 9.

22. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, 12–13.

Taylor's project is an invitation to experience the "theological" in the emancipatory politics at the grassroots. It challenges us to contest the methodology of "guild Theology" which perpetuates the prevailing order that eternalizes the colonization of the commons and the social suffering of the commoners. It is a clarion call to a costly commitment to emancipatory politics to discern "the power, creativity, and vitality of life that is operative in the movements of the people, those bearing the weight of imposed social suffering." It is in this sense that this methodology becomes decolonial and alternative.

Although a host of socially committed ecotheologians made efforts to broaden the mainstream understanding of the ecological crisis and the scope of ecotheology by identifying the connection between ecological justice and social, economic, and gender justice, privileging the voices from the margins, a conscious attempt to recognize the epistemological agency of social movements of Indigenous and subaltern communities is rather absent in their theologies. The oppositional knowledge that emerges from the crucible of grassroots social movements not only challenges the prevailing order but also decolonizes the commons through resistance and recreation. The progressive and liberationist strands in the ecotheology enterprise, in general, unfortunately failed to recognize the epistemological and political significance of the social movements for constructing liberative ecotheologies.

At the same time, it is important here to recognize recent attempts to engage theologically with grassroots social movements. Recognizing the environmental justice movement as sites of "normative creativity," Willis Jenkins affirms their theological significance by identifying how they deploy rights, sacralize land, and re-imagine the human in ways that would utterly reconstruct the basis of politics and ecotheology.[23] Clayton Crockett and John Reader also underscore the need for deeper theological engagement with the new social movements of our times, from the perspective of new materialism.[24] Chris Crews, in a recent article, recognizes the emergence of "a new earth-centered cosmopolitics" in response to the "Anthropocene" in the struggles over the commons by "earthbound" social movements.[25]

Joerg Rieger offers a robust theological appraisal of grassroots social movements. For Rieger, "the world has often been changed more effectively and lastingly by grassroots social movements than by dominant politics."[26] They contest and destabilize the prevailing order with the intention and commitment to overthrow it and to create life-flourishing alternative social, economic, and ecological relations. In the spirit of decolonial thinking,

23. See https://politicaltheology.com/enemies-of-humanity-political-theology-from-the-pipelines/.

24. Crockett and Reader, "Ecology and Social Movements."

25. Chris Crews. "Earthbound Social Movements."

26. Rieger, "Grassroots Social Movements," 558.

Rieger observes that "theologies that emerge in the context of grassroots social movements cannot easily be grasped in the conventional framework developed by theologians and philosophers."[27] They are beyond definitions and systematizations. These theologies emerge from the open wounds created by the conquest and plunder of the commons and the commoners. They are not "special-interest" theologies or theological fads.

"Rather than being fleeting fads linked to short-term upheavals, these theologies may well be among the few that are able to resist shallow fads and short-term trends because they are dealing with the deeper problems and struggles of our world and because they are providing real alternatives."[28]

From Civil Society to Subaltern Counterpublic Spheres

Affirmation of the epistemological privilege of grassroots social movements begins with the problematization of the NGO-ization of resistance and ecological activism that one witnesses today. It is important here to distinguish between public theology/public witness discourses on civil society initiatives and grassroots social movements. As Arundhati Roy rightly observes, NGO-ization of resistance, "turns confrontation into negotiation. It depoliticizes resistance. It interferes with local peoples' movements that have traditionally been self-reliant. [...] The NGO-ization of politics threatens to turn resistance into a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, 9-to-5 job. With a few perks thrown in. Real resistance has real consequences. And no salary."[29] This critique applies to the mainstream ecotheology enterprise and the ecological ministries of the churches and the ecumenical movement as well.

The concept of public sphere as a discursive model is an important contribution by Jürgen Habermas.[30] The public sphere is the domain in which public opinion can be formed. It is a discursive site and theater for constructing and circulating discourses that are critical of the state and the market. However, the Habermasian concept of public sphere is problematic from the perspective of grassroots epistemologies. Habermas' public sphere tends to be a "bourgeois public sphere"—the institutional domain that constructs the legitimization of the hegemonic mode of domination of the state. This bourgeois public sphere idealizes a universal and normative way of reasoning, and as a result, it excludes the majority of the people—women, Indigenous communities, people of color, children—from its discursive arena. This concept

27. Rieger, "Grassroots Social Movements," 562.

28. Rieger, "Grassroots Social Movements," 569.

29. See https://kanaanonline.org/en/2018/02/07/the-ngo-ization-of-resistance-by-arundhati-roy/.

30. The public sphere is theorized by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

of public sphere is an ideology that erases differences and the discursive authority of the commoners. This notion of public sphere is also monolithic in that it does not recognize the presence of counterpublic spheres that exist along with the bourgeois public sphere. Patricia Hill Collins' recollection of the political significance of the black public sphere or black civil society—families, churches, fraternal organizations, and other institutions—is just one example of the host of counterpublics that are erased from discursive authority by the bourgeois public sphere.[31]

Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's problematization of the term "public" is important here: "Unquestioning acceptance of a singular public with singular common good may become a veneer for the legitimation of elite interests excluding the perspectives and interests of the less powerful."[32] We see a similar ambiguity with the concept of civil society as well. John Keane in his analysis of civil society observes that "the freedoms of global civil society are exclusionary and fail to produce equalities." As a result, civil society initiatives tend to reflect and represent the interests of the dominant, and the subalterns are "gripped by feelings of humiliation; of being crushed into impotence that derives from the failure to be understood, the simple inability to make their voices heard, to be recognized as the potential makers of their own histories."[33] The metavisions and projects of dominant civil society initiatives are incapable of addressing the deep-rooted structural evils as their perceptions are tainted by the interests of their corporate donors and their own social locations of privilege.

The concept of subaltern counterpublic spheres developed by Nancy Fraser is paradigmatic here. Fraser defines subaltern counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[34] The subaltern counterpublic spheres are alternative discursive arenas for the construction and circulation of oppositional knowledge. The subaltern counterpublic spheres enable the communities at the grassroots to articulate oppositional knowledge and to develop it as a political force to contest dominant knowledge claims. The recognition of the plurality of counterpublics further underscores the reality of the multiplicity of oppression that the communities face and strengthens the attempts for coalitions of solidarity.

Subaltern counterpublic spheres happen at the interface of ethics, knowledge, and politics. Subaltern epistemologies construct their counterhegemonic

31. Collins, *Fighting Words*, 22–32.

32. Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church*, 7–8.

33. Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church*, 35.

34. Fraser, *Justice Interrupts*, 81.

epistemologies as oppositional political and ethical praxis. For them knowledge is a political and ethical praxis which enables them to understand critically asymmetrical social relations, to make ethical judgment on the dominant social structures that push them to the peripheries and erase their cognitive agency to dream and design new worlds together. When the "oppositional gaze" is absent in the discourses in the public sphere, they do not see the reality differently, thanks to the colonization of their perception by dominant ways of knowing. An active collective resistance to dominant ways of knowing is, therefore, a prerequisite for the subaltern oppositional gaze.[35] As bell hooks rightly puts it, with oppositional gaze, "we do more than resist. We create *alternative texts* that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels."[36] Lived experience becomes epistemological when communities transform this experience into an oppositional knowledge. It involves a critical understanding of the reality of subordination and a vision and the political strategy to replace that reality with just and participatory social relations. Subaltern counterpublic spheres are the sites of this interface of ethics, knowledge, and politics.

Subaltern counterpublic spheres consist of communities at the grassroots who share in their bodies the scars of being objectified and represented in the history of knowledge. These are politically conscious communities at the margins, not disembodied or engaged activist individuals. Oppositional knowledge, in fact, is the rejection of the regime of truth of the public sphere which reduces the subalterns to be objects without agency to be represented and colonized. Only those communities that are consciously involved in the process of "coming to voice" and "coming to power" have the epistemic authority and cognitive agency to construct knowledge that is counterhegemonic. They are the movements that are active in contemporary subaltern counterpublic spheres.

As subaltern counterpublic spheres' social movements are involved in the construction of an alternative society: "Movements are not *made*, much less are they *launched* or led by leaders. Whenever opportunities permit or human disenchantments exhaust the limits of human perseverance, movements decoil (unfold) automatically and reveal themselves in the actions of the awakened conflictual consciousness of the collectivity."[37] This is the politics that we witness in the grassroots social movements of our times. It is an activism that seeks to understand social reality with a political and ethical motif in order to transform it radically. It is an engaged and collective

35. I am drawing here from Zachariah, "Theological Re-imaginations of Tourism."

36. bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 218 (emphasis added). Please retain bell hooks

37. Singh, *Social Movements*, 20.

construction of knowledge mediated by their experiences of marginality and counterhegemonic discourses are generated in their struggles. As sites of alternative politics and ethics, social movements are, therefore, sites and texts that contain and encourage the multiple voices of the living political subjects in our times that have the potential to heal the world. These texts can inform us in constructing grassroots ecotheologies that can challenge the perpetuation of the colonization of the commons.

Indigenous Decolonial Environmentalism: Voices from Aotearoa New Zealand

"Colonization is a process of dispossession and control rather than a historical artefact, and now it takes new forms. These forms may be less obviously violent, but they still deny Indigenous people the right to be fully free in their own lands."[38] This observation by Moana Jackson summarizes the history of colonization and its continued impact on Māori and other Indigenous communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. For Māori, *whenua* (land) and *moana* (waterbodies) are sacred, and hence the colonization of the commons is desacralizing the sacred waters and land. In the Māori cosmology, creation is an intricate network of relationships in which all forms of life are mutually defined and linked, and animated by *hau* (wind, breath, life force). *Hau* drives the whole world, not just people. *Hau* emerged at the beginning of the cosmos. *Hau* binds their life journeys together. Colonization of the commons is therefore the destruction of the *hau*.

It is in this context that we need to revisit the Enlightenment notions of ocean and the cartography of Captain James Cook. The Enlightenment logic separates mind from matter and culture from nature. It objectifies and classifies things. Captain Cook's voyage was based on this logic of Enlightenment, and it shaped the laws of the sea and control over the ocean. Captain Cook's cartography reduced *moana* into "a static expanse, divided by lines of latitude and longitude and mathematically partitioned and measured" the *moana*. Scattered islands "were depicted as vacant expanses, waiting to be explored, claimed and ruled" by Europe.[39] And the rest is history. As Geoffrey Park observes, "when the smoke of the colonists' fires cleared at the end of the nineteenth century, New Zealand had become a different country [...]. Huge slices of the ancient ecosystem were missing, evicted, extinguished.'[40] However, the dominant ecological discourses and theologies tend to romanticize the landscape, forgetting the history of settler colonialism. Today it has become

38. Jackson, "Where to Next?" 134.

39. Salmond, "The Fountain of Fish," 318.

40. Park, *Nga Uruora*, 13.

normal to talk about ecology and ecotheology without reference to racism and white supremacy, ignoring the Treaty of Waitangi.[41]

Māori identify themselves as *tangata whenua* (people of the land), affirming that they belong to *whenua* rather than *whenua* belonging to them. This also signifies kinship, the relationship between the Supreme Being, ancestors, people, and the land. *Whenua* also means placenta, and it symbolizes the organic relationship between people and the land. Land cannot be sold. Land provides the community identity, sustenance, clothing, shelter, and the sacred space to perform their rituals.[42]

Land as covenant is a foundational affirmation of Māori. A landless Māori is a nonperson. Māori identity is integrally connected with one's canoe, tribe, ancestral mountain, ancestral river, and marae. The Treaty of Waitangi is understood as a covenant between the Crown and *tangata whenua* ensuring them land rights. *Whenua* as ancestral land (*papatipu*) is central to the Māori worldview and spirituality. Māori are traditionally buried in their ancestral land. Burying the placenta in the ancestral land signifies the link of the new life to *whenua*, *Atua* (Supreme Being), *tipuna* (ancestors), and *tangata*. This notion of *whenua* as ancestral land is a spiritual force that inspires the contemporary land struggles in Aotearoa.

Whenua as *papatuanuku* (earth mother) is a profound Māori ecotheological affirmation. Here land is respected as an ancestor, a spiritual being, and earth mother. Land is therefore *tapu* (sacred). It is the lifeline of the community. *Tikanga* (ethics) principles are in place for the use and treatment of land. *Rahui* (sacred ban) is used to reduce exploitation of the land to facilitate regeneration. Human vocation is to become the guardians (*kaitiaki*) or the treasures of the earth. The notion of land as kin makes it imperative on the community to decolonize the land.

The Treaty of Waitangi offers Māori "full, exclusive possession of their Lands and Estates, Forests, Fisheries, and other properties so long as it is their wish and desire to retain in their possession."[43] However, this covenant was broken to continue the neocolonial aggression on the commons and the commoners. Māori social movements of resistance and resilience against the colonization and commodification of the *moana* and *whenua* are the fertile land that can sprout a relevant ecotheology of commoning for Aotearoa. Te Whanau-a-Apanui's historic and symbolic resistance against offshore oil exploration in their ancestral waters and the ongoing struggle to protect *wahi*

41. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840, was an agreement between the British Crown and Māori chiefs. Today the Treaty is accepted to be a constitutional document that establishes and guides the relationship between the Crown (embodied by the government of New Zealand) and Māori.

42. Cadigan, "Land Ideologies," 123–37.

43. See https://waitangitribunal.govt.nz/treaty-of-waitangi/english-version/.

tapu and the *whenua* of Ihumatao are two significant epistemological sources for a Māori decolonial ecotheology.

In 2011, when the government issued Petrobras a permit to explore oil in their ancestral waters, Te Whanau-a-Apanui were outraged. They sailed San Pietro, their *iwi* (tribe) fishing boat, into the path of Orient Explorer, Petrobras' oil exploration vessel. When the captain of the ship asked them to stay away, this was their response. "We will not be moving, we will be doing some fishing. We wish to reiterate that this is not a protest. We are defending tribal waters and our rights from reckless Government policies and the threat of deep-sea drilling, which our *hapu* [tribe] have not consented to and continue to oppose. We have a duty to uphold the *mana* [authority] of our *hapu* here in our territorial waters."[44]

Colonization of the *moana* is therefore the history of settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalism. In 1965, the Crown's sovereignty over the *moana* was extended out to 3 miles from the coast. In 1977, it was further extended out to twelve miles, and in 1982 to 200 miles defining the oceanic Exclusive Economic Zone. This enclosure of the *moana* is a quantifying and commodifying cartography, alienating traditional communities from their *moana*. White supremacist settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalism are determined to commodify and privatize water flows, forests, flora and fauna, geothermal sources, seabed, foreshore, and minerals. Commons have become commodities for corporate plunder, and that has awakened Indigenous and subaltern communities all over the world to protect and restore the commons. Ecological restoration is integrally connected with the self-determination and sovereignty of the Indigenous communities over the commons.

Colonization of the land is an ongoing reality in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ihumatao is a site of struggle between two worldviews: *whenua* as home and *whenua* as commodity. "I am the *Whenua*; the *Whenua* is me." "This is our *whakapapa* [lineage], this is our identity, this is the thing that allows us to stand strong in this world." These testimonies explain the politics, ethics, and spirituality of the Ihumatao movement. Ihumatao was home for the Māori for more than 800 years. The premediated war initiated by the Crown against the Kingitanga in 1863 was a war against the communities in Ihumatao as well. The very communities who fed and protected the settlers were driven out from their ancestral land. The land was confiscated and granted to the Wallace family from Scotland. In 2016 the Wallace family sold the land to Fletcher Building. In 2017 Fletcher Building decided to construct 480 houses on Ihumatao. This is the context in which the Save Our Unique Landscape (SOUL) movement came into being and started a historic struggle to reclaim their *whenua*. Their mission is to protect and reclaim the whenua from

44. Thomas, "Political Organisation."

corporate takeover. Their vision is to restore the *whenua* to be held for the benefit of all the people of Aotearoa to enjoy as an open, green, and historic reserve. And their values are *Kotahitanga* (unity), *Manaakitanga* (care for), *Aroha* (compassion), *Kaitiakitanga* (guardianship), *Rangimarie* (peacefulness), and *Whakapono* (belief, trust).[45]

Social Movements as Theological Texts

Subaltern social movements are the *locus theologicum* of a decolonial ecojustice theology. How do I substantiate this claim? Subaltern social movements are epistemological communities that contest the hegemonic knowledge systems with their alternative epistemology emerging from the interface of ethics, politics, and knowledge. As knowledge, politics, and ethics are integrally connected in the political praxis of the subordinated others and their movements, their vantage point of the reality and visions of alternatives can provide a better perspective which has the potential to interpret and to radically transform the prevailing social, economic, and ecological relations. The mediation of the collective testimonials of the social movements is crucial not because they present an unmediated version of the "truth" but because they have the potential to destabilize dominant regimes of truth and pave the way for alternative praxis that is life-affirming.

Theology, as collective autobiographical testimonials of communities at the grassroots, is not the story of heroes and heroines. Rather, it is the communal testimonials of dangerous memories of erasure. By invoking these dangerous memories, subaltern social movements contest the dominant episteme and the regime of truth. Contemporary social movements are hence theological texts that can inform decolonial ecotheology in the search for a world devoid of the axis of domination and alienation. The resilient consciousness of the subalterns becomes flesh in the form of social movements reclaiming their moral agency, engaging in praxis toward alternatives, and witnessing to the dawn of a different world. As sites of this alternative politics, subaltern social movements are alternative texts. The realization that social movements embody, as texts of alternative political praxis, and sites of radical social transformation should compel those who engage in Christian ecotheology to be in solidarity and conversation with these movements.

Social movements, as agents of counterhegemonic praxis, are partakers in the salvific project of decolonization where the gospel is happening today. Therefore, the challenge that the social movements pose requires a radical shift in our theological method. It invites us to rethink the "given" sources for doing theology. It transforms theology into a transformative political praxis

45. On the Ihumatao movement (Save Our Unique Landscape) see their homepage at www.protectihumatao.com.

initiated by "the wretched of the earth" to enable the blossoming of the redeemed earth in our own particular local contexts. It provides us alternative experiences of theophanies to discern who God is, where God is present in our times, and what God is doing in our midst. Wherever the victims of colonization and capitalist plunder develop an oppositional consciousness and collectively struggle to reclaim their selfhood and decolonize their commons, we see the presence of the Divine in a special way enabling life to flourish with abundance.

What Is This God Up To and How Ought Humans Respond?

Christian doctrines play a major role in faith formation and faith practices. Doctrines form the theological threads that weave communities of faith together. Doctrines are generally understood as the faith of the Church, and hence doctrines define and regulate the faith of the believers. Doctrines are imaginative lenses that help us to view the world. Dominant imaginations reinforce systems and practices of oppression and exclusion such as colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and ecological injustice. Much doctrine inherited from the past has perpetuated domination, subordination, and subjugation and continues to determine the nature and politics of Christian engagement with the distress of earth. Re-imagining doctrines is hence an important task of decolonial ecotheology. Grassroots social movements are theological texts that can help us in this process.

"God, the creator" is a fundamental faith affirmation of the church. Judeo-Christian creation theology projects a sovereign God, the omni-God, who has authority over creation. Some Christians believe that ecological disaster implies that God is punishing us. They hold that God is testing our faith and teaching us lessons. They also may believe that since God is in control, God will fix the problem in God's time, and we need to patiently wait for God's time. They have the audacity to exhort the faithful in the low-lying atolls to wait for God's ark to save them from the rising waters. A decolonial ecojustice theology contests this understanding of God.

God creates not by affirming God's sovereignty, but by letting creatures be and create themselves. "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind [...] And God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:24). What we see here is an alternative cosmogony, like the cosmogonies of Indigenous communities—a planetary collaboration in creating, sustaining, nurturing, and celebrating life. Creatures emerge in this creative planetary collaboration and organize themselves. Unlike the sovereign, omni-God of the dominant, we see here God as the enfolding of the world. "And God saw that it was good." Such an imagination

of planetary solidarity in creation and restoration is engrained in the vision and politics of grassroots social movements. However, we need to be cognizant of the inherent danger of this vision of planetary solidarity becoming an apolitical feel-good environmentalism.

It is in this context that we need to draw from the Indigenous and subaltern social movements. Grassroots social movements are engaged in the politics of planetary solidarity to destabilize the prevailing unjust socio-political order that perpetuates the destruction of people and the planet. They expose the correlation between ecological/climate crises and class/white/male privilege. Planetary solidarity for the social movements is therefore an alternative political witness of redeeming the earth and the earthlings by "turning the world upside down." Differently said, planetary solidarity is the work of commoning—releasing the commons and the commoners from the shackles of the Empire.

Planetary solidarity is the theological affirmation of a relational God and relational beings outside the logic and control of the Empire. In the anti-imperial apocalyptic vision of the book of Revelation, we see this vision of planetary solidarity. "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life [...] flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life [...] and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:1–3).

When the waterbodies are redeemed from the control of the Empire, they become agents of redemption. The God whom we experience in the work of commoning is not the Creator God and the Redeemer God of classical theism. Rather we experience the Divine in the blossoming of life facilitated through the creative collaboration of relational God and relational beings. Planetary solidarity practiced by the grassroots social movements is revelatory as it discloses the Divine in the subversive work of redemption undertaken by the relational beings.

A decolonial ecojustice theology rejects the dominant notion of "God is in control," as the omnipotent Lord who occasionally steps in to fix it. As we learn from the panentheistic cosmogonies of Indigenous communities, God is a thoroughly "this-worldly God." There is no God apart from the earth. God is also affected by the threat to life that all earthlings face today. As Catherine Keller eloquently articulates, our notions that "God is an all-powerful force of control—always or when "He" deems fit—may actually obstruct God's work in the world and in each of us. And it might be that God's work in the world depends upon our work—precisely because the mystery called "God" is not a projection of sovereign dominance. Not something, someone, that works by top-down control."[46]

46. See https://medium.com/@drewtheological/a-letter-from-catherine-keller-1930029c4914.

The planetary vocation of earth-healing (*tikkun olam*) is not the monopoly of the church. People and communities with multiple religious belongings and no religious persuasions are engaged in the task of repairing the world. We see this deep solidarity at the ground zeros of the ecological crises. The planetary solidarity that we witness today is a "life-centered syncretism" where we negotiate our non-negotiables to annihilate the viruses that devour life.

Planetary solidarity is more than a rainbow initiative of people of goodwill transcending boundaries for the sake of life. It is a celebration of our planetary relationality—humans, animals, vegetables, waterbodies, minerals—celebrating our togetherness. Archbishop Desmond Tutu tried to broaden the African Indigenous concept of ubuntu to include the wider community of creation, and he named it planetary ubuntu. According to Tutu, practicing planetary ubuntu means "to widen and deepen the circle, act with love to all that we are, to our entire community, to our extended planetary being. I am because you are. We are because the planet is."[47]

Decolonizing ecotheology starts with a critical interrogation of the mainstream ecotheology enterprise. It draws from ecojustice theologies that consistently problematize ecological crises as ecological injustice. It offers an alternative diagnosis of the climate crises. Climate change is the consequence of the colonization of the commons. Indigenous and subaltern social movements that are involved in the politics of commoning are theological texts that can inform in developing a decolonial ecotheology. Commoning is the work of planetary solidarity to redeem the commons and the commoners from colonizing systems and practices of domination, conquest, commodification, segregation, and exclusion. In this work of commoning, God is enfolded as relational God in the company of relational beings involved in the redemptive work of decolonizing the commons and the commoners.

Bibliography

Bauman, Whitney. *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014.

Bollier, David and Silke Helfrich. *Patterns of Commoning*. Amherst: The Commons Strategies Group, 2015.

Cadigan, Tui. "Land Ideologies that Inform a Contextual Maori Theology of Land," *Ecotheology* 6:2 (2001), 123–37. https://doi.org/10.1558/ecotheology.v6i2.123

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Conradie, Ernst M. and Hilda P. Koster. *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change.* New York: T&T Clark, 2019.

47. This quotation may be found at http://enviropaedia.com/topic/default.php?topic_id=336.

Crews, Chris. "Earthbound Social Movements and the Anthropocene." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 13:3 (2019), 333–72. https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.39633

Crockett, Clayton and John Reader, "Ecology and Social Movements: New Materialism and Relational Christian Realism." In *Religious Experience and New Materialism,* edited by Joerg Rieger and Edward Waggoner, 83–104. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

De Angelis, Massimo. "Commons." In *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*, edited by Ashish Kothari et al., 124–7. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019.

Fraser, Nancy. *Justice Interrupts: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Gebara, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.

Harris, Melanie. *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*. New York: Orbis, 2017.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hooks, Bell. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." In *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, 207–21. London: Routledge, 2003.

Jackson, Moana. "Where to Next? Decolonisation and the Stories in the Land." In *Imagining Decolonisation*, edited by Bianca Elkington et al., 55–65. Wellington: BWB Texts, 2020.

Jenkins, Willis. *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013.

Keller, Catherine. *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Kim, Grace Ji-Sun and Hilda P. Koster. *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice.* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017.

McFague, Sallie. *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.

Menizes, Heather. *Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good.* Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014.

Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia. *Public Church: For the Life of the World*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2004.

———. *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013.

Northcott, Michael. *A Political Theology of Climate Change*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013.

Northcott, Michael and Peter Scott, eds. *Systematic Theology and Climate Change: Ecumenical Perspectives.* London: Routledge, 2014.

O'Brien, Kevin J. *The Violence of Climate Change: Lessons of Resistance from Nonviolent Activists.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017.

Palmer, Clare. "Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics." In *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology*, edited by Ian Ball et al., 67–86. London: SPCK, 1992.

Park, Geoffrey. *Nga Uruora (The Groves of Life): Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape.* Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1995.

Rieger, Joerg. "Grassroots Social Movements." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, edited by William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott, 558–71. West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2019.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Gaia and God: Eco-feminist Theology of Earth Healing*. London: SCM, 1993.

Salmond, Anne. "The Fountain of Fish: Ontological Collisions at Sea." In *Patterns of Commoning*, edited by David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, 309–29. Amherst: The Commons Strategies Group, 2015.

Singh, Rajendra. *Social Movements, Old and New: A Post-modernist Critique.* New Delhi: Sage, 2001.

Taylor, Mark Lewis. *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011.

Thomas, Amanda. "Political Organisation and the Environment." https://esra.nz/political-organisation-environment/.

White, Jr., Lynn, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155:3767 (1967), 1203–7. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203

Zachariah, George. *Alternatives Unincorporated: Earth Ethics from the Grassroots*. London: Equinox, 2011.

——. "Re-imagining God of Life from the Margins." *The Ecunemical Review* 65:1 (2013), 35–50. https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12025

——. "Theological Re-imaginations of Tourism." In *Global Alternative Tourism Network*, edited by Jai Chang Park, 187–212. Seoul: CM Press, 2015. http://ymcatourism.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/global_alternative_tourism_network.pdf.

Continuing the Conversation on Method in Christian Ecotheology

Ernst M. Conradie (EMC); Heather Eaton (HE); Guillermo Kerber (GK); Loreen Maseno (LM); Cynthia Moe-Lobeda (CM-L); Jocabed Solano Miselis (JS); Jea Sophia Oh (JS); Maina Talia (MT) & George Zachariah (GZ)

EMC & CM-L: *The series on "An Earthed Faith" draws on various strands of narrative theology from around the world. The assumption is that Christian faith has a narrative shape and structure. It tells a story—interpreted differently by different people—of who God is and what God has done, is doing, and may do within our world. Do you have any comments in this regard given the various contributions to this volume?*

GK: I would put it a little differently. I would say Christian faith has narrative shapes and structures and tells different stories. While participating in this project I realized how much the authors' context influenced their contributions, both on the structure and on the contents. The authors' different approaches and emphases highlight various aspects of "who God is and what God has done," acknowledging God cannot be limited to one narrative and, in the case of this volume, to one method.

How to cite: Conradie, EM, Eaton, H, Kerber, G, Maseno, L, Moe-Lobeda, Solano Miselis, J, Oh, JS, Talia, M & Zachariah, G 2022, "Continuing the Conversation on Method in Christian Ecotheology", in EM Conradie & C Moe-Lobeda (eds.), *How Would We Know What God is Up To?,* An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene", Vol. 2, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 215–225. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.11

LM: The variety of contributions demonstrates the variety of interpretations provided for this volume.

HE: What I find interesting is how autobiographical theological proposals are, based in the contexts, informed by specific theological training, and shaped by personal concerns.

GZ: Two observations. I don't consider Christian faith as a single or monolithic story. Christian faith itself is a multitude of stories, and we too bring diverse reflections from our contexts as we encounter these sacred stories. Second, we tend to use the term "narrative theology" to identify the "voices" and "stories" from the margins. It is assumed that what is done at the center is always the "orthodoxy," theology proper, and the theologies constructed at the peripheries are just narratives. This volume, I think, challenges both these assumptions.

JS: Recounting the memories and experiences of faith is already a methodology in itself. How God has revealed Godself to humanity and how cultures have interpreted this allows for manifestation. By meeting each other, we can know other faces of God and even know each other better. Criticizing our own ways of understanding the divine allows us to be humble and embrace interculturality in the ways narratives are told in our context.

EMC: "Yes" to a plurality of such stories in different contexts and changing times. But does such a multiplicity of stories imply different Gods altogether or perhaps only different names for God?

CM-L: Guillermo and George, you point to "different" or "multitudes" of stories within Christian faith(s). Yes, I agree. To me, that multiplicity points to the reality that all humans can perceive or know only a portion of the magnificent and intimate Mystery whom some call God. But it also opens the door to the great challenge of discerning when a "Christian" narrative that claims to be true, actually betrays the God to whom Jesus draws us (by "us" here I mean all of creation). For instance, the story of who God is and what God wants of human beings that undergirded / undergirds colonization was / is a betrayal of God. Jocabed, in your essay, you recount your grandmother's wisdom that some narratives form and others deform. I agree! And that leaves us with the profoundly controversial task of discerning the difference, and perhaps identifying criteria for that discernment? It is a dangerous task. And it is a part of method in theology.

MT: What I can see in this volume is a multicolor earthed faith and many layers of voices that are contextually driven. The organizing question—*who God is and what God has done, is doing, and may do within our world*—is pertinent for a country like Tuvalu. Our fate is in the hands of

the cooperation of many nations and acts of solidarity. The publication enhances our ability to redefine "God" in the context of the climate crisis, the "Anthropocence," the Earth System, and an ever-evolving ecotheology. This volume will provide new ways of interpreting the fusion of the missionary legacy of the nineteenth century and various cultural perspectives. It will help us to abandon those theological narratives that leave us worrying about what have we done wrong and the sense of powerlessness of being victims.

EMC & CM-L: *For this volume, the question is "how?". How are humans to discern what God may be up to and how humans ought to respond? This is a matter of method. What were the crucial insights regarding method that emerged for you as you encountered the essays of the other authors and worked on your own essay?*

GK: Personally rooted in Latin American (LA) liberation theology, the purpose of my essay was to assess whether what LA liberation theologians proposed more than forty years ago is still valid in the "Anthropocene." While LA liberation theologians strongly highlighted issues of social injustice, listening to and reading other essays made me realize that there are many different "faces of the poor," which have been unveiled in the last decades.

LM: Humans have responded and continue to respond variously. African women theologians embrace additional narratives from their cultural context such as folklores and myths for use in their methods. Context in method is therefore important.

JS: From my interweaving with the Gunadule people, I believe that how my people perceive the Divinity in its symbolic universe, that is, how God manifests himself in everyday life, in his relationship with the earth, there is a hermeneutic of encounter, in the earth, which we call Mother. In the theological space of dialogue, of listening as God manifests himself through other living beings, there is a hermeneutic of the earth, but also directly with the Creator from the connections we make in the sung prayer and in our collective memories. So, it seems pertinent to me to recognize that method must also be approached not only from systematic reflection, but also from the worldview and world livings that the Gunadule people have developed in and with their encounter with the Creator, the earth, and the memories.

HE: It reveals how difficult it is to discuss methods—to be fully transparent about the way we approach the topic of "how?" Not everyone exposed in detail their "method" of responding to the question. It took me a long time to lay out (something like a spreadsheet) of methods, in

order to situate what I would do. Then I had to dissect the manner in which I was answering the question, and be clear about why. Personally, I loved the challenge. I believe deeply that we must expose our presuppositions before we assert theological claims. In reading some of the essays I wanted to know more about why the authors went *this way*, rather than *that way*.

GZ: For me, method is more than the question of how. We cannot address the question of "how?" without affirming *who* we are. As Indian theologians remind us, method is the grammar of doing theology. Grammar emerges from the particularity of the interlocutors. Method is not an overarching structure within which we need to fit in our thoughts and reflections. Method is the standpoint(s) that readers discover in their engagement with the text.

MT: In Tuvalu the word for "method" is "alaga" (literally strategic ways). It has to do with your "ways" of tackling any issue in life. It is multidimensional and assumes a diversity of skills. It provokes a combination of ideas. The *alaga* offered by the authors in this volume craft a new way of thinking and challenge the status quo. For Tuvaluan and other Pacific Islanders, our method is one of "Muna o te fale" (literally the wisdom of the house or Indigenous knowledge). It is through our *Muna o te fale* that culture informs our theological *alaga.*

CM-L: I learned so much from the other authors that I hardly know where to begin in responding to this question! I wish that we could all be together for some days to encounter more deeply the realities behind each contributor's words and grappling. One thing made clearer to me through engaging with the other authors is the extent to which the tongue in which one speaks shapes perceptions of reality including perceptions of God. It is so important to "see the eyes through which we see," including the eyes of language. I find it to be such a gift when a person from another language gives me a glimpse of reality as she / he / they know it through the lens of her / his / their word world.

EMC & CM-L: *What insights did you gather on the sources and interlocutors of Christian theology, its aims and starting points, social theories shaping it, and presuppositions grounding it. Context (and thus experience) clearly plays an often decisive role in theological reflection but how does this relate to Scripture, tradition, and reason as "sources" for doing theology as is assumed in the dominant Christian tradition? For example, how does one's mother tongue shape one's thoughts, approaches, and assumptions, and how does that relate to assessing the spirit of the age and how particular humans ought to respond?*

GZ: Mainstream theology tends to reduce sources to canonized and closed sources alone. Contextual encounters with sources will be considered heresies and eisegesis if we try to broaden the scope of the sources. Perhaps, we need to consider epistemological sources as resources and recognize the epistemological potential of non-canonical resources such as orality, folklore, and social movements in constructing alternative theological reflections and praxis.

CM-L: Yes, and that is exactly what some of the authors in this volume did! I am thinking of Loreen who argued for drawing on folklore; Jocabed's turn to song and the Earth as sources; and you, George, insisting on social movements as a source of theological wisdom; and Maina's insistence on Indigenous Knowledge Systems as sources.

GK: While social theories strongly influence most (if not all) of the essays I read, in my essay I tried to focus not so much on social sciences but on "natural sciences," in particular, the science of climate change. The controversy around anthropogenic climate change is a clear example, I believe, of one of the characteristics of the "Anthropocene." This is the challenge to sciences from various standpoints. Another example has been the opposite positions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the use of vaccines. The incredible reach of social media has strongly challenged scientific discourse, therefore questioning the role of "reason," especially scientific or instrumental reason, which had a paramount status some decades ago.

LM: In my chapter an additional source for African women's theology is folklores and myths of African peoples.

HE: The main insight is the sheer plurality of sources, interlocutors, starting points, etc. I did not ground my approach in social theories and ethics, which I often do elsewhere. I was trying to frame my response in Earth sciences more so than social sciences. I find it challenging to navigate the waters of postmodern / postcolonial contextual hermeneutics and the need for a shared vision of the eco-social common good, planetary solidarity, etc.

JS: Doing biblical re-readings in an indigenous key allows us to have another look at the biblical stories, expand, and fertilize our understanding of the Bible and the context. From the mother tongue we can contribute with words and concepts that are sometimes re-conceptualized and re-signified. These only exist in this language that help us to broaden the ways of understanding God, life, the relationship with the earth. We need to recognize that the revelation of God occurs beyond the Scriptures, also in life and in creation and is therefore present in other stories that tell us about God and God's creation.

MT: Re-reading scripture in Tuvalu for me is through the lens of *Muna o te fale.* My re-reading of Luke 10 (the Good Samaritan) was an exercise to complement the traditional way of reading Luke 10. I do not consider my work around Luke 10 as one of "decolonization" but would say that it offers a Tuvaluan re-reading of scripture.

EMC & CM-L: *What other important insights did you gain by working with the other authors or their essays?*

MT: I appreciate the comments made by other authors toward my essay; it strengthened and enriched my way of thinking. I come from a group of islands where there are no theological colleges and no theological libraries. We are sometimes lumped together in the much larger region of the Pacific Islands. Our present threats, our theological needs, and futures are not the same as those larger islands. It is important for those who come from Tuvalu to have access to the insights of those beyond our own immediate region.

GK: The possibility of reading some of the essays and participating in some of the discussions opened my perspective and made me be more humble in my research and convictions.

LM: I appreciated the rigor and conciseness of their contributions.

HE: At a basic level we were able to comment and offer suggestions to each other. I very much appreciate these discussions, and the manner in which this is undertaken. If life were different, I would prefer more in-depth conversations about presuppositions, sources, beliefs, personal concerns, driving questions, etc. That would be interesting, and require time and wine.

GZ: I just want to highlight something that really inspired me from our friends who are part of this project. The importance of self-reflexivity and deep solidarity. Self-reflexivity leads us to the realization of our privileges and to accept them, denounce them, and try to reduce them through encounters of solidarity with the margins.

CM-L: I relearned the beauty and power of intellectual generosity, the commitment to read and understand another's work, and then offer one's best to strengthen it. I have long been aware of the tremendous gift inherent in this. Given that our writing is aimed at helping to build a far more equitable and ecological world, it means a great deal when other people seek to strengthen ones writing so that it may bear more fruit. All of the essays in this volume were made more powerful by the input of other authors.

EMC & CM-L: *Given the multiplicity of perspectives and the complex power dynamics at play in any given situation, how does one discern the "signs of the times," recognize a "moment of truth" (kairos) and discern counter-movements of the Spirit?*

GK: I believe there is no direct answer. As an individual I, and, as theological community, we may still be the addressees of Jesus' criticism to those who are not able to discern the signs of the times. Criteria for discernment, in my view, would include (among others): humility, openness to the other, listening capacity, sound biblical knowledge, dialogue …

HE: The "signs of the times" are difficult to discern. So much is changing in the world—the invasion of Ukraine, the illegal occupation of Ottawa, the populist movements, media saturated realms of misinformation, COVID-19, ecological decline. The ethical and epistemic crises are severe. These, to me, are some of the signs of the times. I consider it our duty as theologians to work across differences, to collaborate, to ground ourselves in the best available knowledge, and to present our views and claims clearly, calmly, and with clarity. Religious voices are so needed today, and we have to find new ways to present these insights—also as a sign of the times.

EMC: Yes, Heather, these are the signs of the times, but what about the counter-movements of the Spirit. These are much harder to discern, don't you think?

GZ: The discernment of the signs of the time is mediated through our organic solidarity with the laments of the unheard.

MT: The destruction of earth and creation, the sinking of islands are sign of the times. It is time to rethink priorities in life in order to save creation and humanity. For us in Tuvalu these signs of the times are not abstractions to be discerned: they are felt, they threaten us, they touch us, they rob us of dignity and undermine our hopes. They cause us to worry about our children and their children, as yet unborn.

JS: It seems to me that the signs of the times are also recognized in the events that are present in the world today: whether it is pain, regret, or suffering that we live as humanity and as a whole creation. But also, in the resistance and resilience that give hope in the movements of youth, women, Indigenous peoples, civil society, and the church, in general they take initiatives to continue dreaming of a better world.

CM-L: Jocabed, you are making me think of George's essay! For me reading the signs of the times means a threefold form of vision: (a) seeing ever more clearly "what is going on" and in particular seeing where evil masquerades as good, (b) seeing more just and ecological alternatives

that are in the making or are envisioned, and (c) seeing the power of the Holy One guiding us from the former toward the latter. I am increasingly convinced that this threefold vision—or reading the signs of the times—depends on relationships. So, it is relationships with others (human and not) that enable discerning the signs of the times.

EMC & CM-L: *This volume seeks to optimize diversity in ecotheology. Amid such diversity what current paths are you able to identity? And what emerging horizons?*

MT: For Oceanians, *Muna o te fale* (wisdom of the house / Indigenous knowledge) is the foundational pathway for doing theology. The parable of the Good Samaritan enabled me to link indigenous scholarship with biblical knowledge and also to think about Islamic ideas of the neighbor.

LM: Spirit ecotheology, prophetic ecotheology and granting the indigenous voices more audience.

HE: Not sure what these questions are getting at. Current paths—I feel the authors are walking on paths that are contextually meaningful and influential. Emerging horizons—my view is that for ecotheology the emerging horizon is to expand dialogue partners. The shifts from philosophy to hermeneutics to the social sciences transformed theological methods. The natural sciences must be added to these interlocutors. Much of ecotheology is still not well-informed by Earth / natural sciences, cosmology, and at times basic ecological literacy. This is a lacuna that must be addressed if ecotheology is to be relevant.

GZ: For me this volume is not a celebration of unity in diversity, rather a solidarity of multitudes. Let me quote Indian theologian Y.T. Vinayaraj to clarify this point. "The multitude is a radical notion of democracy, contrary to the unitary, absolute, and totalitarian democracy. A celebration of multiplicity, relationality, and plasticity. Multitude does not mean unity in diversity or commonality between units; rather it is a shared solitude—a set of relationships without a single essence."

EMC: I have long been intrigued by the symbol of the luring horizon, where land and sky, God and world, today and tomorrow meet. This volume allowed me to see how the horizon is shaped by the contrast between *oikos* (household) and *hodos* (road) that come together in the method (*meta-hodos*) of doing ecotheology (*oikos-theos-logos*).

EMC & CM-L: *If theological method is inherently a theological question, if any method needs to be adequate to the subject matter investigated, what difference does God (i.e., God's identity and character) make to answering any of the previous questions?*

GK: A renewed sense of humility facing the mystery of God, who, nevertheless, reveals Godself as *intimior intimo meo, superior summo meo* (Augustin), and transparently (Teilhard de Chardin). As God chose to reveal Godself through incarnation, human disciplines (sciences, philosophy, theology) constitute human mediations to respond to the questions "who God is and what God has done."

HE: Theological is many things. Discerning God … is the most significant task, and the most fraught with endless difficulties. Transparency of method is crucial.

GZ: A relational God who evolves and unveils in the planetary solidarity of the community of creation inspires us to destabilize all canonized notions of God, the idols that we construct and worship and use to sanction our supremacy and privilege.

MT: God's identity is directly related to climate refugees and sinking islands. A God who does not identify with climate-displaced persons (refugees) is not a God. The God that we proclaim through narratives such as the Good Samaritan calls others to recognize us as their neighbors in need. Such a God summons us to a radical practice of justice in an Earth System that is increasingly problematic for the whole planet.

JS: A sense of confidence to continue deepening in this motivation and desire to know God more and to know God's work in creation, the character of humility, of reciprocity to receive and give what we learn by grace from the holistic co-existence with the creative community. In being embraced by the God of life who gives us the gifts to expand and fertilize theologies from their revealed mystery and walk with full assurance that during our uncertainties, questions, and still no clear answers, we can continue walking for the faith we have in his action in the world.

EMC & CM-L: *If you were to give advice to people who are entering into ecotheology or to people who are seeking to discern what God is up to and how we should respond, what would that advice be?*

LM: Be open, ready to listen from others and move to praxis of earth care.

HE: Get the best, most comprehensive education possible. Learn to expose presumptions. Be clear what you care about and why you shape your responses the way you do. Life-long learning. Be nourished by the natural world, have regular times of silence, and participate in dynamic communities.

GZ: The audacity to be heretics and be courageous to negotiate the non-negotiables for the sake of the earth.

JS: Be an avid learner who leads us to ask questions. Sometimes questions are uncomfortable. What does the gospel have to say to ecology? How does our faith relate to this? What should be our agenda of reflection and action? In addition, being willing to know other forms of life different from ours teaches us an ethic of full life with creation. This is found among Indigenous Peoples.

MT: Think beyond the ordinary and understand your context. Speak truth to power. Think strategically. Engage with the emotionologies of those who practice a form of climate denial when they fail to see the plight of peoples on low-lying islands.

CM-L: Dare to live in and with paradox. The paradox of holding both despair and hope (while letting hope prevail), the paradox of human existence as both unthinkably brutal and infinitely beautiful, the paradox of lament and joy in one breath, and the paradox that transforming advanced global capitalism into more equitable and ecological economies is possible while seeming to be quite the opposite. Do not flee from admitting the horror wrought by the ripping jaws of injustice or from relishing each day the astounding gift of life in all of its radiant splendor.

EMC: Do I spot a Lutheran love for paradox, Cynthia?

EMC & CM-L: *Given what we know about the so-called "Anthropocene," do you think it is appropriate to ask what God may be up to? What could the answer to this question possibly be—preempting the subsequent volumes in this series?*

LM: We could be led to a deeper spirit ecotheology, prophetic ecotheology, and giving the indigenous people groups more attention.

MT: We can only deal with the deepness of God if we ask challenging and deep questions. The "Anthropocene" presents us with that challenge. The very word means "the age of humans." Given the destruction of earth by humans and the rising of sea levels, the question "Where are you, God" is crucial. The parable of the Good Samaritan suggests an ethic of caring for the neighbor in need. It offers an alternative to militarized understandings of ecological / energy security. It offers an alternative to theologies and lifestyles of self-interest.

HE: It is appropriate, even necessary, to ask the question, and we should be circumspect in answering. All the authors in the series should be attempting to respond to these questions—directly or indirectly. Discerning the traces of the divine is the key theological task.

GZ: God is a climate refugee, patiently waiting for the rising of movements of planetary solidarity, the agents of *tikkun olam* in this *kairos*.

JS: I believe that God is acting with the people who are embedded in the movement of the earth. I mean that the action of the Spirit is dynamic in the times, and today it is still actively present in the testimonies, stories, projects, and initiatives of the collectives, people, who are making a significant contribution to address violence and death. I think it is important to integrate, know, and learn from such diversities of voices that allow us to look more broadly at God's action in the world.

EMC: For me this is not only an appropriate but also a deeply disturbing question. An apophatic "no answer at all" helps as a methodological gut reaction but cannot be the only response. None of the available answers seem adequate. None are able to anticipate how God may be making "all things new."

CM-L: Well, if the human creature is to "participate with God" in God's creating and saving work, then we had better do our best to discern what God is up to. But, as far as I am concerned, we must do so while explicitly acknowledging that our knowing—at least this side of death—always will be both fallible and finite. This is vital to recall. And it is so freeing. We are not in this Garden earth for perfection, but rather for communion.

Index

Academic (finite) co-travellers who will dare to accept are invited in the ecotheological 'Anthropocene period' to journey together (without a roadmap), exploring the probing and unnerving question, 'What is God up to?' This question is exploringly posed and rigorously pursued in the book. The reader will find themselves enraptured by the breadth, depth, and height of a methodological approach to the uncharted landscape of the mystery of an (infinite) God, as well as sense-making narratives of our world – contextually and receptively and constructively, as well as sensitively.

Prof. Danie Veldsman, Department Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Since we live on a 'planet in peril', this proposed ecotheology summa is both timely and significant. This book and the series as a whole engage the perennial themes of systematic Christian theology from the perspective of the multiple strands of ecological reflection. I look forward to reading all the volumes of the "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene"' book series.

Prof. Susan Rakoczy, St. Joseph's Theological Institute, Cedara, South Africa

AOSIS
aosis.co.za

Open access at
https://doi.org/10.4102/
aosis.2022.BK295

ISBN: 978-1-77995-242-4