

Christianity

An ecological critique of Christianity and a Christian critique of ecological destruction

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In the field of religion and ecology the role of the Christian tradition is deeply contested. While some criticize the *Christian* roots of current environmental destruction, others treasure the pre-modern ecological wisdom of, for example, the desert fathers, Celtic earthiness, Benedictine monasticism, Hildegard's mysticism or Franciscan spirituality. This chapter uses the deep contestation as a key to depict the current state of debate in Christian ecotheology.

Christian ecotheology entails a twofold critique: an ecological critique of Christianity and a Christian critique of environmental destruction. In the four sections that follow I first situate the ecological critique of Christianity at its current edge, within concerns about climate change. I then suggest that a far-reaching ecological reformation of the various Christian traditions is already underway. This ecological reformation has become very extensive but also highly fragmented, as old disputes between rival schools and traditions, have pushed ecotheology in many directions. In order to bring those directions into view, I offer an overview of the multiple discourses that currently constitute Christian ecotheology. Finally, I explain why the fragmentation and diversity of ecotheology resist attempts to create typologies. I argue that it is better to see doing ecotheology as an ongoing journey through an uncharted landscape with diverse companions.

An ecological critique of Christianity and climate change: Five theses

Ecological criticism of Christianity is common in environmental literature. This was at first prompted by the famous essay of Lynn White (1967) on the historical roots of the ecological crisis. Focusing on climate change, I here distill one articulation of the ecological critique of Christianity – which I lay out in five theses, without further explanation and without providing detailed references to a considerable corpus of literature.

1) At this stage it seems unlikely that a rise of around 4 degrees Celsius in average global surface temperature above the pre-industrial era by 2100 can be averted. This will have severe implications, especially in areas where a higher rise is probable. Averting a 4C rise is unlikely for many reasons, including that an industrialized global economy would need to refrain from using oil, coal and gas reserves already discovered. What would be required is a transformation of the energy basis of the entire global economy from fossil fuels to sustainable alternatives, within a period of 60 years from, let us say, 1992 (the Rio Earth Summit) to 2050. However, since the first two decades were the most important, an important window period has already been missed.

2) In order to prevent such a likely rise in average global surface temperature a multi-dimensional approach would be required that would need to draw not only on science and technology, economic analyses, political will, environmental education and media coverage, but would also need to draw on cultural, moral and spiritual traditions to transform the visions, goals, perceptions, hearts, minds, habits and behaviour of people across the world. Climate change poses not only moral problems around justice, but also spiritual problems. If

one knows what to do and how to do it, but cannot find the moral energy to do what has to be done, this is indeed a spiritual and not only a moral problem.

3) There is a correlation between historic carbon emissions and those countries where Christianity was influential by the advent of the industrial revolution. The correlation seems connected to tacit legitimization of neo-liberal capitalism and consumerist aspirations. This correlation is continued as a result of the popularity of the prosperity gospel. An ecological reformation of the various branches of the Christian tradition is therefore necessary if a rise of around 4 degrees Celsius in average global surface temperature is to be averted. In short, without a radical ecological reformation of historic and current forms of Christianity, it is hard to see a radical transformation of the energy basis of the global economy.

4) In order to be persuasive in the long run, an ecological reformation of the Christian tradition cannot be approached only on functional or pragmatic grounds. It would need to be deeply rooted in the symbols of the Christian traditions, i.e. in the core message of the gospel, the heart of the Christian faith in God as Trinity, an exegesis of the biblical texts, liturgical renewal, and a retrieval of the virtues of faith, hope, love and joy. However, the credibility of such an ecological transformation is undermined by deep denominational and theological divisions within the larger Christian tradition. Moreover, while Christians in some contexts contribute disproportionately to carbon emissions, Christians in other contexts are or will increasingly become the victims of climate change.

5) Although such an ecological reformation of the main branches of the Christian tradition is already underway in numerous local contexts across the globe, this is “slow work” and faces constant corruption from the now global culture of consumerism. Many cultural practices are defended for obvious reasons but are not by themselves sustainable; consider, for example, the carbon footprint of tourism, universities, mega-sports events, and international conferences. At this stage it therefore seems unlikely that a rise of around 4 degrees Celsius in average global surface temperature above the pre-industrial era by 2100 can be averted.

This negative assessment requires further reflection on the possibility and limitations of an ecological transformation of the various Christian traditions. One may well ask: What would it really help?.

An ecological reformation of various Christian traditions

The emergence of Christian ecotheology especially since the 1960s may be regarded as an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom embedded in the Christian tradition as one source for responding to ecological destruction and environmental injustice. However, it is also prompted by the widespread suspicion that the root causes of the crisis are related to the impact of Christianity. Just as feminist theology engages in a twofold critique, that is, both a Christian critique of sexism and patriarchal culture and a feminist critique of Christianity, so ecotheology offers a Christian critique of the economic and cultural patterns underlying ecological destruction, and an ecological critique of Christianity. In other words, ecotheology is not only concerned with how Christianity can respond to environmental concerns; it also offers Christianity an opportunity for renewal and reformation. Indeed, this internal reformation of particular Christian traditions may, paradoxically, be the most significant contribution that Christian ecotheology can make to addressing *global* environmental concerns. Christians also need to be involved in addressing global environmental problems but changing the hearts and minds of its own adherents and getting its own house in order

(addressing its own environmental footprint) may have more impact.

This implies the need to reinvestigate, rediscover and renew Christian traditions in the light of the challenges posed by environmental destruction. Such an ecological reformation of Christianity implies that there are significant flaws in the Christian tradition – else a reformation would not be necessary. It also implies that these flaws can be corrected – else a reformation would not be possible (see Nash 1996).

A reformation cannot be prearranged; it lies beyond anyone's locus of control. It is therefore a gift to be received with gratitude but also with trembling. It is usually not welcomed, not even by its own supporters and prophets. Any radical reformation of the Christian tradition would call for continuous theological explanation. The need for explanation is born from both the polemic and the prophetic nature of such a reformation. The value of such explanations should not be underestimated, since it can sustain an ecological reformation. The value should also not be exaggerated; the environmental impact of ecotheology will be limited. New ideas do not necessarily change the world (although emerging moral visions may well do so – see Rasmussen 2013, 147).

Such a reformation of particular Christian traditions may commence anywhere (as the example of the Lutheran reformation illustrates) but will soon spread to other aspects of the Christian tradition: reading the Bible, retrieval and critique of Christian histories, revisiting Christian symbols, virtue ethics, applied ethics, ecclesial praxis, liturgical renewal, pastoral care, preaching, Christian formation and education, Christian mission, institutional projects and theological reflection on other religions. It therefore almost necessarily becomes comprehensive – but this has the danger of becoming amorphous so that the original stimulus behind the reformation may easily become corrupted through institutionalization.

It is a welcome sign that such an ecological reformation is currently taking place in all the main branches of Christianity, including the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and its various orders, the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Methodist Council, the (ana)Baptist traditions, evangelical Christianity, Pentecostal churches and various indigenous churches. In each case the form of the reformation is shaped by the distinct spirituality of that tradition. It is impossible to give an overview of the literature emerging from within these traditions, given the sheer volume, variety and geographical spread of such contributions. Any references would be necessarily selective and will tend to privilege the better disseminated publications in English emerging from the North-Atlantic cultural and academic hegemony.

The papal encyclical *Laudato Si* by Pope Francis (2015) is one highly significant recent example, but this draws on many similar statements, including the path-breaking work of the “green” Patriarch Bartholomew. One would also need to mention the role of ecumenical bodies at the national, continental and global levels. The World Council of Churches, for example, recognised the call for a “Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society” already at its fifth Assembly in Nairobi (1975), and has sustained pioneering programmes on climate justice. In evangelical and Pentecostal contexts there have emerged commitments to address environmental issues, while retrieving the indigenous wisdom of the traditional custodians of land in other geographic contexts is equally important, if typically publicized by others.

It is remarkable that environmental concerns have been mainstreamed in several traditions so

that a clear sense of leadership is being exercised through resolutions, documents and programmes. It is equally noteworthy that such concerns have been raised in diverse geographical contexts all around the world. This is clearly in response to contextual considerations – either expressing solidarity with the victims of environmental destruction (see e.g. WCC 2002), or as a prophetic critique of complicity in such destruction (see e.g. Moe-Lobeda 2013). What is the actual (ecological) impact of such ecclesial resolutions? Although there have emerged some evocative local examples of carbon neutral Christian communities (including the Vatican itself), the actual environmental impact of such reforms nevertheless remains limited in terms of ecclesial praxis. Such impact would best be measured in terms of the patterns of production and consumption of the lay members of such churches wherever they live and work – and not so much by official church statements.

Distinct Christian discourses on ecology

This ongoing reformation of various Christian traditions has prompted reflection in the form of an enormous corpus of publications (by now probably in excess of 10 000 books, articles and essays – see Conradie 2006). Such literature is to be welcomed but the extensiveness of the reform movement has come at the cost of fragmentation, against its own inclinations for ecological wholeness. It is no longer possible to speak of Christian ecotheology in the singular. Instead, a conflicting variety of schools and guilds in which old methodological disputes have re-emerged have become the dominant feature of Christian ecotheology. Ecotheologians worldwide do not talk primarily to each other, because the scope of the field is so large that everyone has to focus more narrowly on specific discourses. It may be helpful here to sketch this situation by identifying a number of distinct, if overlapping discourses. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the contributions made within each discourse, but to identify the unresolved issues at the cutting edge of each discourse and to indicate the methodological tensions that prevail between these discourses.

Biblical Hermeneutics: There are many attempts to retrieve the ecological wisdom embedded in the biblical roots of the Christian tradition. Such exegetical work naturally tends to focus on texts related to God's creation that seem congenial to ecological concerns. Although the agenda is to indicate that the Bible is "filled to the brim" with ecological wisdom, the limited choice of texts does not help Christian communities to relate ecological concerns to the core message of salvation. By contrast, others have adopted a critical hermeneutics with the assumption that the domination of otherkind by humankind, religious alienation from the earth and forms of anthropocentrism, if not dualism, are reflected in the canonical texts themselves. The texts were written by humans to serve human interests so that the voice of Earth is undermined (see Habel 2000, 2009). This has resulted in deep tensions between a hermeneutics of suspicion and one of trust in the sacred texts (see Horrell et al 2010). While some find sources in the text for a Christian critique of ecological destruction, others use such destruction as a point of departure for a critique of the same text. For example, while some bemoan our failure to respond to the call to "stewardship" in Genesis 1:28, others trace the root causes of environmental destruction to the "successful" collective response in Abrahamic traditions to this call to "subdue" the earth and to "rule" over it.

Constructive Theology: In almost every confessional tradition and theological school there have been attempts to rethink the content and significance of the Christians faith in the light of ecological concerns. Many tend to focus on the theme of creation (e.g. following Moltmann 1985), the relationship between humanity and nature or the place and responsibility of humanity within God's creation. In this regard many emphasize the need for

responsible stewardship (e.g. Berry 2006), priesthood or guardianship, while others dispute the legitimacy of these metaphors used to express such responsibility (see Conradie 2011, 81-94). Yet others recognize the need to reinterpret all the core symbols of the Christian faith, including the Trinity, faith in God as Father, Son and Spirit, God's work of providence, salvation and consummation and the formation, governance, ministries and missions of the church. As I have argued elsewhere (Conradie 2013), there remain many unresolved issues here, for example on the ecological significance of God's transcendence, on the relatedness of Christ and the Spirit, on doing justice to both God's work of creation and of salvation, and on the plausibility of eschatological consummation (the hope of "going to heaven"). Although there have been some collaborative and ecumenical engagements (see Hessel and Ruether 2000, Edwards 2001, Conradie et al 2014), there is a tendency for such discourses to become insular within particular theological traditions and regional contexts. There is a vast corpus of literature but there remain deep differences that are typically related to diverging views on nature and grace, underlying worldviews, views on faith and science and on the relationship between Christianity and other religions.

A "Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society": Since the WCC Assembly in Nairobi (1975) there has emerged a huge corpus of ecumenical literature offering theological perspectives on ethical concerns over environmental sustainability, economic injustices and violent conflicts (including debates of refugees, gender-based violence and inter-religious conflict). The multiple links between these three sets of issues are widely recognised. These are often related to the etymological links between the Greek root *oikos* (understood as the whole household of God) and the English terms ecology (the underlying logic of the household), economy (the rules for managing the household) and ecumenical fellowship (the inhabitation of the household) (see Rasmussen 1996, Kaoma 2013). However, ever since the World Convocation on Justice Peace and the Integrity of Creation (Seoul, 1990 – see Niles 1992), there has been a tendency to prioritize one of these themes over the other. In over-generalized terms one may speak of a Western emphasis on sustainability (given the impact of industrialized societies), an Eastern emphasis on enhancing life amidst conflict and a Southern emphasis on justice, including economic justice (following Boff 1996) and climate justice (see SACC 2009). This continues to pose challenges for ecumenical communication and solidarity even though the need to address all three agendas together is widely acknowledged. However, there is an even deeper tension here, namely between ecclesiology and ethics (see Best & Robra 1997), between discourse on "Faith and Order" and on "Church and Society". Some emphasize what the *church* is (in terms of the Christian faith) while others focus on what the church *does* (underplaying the distinctiveness of the church). This debate on ecclesiology and ethics remains unresolved.

Ecofeminism and Christianity: In most forms of ecofeminism there is a critique of the logic of domination in the name of differences of gender, race and class underlying modern, industrialized societies. Such domination is reinforced and ideologically justified through a system of interlocking dualisms based on the binaries of male/female, culture/nature, soul/body, transcendence/immanence and heaven/earth. The argument is that such forms of domination are extrapolated towards the subjugation of the land and other forms of life for the sake of human needs and desires. This is subjected to critique in various forms of ecofeminism and ecowomanism in very diverse contexts (see e.g. Ruether 1996, Gebara 1999, Eaton 2005, Gnanadason 2005). One may observe that this critique is related to concerns over sustainability, justice and peace but that it poses specific challenges to Christian belief systems given the fundamental distinction between Creator and creature, the male terminology employed for God (as Father and Son), patriarchal authority and

dominance in church leadership even where the ordination of women is endorsed. This debate is not easily resolved given ongoing theological debates on the Trinitarian confession in relation to various forms of theism, atheism, panentheism and pantheism.

Indigenous spirituality: Concerns over sustainability, justice and peace are often interwoven with critiques of domination in the name of differences of race and culture – and its impact on land. There is some overlap here with contributions in ecofeminism but there is also considerable contestation given the relative priority attached to issues of land vis-à-vis race and gender. This is significant given the relative paucity of contributions to ecotheology within the context of North American and southern African black theologies (see Cone 2001 though). There is a widespread retrieval of indigenous wisdom by Christians within the Aboriginal, African, Latin American, Native American and Nordic contexts – so widespread that it would be inappropriate to single out specific contributions. Where such indigenous spirituality is expressed within a Christian context (e.g. in indigenous churches) one typically finds simmering tensions with mainline Christianity. The deeper debate here has to do with how pre-Christian religious understandings of God relate with the Trinitarian confession of Nicene Christianity.

Animal theology: Christians have traditionally affirmed not only the intrinsic worth but also the equal dignity of all human beings on the basis of the belief that humans are created in the image and likeness of God. Although such equal dignity is still rather counter-intuitive given long-standing class hierarchies, this has been widely endorsed in secular human rights discourse. In more recent times the intrinsic worth of other animals and indeed, given the evolutionary history behind the emergence of hominid species, of all forms of life, have been affirmed in many expressions of animal theology (see Clough 2012, Linzey 1995, Deane-Drummond 2014). In ecumenical discourse such intrinsic worth is expressed in terms of the notion of the “integrity of creation.” However, few have endorsed the notion of biocentric equality – so that the worth of various forms of life is still graded. Such grading seems necessary in order to distinguish between the needs of children and chickens, between household pets and household pests but is contested in wider debates on biodiversity, also in non-Western societies. Where such grading is accepted, this begs the question why such graded value is not applied amongst humans. This debate on biocentric versus ecocentric approaches to environmental ethics is not unique to Christianity. However, it requires special discernment since this may be contrasted with proposals for a Christocentric (e.g. on “deep incarnation”), a Pneumatological (the Spirit as “Giver of Life”) or a theocentric approach (see Gustafson 1994). In general it is striking that this debate on animal theology remains dominated by British and North American voices.

Mission and earthkeeping: The nineteenth century witnessed wide-spread cross-cultural missionary activities. There has typically been an unholy alliance between such missions and the colonial conquest of land (and neo-colonial exploitation of resources). This has prompted not only debates on economic justice but also on Christianity and culture. This is expressed as a critique of the destruction of indigenous cultures but also as a critique of the consumerist culture of countries that benefited from colonial exploitation. These critiques have prompted ongoing reflection on what Christian mission entails. Some acknowledge an earthkeeping dimension to mission so that creation is regarded as being “at the heart of mission” (see Keum 2013). This is often expressed in terms of the priestly responsibility for earthkeeping in local Christian communities. Such a call for responsibility seems to appeal especially to those in positions of relative power (with a large carbon footprint), while the victims of environmental injustice, quite ironically, seek refuge in those countries where the nineteenth century

missionaries came from. In response, the latest WCC mission document *Together towards Life* (Keum 2013) speaks of mission *from* the margins and not only *to* the margins. This debate on mission and ecology may be regarded as the storm center of diverging views and methodological conflict over the relation between missionary praxis and the spiritual sources from which such praxis springs.

Christianity and multi-faith dialogue: Addressing global environmental concerns cannot be done by any one group, even if there are around 2 billion Christians worldwide. It requires Christianity to work together with other religious groups, other organizations in civil society, science and education, business and industry and the various levels of government, not to forget the symbiosis with other forms of life. This need is widely recognized and endorsed. In the South African context this is exemplified by the work of the South African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (see <http://safcei.org/>). It seems perfectly possible, best expressed in the *Earth Charter*, to identify common values and proximate goals to make such cooperation possible (see Rockefeller 2001). However, amongst Christians there are deep divides as to how such cooperation should be interpreted. For some earthkeeping is a form of Christian witness to the triune God, aimed at spreading the Christian gospel to the ends of the Earth to establish God's reign. For others, Christianity is one religion alongside others, which is itself one form of life emerging within evolutionary history in the earth's biosphere (see Knitter 1995). This begs further questions on how Christianity relates to other religious traditions and how the distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate is interpreted.

An ongoing journey instead of a typology

Given the sheer variety of forms of ecotheology in different contexts, traditions, disciplines, with an even wider range of conversation partners (from different disciplines and with diverging philosophies), and the fragmentation in diverging schools and scholarly guilds with underlying methodological disputes, it is hardly surprising that many scholars have offered typologies to classify various approaches and to map the terrain. The typologies employ diverging points of demarcation in terms of forms of spirituality, religious practices, symbols, traditions, orthodoxy, methodologies, sub-disciplines, conversation partners from other discourses and so forth. It seems that there are as many typologies as there are positions! This does not imply that typologies are not helpful, only that no one typology would suffice while no overview of typologies would be comprehensive (Conradie 2011, 1-4).

An added problem is that any typology would tend to reflect geographic and language divides. There is some academic exchange and ecumenical fellowship across such divides, but any mapping of the terrain would tend to reveal underlying worldviews and linguistic assumptions. The very term "worldview" is used with diverging connotations in different discourses. This contribution, for example, is offered from within the South African context and on the basis of international collaboration mainly through the medium of English as a former colonial language. However, given language and other limitations, it may well underplay Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox views (e.g. in Greek or Russian), African indigenous perspectives (see Gitau 2000, Daneel 2001, Mugambi & Vähäkangas 2001 and many others), Latin American contributions (in Spanish), a considerable corpus of literature from the Indian sub-continent (albeit from diverging perspectives) and especially East Asian Christianity, for example from South Korea (see e.g. Kim 2013 besides many publications in Korean). In each context obvious differences emerge when Christians adopt conversation partners from, for example, secularism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism and other eastern religions. In Eastern debates the term "life" is often preferred to the term "ecology"

(see Kim Yong Bock 2014).

One significant attempt to map the terrain in a different way is derived from a colloquium held in San Francisco in November 2011 (see Bauman, Conradie and Eaton 2013) where the metaphor of a journey through an uncharted landscape was proposed. The choice of metaphor suggests that participating in a journey rather than the exercise of mapping the terrain may be the best way to appreciate diversity in ecotheology while also addressing the underlying challenges. In other words: the ecological reformation of Christianity may be understood as an ongoing journey.

The notion of a journey suggests a combination of a sense of place (the spatial turn – see Bergmann 2007) and the recognition of a temporal axis with an uncertain but daunting future. Various dimensions of this journey may be identified and described. It is a journey from an unacceptable present but proceeding with some sense of a destination and purpose. There are diverging sources of inspiration for such a journey, including authoritative sacred texts, tradition, reason and contextual experience, but with different weights attached to such sources. Different scholars employ distinct modes of “transport” (symbols or thematic interests) in this journey.

In traveling on this journey one typically also has to “steer through” certain tensions. These include the tensions between the use of the terms “religion” and “theology” (or philosophy) to describe one’s core research interests, between an emphasis on immanence or on transcendence, between (Nicene) “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” between faithfulness to one tradition and a more eclectic or pluralistic use of traditions and schools, between being “evangelical” and being “progressive,” between particular (narrow group) identities and contested attempts to construct inclusive identities, between a focus on the local or the global, between biocentric, ecocentric or theocentric approaches, between a focus on wilderness or on urban ecology, between a concern for the plight of non-human animals and a concern for the human victims of environmental injustices.

Although there are different theological re-descriptions of this journey, there is also a widespread recognition of the need for diverse companions and therefore for collegiality, affinity, solidarity and cooperation with many others, e.g. environmental activists, scientists, people standing within other religious traditions and those who describe themselves as secular or post-secular.

This collective effort to map the journey of doing ecotheology cannot be an aim in itself; the focus has to remain on the journey itself. This journey demands responses to a looming catastrophe beyond imagination. One may do so with the recognition that we are embedded in a “divine milieu,” journeying in the midst of an ineffable mystery in which we have received and may treasure the wondrous gift of life. An ecological reformation of the various Christian traditions will require such an ongoing journey.

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