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Ecotheology or a Reformational Ecophilosophy?

Theology

Theos + logos. The study of God. Evan Runner says, How dare we attempt to put God under a microscope; it is God who places *us* under scrutiny.¹

Or: God talk. Talk about God. Or God's words. Divine discourse. Human intercourse with the Divine.

Ecology

Is this an intrusion of science into religion? What has the chapel to do with the laboratory (or rain forest)?² Are theologians now expected to be experts in ecology too? Experts, no, but those of us engaged in theological pursuits must not be tempted to dualism: theology (philosophy, metaphysics) deals with the inner person (soul, spirit, mind, i.e., the eternal) while the other sciences (e.g., physics, biology, etc.) deal with the mundane world (nature, culture, i.e., the temporal). Try as you may, it won't work. Even theologians eat, get cancer, raise children, and shake their heads at American politics. No, the biblical tradition—reaffirmed by the Reformational tradition—is of a *Theos* that becomes *Logos*. God in the flesh.

From culinary mandates to social justice programs, the Bible is a record of a Creator intimately invested in creation. From the structure of the “heavens” to the debate over when exactly human life begins, the Church has had no choice but to be engaged in science and

¹ Told to me by my grandfather, Glenn A. Andreas.

² Playing off of Tertullian's famous question, “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?”

culture. Sometimes the Church was wrong, Galileo comes to mind—also the idea that the fourteenth-century Black Death was the apocalypse. And sometimes the Church is slow to come to a consensus; Darwinian evolution, for example, remains a problem for some.

But this time the Church can afford to be neither slow nor wrong.

One does not need a degree in ecology to see the crises unfolding around us. To choose one among a growing list, many of which have been widely broadcast for almost 50 years,³ consider the human flood of refugees fleeing increasingly inhospitable regions (such as Northern Africa, Central America, and parts of Mexico) to already overcrowded “greener pastures” to the north.⁴ The issues surrounding these mass migrations are complex—all of life is—but dwindling natural resources and an increasing human population certainly play a significant role.

What do theologians—God talkers—have to say about that?

We must talk, for our silence makes us complicit with the growing injustices.

What does God say? Who speaks for God?

What do we say to God?

A voice cries out in the wilderness...

Ecotheology

In 1967, Lynn White, Jr., launched a shot across the bow of Christianity with his article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.”⁵ The controversy was not over his use of the word “crisis”; 1960s science had already established that fact. White’s thesis is short and accusatory: the Christian axioms of “faith in perpetual progress” and the “dualism of man and nature” have given Western “mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecological effects, are out of

³ After five decades of authoritative scientific warnings, it is disheartening how little progress has been made in changing our (American) lifestyles. Bron Taylor, a professor at the University of Florida, documents a 2014 survey showing that there are “significant correlations” between both Republicans and White Evangelical Protestants and climate science skepticism (Bron Taylor, “Religion to the Rescue (?) in an Age of Climate Disruption” (unpublished paper, University of Florida, 2014, email attachment to author, April 10, 2015)). This disconnection from reality by such a large segment of our society and leaders begs the question of what other religious influences (e.g., consumerism, progress, etc.) are deafening them to the cries of creation.

⁴ According to the CBS Evening News (August 25, 2015), the Greek island of Lesbos alone is receiving an average of 1,000 refugees a day this year.

⁵ Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155: 1203-07. Accessed July 14, 2015. http://www.siena.edu/ellard/historical_roots_of_our_ecologic.htm.

control”; therefore, “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt.”⁶ His logic is far from watertight, but his prescription is interesting: “Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.”⁷ I couldn’t agree more.

Of greater relevance, in my opinion, is James A. Nash’s 2009 article, “The Bible vs. Biodiversity.”⁸ Nash (1938-2008) was a United Methodist minister, a professor at Wesley Theological Seminary and the Boston University School of Theology, the executive director of the Center for Theology and Public Policy (Washington, DC), and a respected scholar of Christian environmental ethics. This, his final, statement in his specialty, is (a) a sampling of biblical references to nature from Genesis to Revelation, (b) a critique of shallow hermeneutics, and (c) a call for an ecological reformation of Christianity. Regarding the biblical references to nature, Nash concludes, “the bulk of the Bible is indifferent, insensitive, or even antagonistic to untamed nature (as opposed to domesticated nature). The Bible is in the main ecologically unconscious.”⁹ With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Gen. 1 and Ps. 104), the biblical authors are more interested in agriculture than wildness (Gen. 2), ignorant of biodiversity (plant genocide during the flood narrative, Gen. 6-8), view wilderness as wasteland (Num. 14; Deut. 8; Job 24 et al.), and eschatologically predict “the total triumph of civilization, even urbanization” over the wild (e.g., the elimination of the sea in Rev. 21:1; cf. also Lev. 26:6; Ezek. 34:25 et al.). In sum, “The Bible reflects an anthropological mindset....”¹⁰ To expect otherwise, Nash points out, is “an anachronistic fallacy,”¹¹ a kind of eisegesis, as if the Bible were a text on bioresponsibility.

“None of this,” writes Nash,

...is really an indictment of Scripture. It is futile, unfair, and foolish to expect this collection of ancient texts—from a broad assortment of authors and editors, arising from and reflecting more than a millennium of socio-historical conditions—to express a single

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ James A. Nash, “The Bible vs. Biodiversity: The Case against Moral Argument from Scripture,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2009): 213-37, email attachment to author from Bron Taylor, editor of *JSRNC*, April 10, 2015.

⁹ Ibid., 214.

¹⁰ Ibid., 225.

¹¹ Ibid., 215.

moral viewpoint, let alone to embody the emerging moral sensitivities of a modest minority in the early twenty-first century.¹²

In other words, it is a matter of hermeneutics, and many are suspect. Indeed, as Nash writes, “Christians have shown impressive capacities to make biblical texts say or mean what fits their personal values or political perspectives.”¹³ What else can we do? We cannot read Scripture from a neutral, unbiased perspective, no matter how much we may want to. And when we limit ourselves to reading from only one tradition (e.g., Reformed) without being exposed to broader horizons, we risk creating “ecclesiastical ghettos.”¹⁴ For Nash, an ethicist, “The authority of the Bible itself needs a firm moral justification before it can function as a moral arbiter. But that authority flounders on two well-known and related features of the texts: cultural immersion and moral pluralism.”¹⁵ Culturally, first-century Christians reflected much of the value systems of the surrounding (pagan) cultures (e.g., acceptance of slavery), and it was no different for the ancient Israelites (e.g., genocidal war crimes). In spite of the Bible’s incalculably positive influence on Western morality, “the canon canonizes moral pluralism”;¹⁶ therefore we can proof-text our way into a wide variety of disparate ethical conclusions.

So is the Bible useless? Far from it! Nash reminds us of the rational-experiential method of Christian ethics: rational reflection on the dialogue between human experience, the Bible, Christian tradition, and cultural wisdom (e.g., relevant sciences and philosophies). Lest he be written off as yet another rationalist, he emphasizes that “reason is ‘tainted’ . . . Rationalism is only one of the fundamentalisms that pretend to be pure and undefiled.”¹⁷ Instead of the Bible being morally normative, our critical engagement with it is rooted in love (including justice). Rather than warring camps of Christians throwing Bible verses at each other like so many stones,

¹² Ibid., 225.

¹³ Ibid., 228.

¹⁴ Ibid., 229.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 231.

¹⁷ Ibid., 233.

Nash calls us to an “ecological reformation,” a “revisioning of the central affirmations of faith... to cohere with ecological data.”¹⁸

Ecohermeneutics

Unlike Nash, White lays the blame for our ecological crisis at the foot of Christianity—and yet he is not anti-Christian. His article ends on a hopeful note, that if we make Francis of Assisi our patron saint of ecology, we might “depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures.”¹⁹ Nash, a confessing Christian, argues that the Bible is ultimately indifferent to our specific ecological needs and that the way forward lies in adapting our faith to those needs. These are merely two of many voices in what has become known as ecotheology; just like every other subfield of theology, it has as many interpretations as there are scholars. After all, put three Calvinists in a room and you’ll end up with at least four opinions!

Which brings us to hermeneutics. “Ecological Hermeneutics,” according to David R. Keller, is “the act of interpreting the impact of technology with the lifeworld.”²⁰ Leaning on Gadamer and Aristotle, he rejects subject/object dualism and concludes that “any use of technology—whether in relation to scientific research or capitalism—must always be interpreted within the context of the lifeworld in terms of biotic harmony.”²¹ He speaks of justifiable and unjustifiable uses of technology (e.g., bicycles rather than cars), critiques capitalism’s profit motive, and admits “we cannot expect definitive answers”²²—all valid points in my opinion—but nowhere defines “biotic harmony.” Can a biblical ecological hermeneutics do better?

In the late 2000s, the University of Exeter conducted a three-year project on ecological hermeneutics and attempted to do so in an ecologically sensitive manner. For example, no flying in scholars from all over the globe, the carbon footprint would be too large, so it was limited to those in the British Isles, fortuitously including several leading scholars in the field who happened to be visiting from Australia, South Africa, and the US. The result is a collection of essays from a

¹⁸ Ibid., 235.

¹⁹ White, “Historical.”

²⁰ David R. Keller, “Ecological Hermeneutics,” introduction, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Envi/EnviKell.htm>.

²¹ Ibid., section IV.

²² Ibid., section III.

wide variety of theological traditions addressing biblical, church historical, and contemporary perspectives.

In his “Introduction,” David G. Horrell reminds us that the Bible does not “*say* that humans are appointed stewards of creation.”²³ He finds this softening of the Hebrew in Genesis 1:26-28—from “dominion” to “stewardship”—to be an inappropriate interpretation. His intention (along with his fellow editors) for this collection of essays is to offer a broad middle way between the extremes of (a) those who “cherry pick” Bible verses to make the Bible appear “green,” and (b) those who would reshape Christianity beyond all recognition for their ecological agenda.²⁴

As an example from the biblical perspectives section of the book, John Barton searches the prophets, concluding that their primary concern was interpersonal ethics and that to read environmental ethics into their messages would be anachronistic.²⁵ Nonetheless, it is interesting that the prophets see human misconduct as adversely affecting the physical world (cf. Hag. 1:9-11; 2:15-19). Barton also holds out hope that “[b]iblical study is...recovering from a kind of Barthianism that denied all continuities with the enviroing culture.”²⁶

The church history section begins with Irenaeus, continues through Aquinas and Luther, and ends with Moltmann. Jeremy Law examines Jürgen Moltmann, the prodigious theologian who has been writing with an ecological awareness since the 1960s. Moltmann might be considered one of the first ecotheologians and, as such, is a transition figure into contemporary issues. For him, it is the unrestrained science and technology of the Western world that has led us into this ecological crisis²⁷—and this crisis comes with an enormous social justice price tag. Law quotes Moltmann: “The Western standard of living cannot be universalised. It can only be

²³ David G. Horrell, “Introduction,” in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. David G. Horrell, Cheryl Hunt, Christopher Southgate, and Francesca Stavropoulou (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 6 (emphasis original).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁵ John Barton, “Reading the Prophets from an Environmental Perspective,” in Horrell et al., 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁷ Jeremy Law, “Jürgen Moltmann’s Ecological Hermeneutics,” in Horrell et al., 223.

sustained at the expense of others: at the expense of people in the Third World, at the expense of coming generations, and at the expense of the earth.”²⁸

The contemporary perspectives section is well represented by Tim Gorringer’s essay, “Keeping the Commandments.” He reminds us that “Israel’s story tellers knew nothing about the division between sacred and secular”; they believed that “God is concerned with the ordering of every aspect of human life...”²⁹ We are called to look after the needs of our neighbors, and today’s world is adding 80 million new neighbors every day. It is our cheap energy economy over the past two centuries that has skewed our vision of living in balance with the earth. Our focus on “wealth creation,” slave labor (from “cheap labor” overseas to incarcerated workers), and the means of production in the hands of a few is neither sustainable nor biblical (cf. Deut. 15 and Lev. 25).

Several authors in this volume mention the Earth Bible project (Australia) including one who identifies herself as a member of the team. The project’s goal is not a Bible translation but the production of five academic volumes addressing biblical interpretation, i.e., a Christian ecohermeneutics. The primary spokesperson for the project—certainly quoted the most—is Norman Habel, so I read his most recent book, *An Inconvenient Text*,³⁰ where he summarizes the project’s findings. The team began by “formulat[ing] a set of [six] ecojustice principles in dialogue with ecologists.”³¹ They are (1) the *intrinsic worth* of all of creation, (2) the *interconnectedness* of all living things, (3) the *voice* of the Earth as something to listen for, (4) the *purpose* of creation as found in its “dynamic cosmic design,” (5) the *mutual custodianship* of humans and nonhumans in sustaining balance and diversity, and (6) the *resistance* of creation to human-caused injustices.³² In light of these principles, Habel uses a three-part hermeneutic—suspicion, identification, and retrieval—to categorize Bible passages as either “green” (affirming the intrinsic value of Earth) or “gray” (anthropocentric devaluing of nature). His hermeneutic begins with a stance of *suspicion*

²⁸ Ibid., 224.

²⁹ Tim Gorringer, “Keeping the Commandments: The Meaning of Sustainable Countryside,” in Horrell et al., 283.

³⁰ Norman Habel, *An Inconvenient Text* (Adelaide, Australia: ATF Press, 2009). The title is a play off the title of Al Gore’s book on climate change, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

³¹ Ibid., 60.

³² Ibid., 61.

(Are the text’s authors and past interpreters more concerned about human interests than those of the Earth community?), then he moves to an empathetic *identification* with the Earth community, and, in so doing, seeks to *retrieve* (and be surprised by) the voices of the nonhuman characters in the story.³³ This means that when the Bible says in Genesis 1:26-28 to *dominate*³⁴ all living creatures (a gray text) and in Genesis 2:15 to “serve and preserve”³⁵ the Earth (a green text), we should emphasize the latter. When God destroys creation in the (gray) flood narrative, and when God becomes creation in the *Logos* (Jn. 1:1-14; a green text), we should emphasize the latter. Habel’s conclusion: “Our unenviable task, then, is [to] liberate ourselves from the power of those grey texts that have controlled our thinking; and through green texts to listen with empathy to the cries of a suffering creation, and discern God’s presence in solidarity with all who suffer.”³⁶

Do we just ignore portions of Scripture, showing preference to the parts we like and explaining away the ones we don’t? Like Thomas Jefferson, do we snip away the portions we disagree with? I don’t believe this is what Habel, or the Earth Bible project, is about. The truth is, we all choose to explain some portions of Scripture in terms of others, and hermeneutics is—or should be—a forum for declaring and justifying our core religious motive(s) and its/their ensuing theoretical framework for interpretation. For example, our explorations of creation have shaped our interpretative schemes such that we de-emphasize literal references to “the four corners of the earth” (Is. 11:12) or that heaven is “up,” just beyond the clouds (Lk. 24:51). Why then, in light of our current technology-driven ecological crisis, should we not move beyond dominion/ domination to “mutual custodianship”?

Eco-Evangelical

Despite the conclusion of the aforementioned survey correlating many evangelicals with climate science skepticism³⁷ (and the media’s overexposure of that titillating fact), “evangelical ecotheology” is not an oxymoron. Indeed, the cochair of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning

³³ Ibid., 57-60.

³⁴ “Dominion” in Hebrew is *rada*, “what kings and taskmasters do (1Kgs 4:24; 5:16): dominate their subjects and their enemies” (ibid., 5). Habel, similar to Horrell, refuses to let it be softened to “stewardship.”

³⁵ Habel’s translation (ibid., 69).

³⁶ Ibid., 121.

³⁷ Cf. footnote 3 above.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), John Houghton, is an evangelical.³⁸ Daniel L. Brunner, Jennifer L. Butler, and A. J. Swoboda, in their book on evangelical ecotheology, define evangelicalism by weaving together four concepts—conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism³⁹—and then turn that perspective on our planet’s “acute ecocrisis.”⁴⁰

For these authors, “creation care” or “earthkeeping” is grounded in Genesis 2:15, where Adam is placed in the garden to “keep” (Heb.: *shamar*) it. *Shamar* is also used in the well-known blessing from Numbers 6:24, “the LORD bless you and keep [*shamar*] you.” But unlike Habel, Brunner et al. do not consider the context of a *garden*, a human-shaped plot of land. How does this apply to wilderness (from deserts to rainforests) and biodiversity? They do not say. They also read the Noahic covenant as “universalized to include *all* creatures,”⁴¹ i.e., an ecological covenant, and liken us to curators taking care of God’s artistic creation. These are not, in my mind, penetrating exegetical arguments, but rather wishful musings. And I do not see the link to the four marks of evangelicalism (conversionism, etc.). They also introduce some creation-friendly elements from Eastern Orthodoxy and pluck some quotations from Luther and Calvin, but ultimately, I do not think this is going to challenge the thinking of their skeptical evangelical brothers and sisters.

Nonetheless, their book includes enough climate science and ecology to show the urgency of the many crises we face: the precipitous rise of CO₂ in the atmosphere, glacial melting, deforestation, and population growth, to name but a few. Again, although they do challenge the “eschatological escapism”⁴² of some Christians and critique industrialism, I do not see how this is a specifically *evangelical* perspective. The strength of this particular book is not in its evangelicalism but in its heartfelt desire to do the right thing, to justify it via the Scriptures and Christian tradition, and thereby to address the injustices that we as a consumer society have brought to bear on others. Consider what they call the “colonialism of waste.”⁴³ Wealthier

³⁸ Daniel L. Brunner, Jennifer L. Butler, and A. J. Swoboda, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 94.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27 (emphasis original).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 174.

neighborhoods are able to pay (including lobbying) for their garbage to be removed to the proximity of the poor. On a single, shared planet, there is no “away” in “throw away.”⁴⁴ Most of our plastic waste will not deteriorate for eons, and our insatiable appetite for new techno-goodies means that an ever-increasing number of global poor are spending their days pulling apart the toxic components of our “recycled” last year’s models. These types of eco-injustices should concern us all, Christian or not.

For Brunner et al., this is no ivory tower exercise. They conclude with a healthy emphasis on praxis, i.e., living simply by supporting local businesses, questioning technology, slowing down (working less and spending more time with loved ones), avoiding advertising, and practicing frugality.⁴⁵ They close on an evangelical note: greening mission. Quoting Dallas Willard —“Remember, in a pluralistic world, a religion is valued based on the benefits it brings to its nonadherents”—they emphasize what evangelicals are best at, namely, sacrificing their own needs for the well being of others. “Our faith drives us away from systems of power that are based on an ability to consume” and toward “the abundant life Jesus talks about in the Gospels, a world in which there is enough for all, especially the ‘least of these’ (Matt. 25:40).”⁴⁶

Eco-Reformational

Is there a uniquely Reformational voice in this cacophony of Christians attempting to “green” the Bible and the faith? In 1983, Donald K. McKim delivered an essay at a Calvin Theological Seminary colloquium entitle “John Calvin: A Theologian for an Age of Limits.” It was a brave move considering that Ronald Reagan had just swept into the White House three years earlier on a wave of “no limits” rhetoric. McKim speaks as strongly as any of today’s ecotheologians:

No responsible person can believe that ever increasing consumption by an expanding world population will not eventually bring us face to face with the limits of the world’s resources.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid., 208-9.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 194, 198-99.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 196-97.

⁴⁷ Donald K. McKim, “John Calvin: A Theologian for an Age of Limits,” in *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, ed. Donald McKim (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 291-92.

[T]he poverty of much of the world... [is a] challenge... directed particularly to us Americans. Christians of the United States have used the world's resources as intensively as has anyone.⁴⁸

Do biblical religion and theological reflection offer any insights pointing us toward appropriate lifestyles...?⁴⁹

McKim answers that question in the affirmative, using Calvin's *via media* approach to avoid excesses. According to McKim, Calvin warns us "against the dangers of luxuries" and implores us to "curb our appetites" and "make do with the least possible for ourselves so that others might have enough."⁵⁰

But just quoting Calvin doesn't make our ecohermeneutics Reformational, does it?

I would like to suggest a different tack. Any comparison of doctrine, historical or contemporary, will not only run into the problems of categorical cross-fertilization,⁵¹ but, more importantly, is limited to the cognitive aspect of faith.⁵² For a more complete picture, a historical viewpoint will show that reformation is part of a recurring pattern: *ecclesia semper reformanda est*.

Humans stray off track; reformers call them back. Consider the following:

- Ancient Hebrews (Judaism): religion = all of life;⁵³ rooted in the soil/land
 - SYNTHESIS: Hellenized Judaism: religion = part of life (temple sacrifices; urban centralization of power)⁵⁴
- REFORM: Jesus: religion = all of life; focus on marginalized (esp. rural poor); kingdom here and now
 - SYNTHESIS: Roman Christianity: religion = part of life (hierarchy; urban centralization of power; neo-Platonism)
- REFORM: Francis/Luther/Calvin: religion = all of life (Francis: rural poor; Luther & Calvin: priesthood of all believers)

⁴⁸ Ibid., 292.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 309-10.

⁵¹ E.g., Baptist four-point Calvinists, nondenominational adherents to some Reformational ideas, doctrinally illiterate Reformed congregants, those who like Kuyper but not Dooyeweerd (or vice versa), et alia.

⁵² This is what I attempted in an earlier essay, "What Does It Mean to Be (a) Reformed (Christian)?" (Unpublished student paper, Edinburg Theological Seminary, August 1, 2014).

⁵³ I am using a modified version of Evan Runner's phrase, "Life is religion," as shorthand for "all of life should be lived *coram Deo*," i.e., lived consciously in submission to one's Ultimate.

⁵⁴ For the sake of simplification, I am not including the synthesis of Canaanite and Israelite religions and the "reformers" (prophets) that called the Israelites back to YHWH.

- SYNTHESIS: Modernist Christianity: religion = part of life (nature/grace dualism); eschatological escapism
- REFORM(?): Ecotheology: religion = all of life (frugality; limits); rooted in the soil⁵⁵

From this perspective, reformation is less about specific doctrines (many culturally bound) and more about a call to full responsibility to engage with God in *every* detail of one's life. For Francis of Assisi, this meant a complete break with the economics and lifestyle of his father's business; for Luther, a break from the hierarchy and centralized power of Rome; and for Calvin, a return to the hermeneutics of the early church fathers. No reform is perfect, of course, whatever that might mean. Francis was guilty of relying on donations from the very ones whose lifestyles he repudiated; Luther could be accused of removing the bodily tangibles (human confessor, *real* body and blood of Christ, etc.) from those simple folk who need it most; and Calvin was hearkening back to men who were heavily influenced by hellenistic (neo-Platonic) thought.

In this way, being a reformer is akin to being a prophet, calling people back to a grounded, holistic way of life (not just belief) that is normative (God-magnifying) in every sphere of society (building God's kingdom here and now). Reformers are particularly interested in the injustices perpetrated against the marginalized (today that includes nonhuman as well as human) by those in power, and are willing to stand against the flow in the halls of power and say, "Here I stand; I can do no other."

In 1994, two members of the Institute for Christian Studies, Brian J. Walsh and Nik Ansell, teamed up with Marianne B. Karsh, a Canadian forester, to address our relationship with trees and forests from a Reformational philosophical perspective. Typical of the 1990s, they wrestle with the postmodern topic of metaphors and meaning. They conclude: "Metaphors are world-formative, they engage in world-construction.... The metaphors we use mediate the worldview by which we live."⁵⁶ The metaphors of which they speak fall into two opposing camps. Using Martin Buber's terms, one way we speak of trees is "I-It," i.e., as *objects* of our observation, manipulation, utilization—I would add: as *resources*, in the negative sense of their having no

⁵⁵ Again, for the sake of simplification, I am not including Groen van Prinsterer, Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven et al. as reformers calling Christianity away from dualism.

⁵⁶ Brian J. Walsh, Marianne B. Karsh, and Nik Ansell, "Trees, Forestry, and the Responsiveness of Creation," *Cross Currents* 44, no. 2 (Summer 1994), accessed August 13, 2015, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/trees.htm>.

intrinsic value outside of our usage. This way has been most prevalent at least as far back as the Industrial Revolution and remains so today. The other way to speak of (or to) trees is “I-Thou,” i.e., as fellow subjects, fellow creatures, whom we should only observe or utilize with the other’s well-being in mind. Whether or not this seems too anthropomorphic or sentimental, we must admit that in today’s world, “Trees are the weak ones.”⁵⁷ For Walsh et al., the *way* we speak about trees, the metaphors we use, determines our view of and actions with them. As *resources* they are disposable, replaceable; as *fellow creatures* we stand *with* them *coram Deo*. The former view is that of the powers that be; the *reformer* stands with the weak and challenges those powers.

Eco-Catholicism

Earlier in this essay I wrote, “this time the Church can afford to be neither slow nor wrong” with regard to a faithful response to the voice of science. With his encyclical, *Laudato Si* (“On Care for Our Common Home”), Pope Francis places the full weight of the Catholic Church on the side of well-researched, urgent action—particularly aimed at those of us in “developed” countries—against the social and ecological injustices that are rapidly increasing in the “less developed” world. Anyone who has divorced him- or herself from the Catholic world, for whatever reason, would be unwise to ignore this document. Although minor points could be quibbled over and Mary has a cameo at the end, the vast majority of it is Christian in an ecumenical sense, perfectly compatible with Protestantism, and is addressed to “every person on this planet.”⁵⁸ Indeed, it is my wish that every person on our planet would find time to read it and take it to heart. It certainly is more compelling and concise than any of the other books I have read on the subject.

In the introduction, the reader is reminded that this is not the first time the Catholic Church has turned its attention to ecological issues. In 1971, Pope Paul VI spoke about the “exploitation of nature” (§4); in 1979, Pope John Paul II called for a “global ecological conversion” (§5); and in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI identified the systemic economic problems that do not respect the environment (§6). Francis is famous for his inclusiveness and, in like manner, acknowledges “other Churches and Christian communities—and other religions, as

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, Papal Encyclical Letter (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vatican, May 24, 2015), ¶3, accessed June 18, 2105, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. Subsequent references are in parentheses in the text.

well” (§7) who are disturbed by these issues. As one example, he gives a generous amount of attention to Patriarch Bartholomew (representing the Eastern Orthodox community) who, even if largely ignored in the West, has become a staunch voice for ecological reform over the past two decades. Francis turns to his namesake, Francis of Assisi, as an inspiration for an “integral ecology” that “transcend[s] the language of mathematics and biology” (§11). Similar to Walsh et al. above, he recognizes that the way we talk about creation, the metaphors we use—Francis of Assisi called his fellow creatures “brother” or “sister”—affects our attitudes toward and interaction with it. Finally, he does not ignore the fact that decades of warnings have gone unheeded due to both “powerful opposition” and a “general lack of interest” (§14) and offers this letter based “on the results of the best scientific research available today” (§15) as a means of “a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet” (§14).

The document is divided into six chapters. Chapter One, “What is Happening to Our Common Home,” begins with a critique of our “irrational confidence in progress” (§19), offers a litany of problems with our “throwaway culture” (§22) including pollution, waste, a loss of biodiversity, and the breakdown of society (“a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach” (§49, emphasis original)), and ends by examining why our responses thus far are so weak. Chapter Two, “The Gospel of Creation,” is where Francis pulls out the Bible. Among the textual concepts considered are “dominion” (Gen. 1:28; §§66-67), the Jubilee year (Lev. 25:10; §71), the Psalms’ celebration of creation (§72), the dignity of rich and poor alike (Prov. 22:2; §94), and the fact that “all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ” (Col. 1:16; §99). Chapter Three, “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis,” is a critical look at the power of “technoscience” (§103), an economy that maximizes profits at the cost of human beings (§109), and an anthropocentrism that gives “priority to immediate convenience” (§122). Chapter Four, “Integral Ecology,” is a reminder that “we are part of nature” (§139) and that a healthy society is built “on the notion of the common good” (§156), including the importance of the family, distributive justice (§157), and the fact that “the environment is...on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next” (§159). Chapter Five, “Lines of Approach and Action,” addresses the role of international, national, and local policies in affirming the needs of local populations (including indigenous peoples (§179)), not “saving banks at any cost” during financial crises (§189), and not allowing profits to trump all other concerns (§195). Finally, Chapter Six, “Ecological Education and Spirituality,” is a list of suggestions to further our “ecological

conversion” (§217) toward a life of simplicity rather than accumulation (§222), reflection on the Creator through the beauty of creation (§225), a stronger sense of community (§228), and the importance of sacramental worship that “penetrates all creation” (§236). Francis concludes with two beautiful prayers, one for “all who believe in a God who is the all-powerful Creator” and another specifically for trinitarian Christians (§246).

The arc of Francis’s argument over these six chapters could be sketched as follows: (1) we are destroying creation, (2) the Bible affirms creation, (3) the worldview that led to this crisis, (4) an alternative worldview, (5) what communities, businesses, and governments can do differently, and (6) how education and worship can reinforce the alternative worldview.

As Herman Dooyeweerd has demonstrated,⁵⁹ Western thought is rife with dualism. According to him, the Roman Catholic church adopted the Greek matter/form dualism, “sanctified” it as nature/grace dualism, and, via the doctors of the church (e.g., Thomas Aquinas), established it as the basis of the biblical Christian worldview.⁶⁰ In other words, since nature is inferior to and perfected by supernatural grace, the human body is relatively worthless compared to the soul, and the Church is the dominant force leading (guiding, organizing) the rest of society (e.g., theology is the “queen of the sciences”). It took the sixteenth-century Reformers to question the dualism, point to the more holistic and scriptural creation-fall-redemption motive, and break the Church’s monopoly over all spheres of society.⁶¹ Nonetheless, I believe Dooyeweerd would have been shocked—and pleasantly surprised—to read *Laudato Si*.

Chalk it up to Vatican II or Francis’s inclusiveness, this document hardly fits Dooyeweerd’s characterization of Catholic thought. Its entire thrust is toward an integrality (relationality, interconnectedness)—e.g., between ourselves, God, neighbor, and earth (§66)—that is horizontal, circular, weblike and not vertical or hierarchical. It is a “call for a global ecological conversation” (§5), not a command *ex cathedra*. In humble Assisian fashion, it refers to creation as a sister and mother (§1 and throughout), a fellow being in whom we encounter God (§233), not a corrupt or inferior or even neutral thing. “Encountering God does not mean fleeing from this

⁵⁹ Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, trans. John Kraay, ed. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra, newly ed. D. F. M. Strauss (1979; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Paideia Press, 2012).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 116ff.

⁶¹ At least that was the Reformers’ vision. It could be argued that nothing of the sort really materialized until the era of Abraham Kuyper (late 19th and early 20th century) and his ideas on societal sphere sovereignty.

world or turning our back on nature,” Francis writes (§235). Then, quoting John Paul II, “Christianity does not reject matter. Rather, bodiliness is considered in all its value in the liturgical act, whereby the human body...is united with the Lord Jesus” (§235). Francis emphasizes that God “chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within” (§236). Creator/creation distinction? Yes. Denigration matter (nature)? No.

To be sure, there are places where tension is evident. Francis may tell us that we need not flee from this world, but a few paragraphs later he refers to “our common home in heaven” (§243). Nonetheless, the celebration of earthly creation is clear. In a section describing Jesus’ life, Francis writes, “He was far removed from philosophies which despise the body, matter and the things of the world”; those “unhealthy dualisms...left a mark on certain Christian thinkers in the course of history and disfigured the Gospel” (§98). Might he be alluding to Thomas Aquinas? Francis writes with a daring pen. Another tension is found in the anthropological dualism of one’s nature and spirit. A quote from Benedict XVI clearly separates the two (§6), yet Francis later ties them tightly together: “the life of the spirit is not dissociated from the body or from nature or from worldly realities, but lived in and with them, in communion with all that surrounds us” (§216). And free will? Francis makes the remarkably Reformational-sounding statement that “human beings...are...capable of...choosing...what is good...[thanks to] our *God-given* ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts” (§205, emphasis added). This is not your (grand)father’s Catholicism.

An ecological tension is found in describing our (inter)connection to/with creation. It is not “an object simply to be used and controlled” (§11), yet it is a “resource” (§32). Ecosystems “have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness” (§140), “the ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us” (§83), yet we “need not necessarily yield to ‘biocentrism’” (§118). Although Francis draws heavily upon recent scientific findings, he does not presume to wield authority over science—“science and religion...are distinctive approaches to understanding reality” (§62, cf. sphere sovereignty)—but rather offers a “social teaching” (§15) as part of a dialogue with everyone who will listen. The science points to an urgent, unprecedented set of crises that requires a common response. There may be no single solution to all these issues (§§60, 180), but Francis calls for a “true world political authority” (§175, quoting Benedict XVI) in order

to assure the continuity of our common efforts regardless of individual nations' changes of government.⁶²

Francis addresses a span of topics as wide as society itself, from pollution to education, but none of them is so dear to his heart as the poor. It might be said that, for Francis, a Christian perspective on any topic is equivalent to a poor (marginalized, ostracized) person's perspective. It is as though the top man in one of the most hierarchical organizations on earth were saying, "We need to see things from the bottom"; we need to stop deifying the market (§56) and power politics (§178) and start listening to the voices of "the excluded[,]...the majority of the planet's population, billions of people" (§49). Is this so different from God wanting to see things not from a kingly perspective (like another King David) but from that of a poor construction worker's son? In the crosshairs is "compulsive consumerism" (§203) and its "throwaway culture (§§16, 22, 43, 123), discarding the very poor themselves by, e.g., "the export of solid waste and toxic liquids to developing countries" (§51). Consumerism is, of course, tied to capitalism and Francis excoriates those who place their faith in "the invisible forces of the market to regulate the economy, and consider their [those forces'] impact on society and nature as collateral damage" (§123). Instead, we must "question certain models of development, production, and consumption" (§138), especially those "businesses [that] profit by calculating and paying only a fraction of the costs involved" (§195). Most guilty are those multinational businesses that put economic interests before human needs; they leave less-developed countries in worse shape than when they found them (§51). For each one of us, "purchasing is always a moral—and not simply economic—act" (§206, quoting Benedict XVI); we should not be afraid to boycott certain products. From "superficial rhetoric" (§54) to "the increasing use and power of air-conditioning" (§55), our responses to our global problems have too often been too little. "We are one single human family" (§52) and it is about time we start acting like it.

The core of *Laudato Si'*, the seed that Francis would like to plant, is an "integral ecology." Integral, for him, is a healing of the brokenness between nature and society: "Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature..." (§139). It is the fact that "everything is closely related" (§137) and "interconnected" (§138). "We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of

⁶² Please note that Francis is not volunteering for the job. This is not a Catholic conspiracy aiming toward papal domination.

knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision” (§141). What an interesting way to put it. I take his use of the word “humanism” here to mean an all-inclusive way of being human in the world, a way that transcends the reductionistic language of mathematics, physics, and biology (§§11, 81, 92, 110, 112, 199). Notice his specific inclusion of economics. For Francis, the center of the brokenness that he challenges us to heal is a mismanaged economy. Economics is our interface with each other and with nature; it is justice—or lack thereof—in action. *This Economy Kills* is the telling title of a 2015 publication of an interview with Francis. In it, he says, “The vocation to take care of someone or something is human, before being Christian.”⁶³ Care is the normative glue, the creational adhesive that we are guilty of hoarding, not freely giving, in a consumption-driven society. Instead, we should “replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing” (§9).

Conclusion

Francis’s comment above, that to be human is to care, even before being a Christian, makes me wonder if perhaps we are not approaching the entire topic of ecotheology from the wrong way. Recall the opening sentences of this paper. Who are we to put God under a microscope? And yet that is exactly what theologians do: delineate the attributes of God, artificially systemize the diversity of God-experiences we call Scripture, etc. There is nothing wrong with exercising our analytical skills to better understand God, Scripture, and other religious topics, but the moment we believe that our models are Truth itself and lose sight of the limits of human understanding, we are guilty of idolatry. William James famously reminds us that we choose our philosophies based on our personalities; Arne Naess, the father of ecosophy (ecological philosophy), suggests we all share biological and social needs before we split into our various religions, and those needs are a point of ecumenicity; and Francis speaks similarly of care. Even Dooyeweerd’s modal scale demonstrates that analytical knowing is (1) but one aspect of a broader, more integral and vibrant, human experience, and (2) dependent on the proper functioning of our biotic self and environment. Unfortunately, the latter is often limited to something like eating well and getting a

⁶³ Quoted in “Pope Francis on Capitalism and Social Justice,” *Sojourners* 44, no. 9 (September-October 2015): 43. The article is an excerpt from Andrea Torielli and Giacomo Galeazzi, *This Economy Kills* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).

good night's sleep. I would suggest that a normative (Christian, biblical) ecotheology is far more than that.

First, as discussed above, the very term “theology” is problematic from a Reformational perspective. “Theology” is often used to describe our analysis of God (or some Ultimate). Is this really possible? No, in the sense that God is revealed/mediated through creation itself. John Vander Stelt has suggested that we use the term “pisteology” instead, i.e., the study of faith. That might apply to many “theological” topics such as church history or hermeneutics, but if it is extended to include the study of our faith *experiences*, then it runs into phenomenological problems such as subjectivism/relativism. Of greater concern here is the scholastic legacy of giving one's theoretical thinking about God (theology) primacy over other areas of life. This is the “theology of” fallacy: a theology of sports, a theology of economics, a theology of parenting, etc. But when a theologian starts coaching your child's soccer team, you may end up with more prayer and Bible study than practicing the basics. The scholastic legacy is dualistic, a fundamental confusion about and denial of the goodness and value of creation. For the scholastic (dualistic) Christian, the theologian (or pastor, as a representative of the True Faith) stands as a mediator between us and God (and God's creation). The well-meaning theologian and would-be coach looks to the Bible for athletic advice (where little more than a handful of inspirational texts such as “running the good race” will be found) and then inevitably adopts whatever “neutral” soccer techniques he or she has been exposed to. This turns the sport (nature) into a mere tool to bring children to Christ (grace). The Calvinian and (neo-)Kuyperian tradition sees things differently. We need no theologian-mediators between us and God. Each of us—coaches, economists, parents—is to present his or her vocation as a living (developing, interactional) sacrifice before God.

Second, if ecotheology is merely another (dualistic) “theology of,” i.e., a theology of ecology, then it is oxymoronic at worst and ironic at best. Oxymoronic: a “theology of” subjugates (even denigrates) nature whereas ecology focuses on (even celebrates) nature.⁶⁴ Ironic: picture a bunch of heavenly-minded Bible scholars feverishly searching Scripture and church history for the justification and guidance needed to take care of our natural environment. Their intentions may be good, but a more creation-affirming way is the development of a Christian philosophy of ecology founded on the principles of an overall (cosmonomic) Christian

⁶⁴ Interestingly, a literal translation of “ecotheology” could be the study of Nature-God, i.e., pantheism (or perhaps God-in-Nature, i.e., panentheism).

philosophy.⁶⁵ A Christian philosophy of ecology investigates the normative structure of (including laws for) the various ecosystems of our planet and their interrelational whole. An overall Christian philosophy prevents an ecocentric reductionism by placing a Christian philosophy of ecology within the larger, cosmic structure of God's good creation. In light of these distinctions, let us briefly review and evaluate the perspectives included in this paper.

Lynn White, Jr., accuses Christianity of a human vs. nature dualism that has led directly to our current environmental crisis. Inasmuch as Christianity has been influenced by Aristotle (e.g., via Thomas Aquinas), he is right. The Bible's variety of expressions of the Creator/creation distinction are anthropocentric insofar as they represent a human perspective of interaction with God. What other perspective do we have? A hellenistic hierarchical corralling of certain texts can easily lead to a three-part distinction: Creator, human, other-than human creation. From there, an already dualistic (scholastic) theology makes Christendom a culpable partner in the plundering of this temporary earthly home. But not all of Christianity is so dualistic (cf. Francis of Assisi, as White, to his credit, points out).

James A. Nash, who declares that "the Bible is in the main ecologically unconscious" and that to read an ecological agenda into the Bible is anachronistic, is a key to distancing theology from ecology. The one should not dictate to the other its principles of investigation.

Ecohermeneutics as a branch or variety of ecotheology is merely a muddying of the dualistic "theology of" waters. A true ecohermeneutics would be a study of the various (scientific, cultural, mythopoetic) interpretations of nature itself. David R. Keller uses "ecological hermeneutics" as a label for the task of evaluating (interpreting) the effect of technology on nature. The University of Exeter cohort uses the same label for their examination of biblical and church historical texts relating to humanity's interaction with nature. It is here that ethical observations are made regarding the effect on the poor of ecological mismanagement. Norman Habel, representing the Earth Bible project, presents the eisegetical technique of beginning with six ecological principles and then searching Scripture for "green" (helpful) or "gray" (unhelpful) texts—the very anachronistic method that Nash disparaged. Muddy waters indeed. Theology should not be the queen of ecology.

⁶⁵ Cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969). Perhaps, à la Arne Naess, what we need is a Christian ecosophy.

Unfortunately, an evangelical ecotheology fares no better. In the representative book I chose, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology*, the same eisegetical anachronisms occur. Nonetheless, the saving grace of this particular book is that, apparently unbeknownst to the authors, they are feeling their way from a (dualistic) theology of ecology to a (Reformational) Christian philosophy of ecology. They stumble through a healthy amount of “neutral” (unreflected upon) statistics regarding our many global crises, and then conclude with several valuable creation-honoring practices that reflect a biblical ethic.

Under “eco-Reformational” I compared reformers to prophets, those calling us back to a proper relationship with God, and suggested that “ecotheology” (before deconstructing the term) might be a reforming movement drawing us closer to God by caring for “the least of these” in today’s world, which includes our fellow nonhuman creatures.

And finally, under what I have called “eco-Catholicism,” we acquainted ourselves with Pope Francis’s recent encyclical, *Laudato Si*. If this document were offered as the Church (represented by the Pope) declaring its authority over—theology of—ecology or economics, it would fit neatly into Dooyeweerd’s nature/grace dualism scheme. But it does not. Presidential candidate Jeb Bush, a devout Catholic, has been quoted as saying that he does not get his economic policy from the Pope.⁶⁶ But Francis is not dictating economic policy. He is challenging humanity to rise to Jesus’ command to care for “the least of these”—both human and nonhuman. Although the letter includes some biblical hermeneutics, it is not primarily a “theology of” ecology but a plea for justice for the weak, the poor, the voiceless. The very fact that he is suggesting an *integral* ecology that transcends the reductionism of science is shockingly familiar to the Reformational ear. I would encourage a forum of Reformational scientists (particularly climatologists and ecologists) and philosophers (both philosophers of science and general philosophers) to sit down with *Laudato Si* and come up with a response as part of Francis’s call for a dialogue.

Ecotheology or, better, a Christian (Reformational) philosophy of ecology in both technical and publicly accessible forms is urgently needed in today’s world. For “theology of” dualists—from traditional Catholics to most evangelicals—ecological crises are temporary (until Jesus returns) and secondary (to saving souls). For materialist dualists—from unthinking

⁶⁶ “Pope’s a Dope?” *Earth Island Journal* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 7.

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Christians to billionaire capitalists—ethics is neatly sequestered from profits. In the gap stands integralists, holists, and Reformationalists, the latter seeking the integrality of God’s good creation and the inclusion of the marginalized. There is much work to be done. Remember: Luther, when asked what he would do if he knew Jesus were returning tomorrow, said, “Plant a tree.”

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