

God and the Eco-Crisis: An Introduction to Ecotheology

Ecogrief: A Problem in Canada

“Canadians are increasingly showing symptoms of anxiety, “ecological grief” and even post-traumatic stress related to the effects of climate change, according to a new report. The impact of climate change on mental health is something researchers have only recently begun to study and evidence is beginning to mount. It is part of understanding a changing climate as a looming public health crisis. “Food insecurity, post-traumatic stress disorder, population displacement, trauma, cardiorespiratory impacts, and even deaths because of wildfires, floods, storms, heat waves and related poor air quality are some of the health concerns felt in Canada in the past few months alone,” said Dr. Courtney Howard, lead author of the Lancet Countdown report on Canada released Wednesday. “The lack of progress by our governments is affecting us today and will increasingly put public health infrastructure at risk,” she said. The report cites growing evidence, much of it the result of research done in Canada, about not only the physical, but also the mental health effects of climate change.” November 29, 2018

<https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/ecological-grief-among-mental-health-effects-of-climate-change-in-canada-report>

Is Christianity the Root Problem? Lynn White's Early Claim as One Spark toward Ecotheology

“...In sharp contrast [to Greek thought] Christianity inherited from Judaism not only a concept of time as nonrepetitive and linear but also a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God' had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image. Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the 2nd century both Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions...not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”

“At the level of the common people this worked out in an interesting way. In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.... The spirits in natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled.” ~Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* (1967)

No: The Problem is not Christianity as Such but Certain Forms of Early Modern Christianity

“To desacralize nature and matter was to exile God from the world, something essential to the official Newtonianism of the Royal Society in England, where God was responsible for motion, not by being present in nature and thereby providing an inner source of dynamism that made for the motion of the universe, but as a clockwinder, an external source of motion of an otherwise intrinsically brute and inertial universe. And this, in turn, had the consequence that now God, no longer present in matter and nature, was not available to all who inhabit His world. He was a distant, providential figure and access to Him was the exclusive prerogative of the scripturally learned in universities. This complaint of the radical Puritan dissenters should not be confused with the orthodox cliché about Protestant ideals of an individual's relation to God bypassing the Catholic Church's mediation of those

relations. In fact, it is that very Protestant orthodoxy which had converted this individualism to its “possessive” variety, with essential links to property and extraction from property for profit by way of a right, and it was the same Protestant establishment that had deemed “enthusiasm” to be dangerous and argued instead for the exile of God to an inaccessible place, available only to those trained in the formal learning of specialized scriptural knowledges.” ~Bilgrami, Akeel. *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (p. 142).

The Prioritization of History Over Nature

“Our relationship to history is wholly different from our relationship to nature. Man, if he rightly understands himself, differentiates himself from nature. When he observes nature, he perceives there something objective which he is not himself. When he turns his attention to history, however, he must admit himself to be a part of history; he is considering a living complex of events in which he is essentially involved. He cannot observe this complex objectively as he can observe natural phenomena; for in every word which he says about history he is saying at the same time something about himself.” ~Rudolph Bultmann (1934)

Is God's Salvation in Jesus for Human Beings Alone? Against Anthropocentric Soteriology

“How can we imagine the gracious, compassionate love of God for the created world? “The whole creation is groaning in labor pains until now,” we read in the New Testament. Creation waits to be set free from its bondage to decay in order to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God, who are themselves groaning while waiting in hope for the redemption of their bodies (Rom 8: 18– 25). Many theologians have written of human redemption. But how in our day can we understand cosmic redemption? At a time of advancing ecological devastation, what would it mean to rediscover this biblical sense of the natural world groaning, hoping, waiting for liberation? What would it mean for the churches’ understanding, practice, and prayer to open the core Christian belief in salvation to include all created beings?”

“A formidable obstacle looms that would seem to end this exploration before it gets started: sin. In the course of giving public lectures on the subject, I have continually been asked in one form or another: “But what about sin?” Thoughtful listeners queried, “Didn’t Jesus die to save us from our sins?” People pressed on, “Wasn’t the cross an atonement for sin?” Following common teaching, people equated redemption with the pardon for sins said to be gained by Jesus’ death. Since the natural world does not sin, theology would be foolish to include it in the blessing of redemption. Sin and the cross: the connection runs deep and powerful.”

“Yet over the centuries Western theology’s focus on sin became so intense that the wideness of God’s saving mercy throughout the whole created world was by and large overlooked. Any connection between the cross of Christ and cosmic redemption came to seem esoteric. As a result, the natural world was ignored in doctrine, liturgical prayer, and ethical practice. It is hard to take cosmic redemption seriously if redemption is only about forgiveness of human sin. How did this come about? Scripture offers multiple ways of speaking about salvation and diverse ways of interpreting the cross that do not lead into this cul-de-sac. Up to the Middle Ages no one way predominated. Neither did the church officially decide for one over the other. There never was an early council defining the terms in which Christ’s redeeming work had to be understood, unlike specific decisions about his person. To this day the church in the East sees the incarnation as redemptive of all creation, and the resurrection of the Crucified as pledge of hope for all finite creatures who die.”

“To catch this broad meaning, the Danish theologian Niels Gregersen has coined the phrase “deep incarnation.” It is starting to be used in theology to indicate the radical divine reach in Christ through human flesh all the way down into the living web of organic life with its growth and decay, amid the wider processes of evolving nature that beget and sustain life. As he writes, “In Christ, God enters into the biological tissue of creation in order to share the fate of biological existence. . . . In the incarnate One, God shares the life conditions of foxes and sparrows, grass and trees, soil and moisture.” The saving God became a human being, who was part of the wider human community, which shares the membrane of life with other creatures, all made from cosmic material, and vulnerable to death and disintegration. *Clara*: So if we take flesh at its most inclusive meaning, the flesh assumed in Jesus Christ connects

the living God with all human beings; this has been said for centuries. But it also connects the creating God who saves with all biological life and the whole matrix of the material universe down to its very roots; this is the new vision. *Elizabeth*: That's right. You can argue this point from John's prologue itself. It starts with the same words as the opening chapter of Genesis, "In the beginning," thereby evoking the story of creation. The prologue's next verses put the whole gospel that follows in a cosmic context as it speaks of the divine Word making "all things," nothing excluded (Jn 1: 1– 3). Then the Word joins what has been made."

"Deep incarnation understands John's gospel to be saying that the *sarx* that the Word of God became not only weds Jesus Christ to other human beings in the human species; it also reaches beyond us to join the incarnate one to the whole evolving biological world of living creatures and the cosmic dust of which they are composed."

Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*

Christian Resources for Ecological Care

"Possibly we should ponder the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ: Saint Francis of Assisi.... The key to an understanding of Francis is his belief in the virtue of humility—not merely for the individual but for man as a species. Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures. With him the ant is no longer simply a homily for the lazy, flames a sign of the thrust of the soul toward union with God; now they are Brother Ant and Sister Fire, praising the Creator in their own ways as Brother Man does in his.... Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny.... I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists."

~Lynn White

Canticle of the Creatures (St. Francis)

"Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night,
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs."

Learning from Pope Francis

"This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (*Rom* 8:22). We

have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *Gen 2:7*); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.

Various convictions of our faith, developed at the beginning of this Encyclical can help us to enrich the meaning of this conversion. These include the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light. Then too, there is the recognition that God created the world, writing into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore. We read in the Gospel that Jesus says of the birds of the air that “not one of them is forgotten before God” (*Lk 12:6*). How then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm? I ask all Christians to recognize and to live fully this dimension of their conversion. May the power and the light of the grace we have received also be evident in our relationship to other creatures and to the world around us. In this way, we will help nurture that sublime fraternity with all creation which Saint Francis of Assisi so radiantly embodied.

~*Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, by Pope Francis

Our Obligation to Learn from Indigenous Communities

“In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top—the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation—and the plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. They’ve been on the earth far longer than we have been, and have had time to figure things out. They live both above and below ground, joining Skyworld to the earth. Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away.”

“The arrogance of English is that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be a human. A language teacher I know explained that grammar is just the way we chart relationships in language. Maybe it also reflects our relationships with each other. Maybe a grammar of animacy could lead us to whole new ways of living in the world, other species a sovereign people, a world with a democracy of species, not a tyranny of one—with moral responsibility to water and wolves, and with a legal system that recognizes the standing of other species. It’s all in the pronouns.”

“In weaving well-being for land and people, we need to pay attention to the lessons of the three rows. Ecological well-being and the laws of nature are always the first row. Without them, there is no basket of plenty. Only if that first circle is in place can we weave the second. The second reveals material welfare, the subsistence of human needs. Economy built upon ecology. But with only two rows in place, the basket is still in jeopardy of pulling apart. It’s only when the third row comes that the first two can hold together. Here is where ecology, economics, and spirit are woven together. By using materials as if they were a gift, and returning that gift through worthy use, we find balance. I think that third row goes by many names: Respect. Reciprocity. All Our Relations. I think of it as the spirit row. Whatever the name, the three rows represent recognition that our lives depend on one another, human needs being only one row in the basket that must hold us all. In relationship, the separate splints become a whole basket, sturdy and resilient enough to carry us into the future.”

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*