



Creation as Promise: A Dogmatic Approach to Eco-Theology in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The article constructs the emergence of environmental ethics and eco-theology, referring to ecumenical discussions and influences. It then focuses on the difference between two types of eco-theology: one that may be called eco-centric, the other theo-centric. Following the second model and rooted in Karl Barth's approach to creation theology, the argument is put forward that a dogmatic approach today has to be based on the concept of '*creatio ex nihilo*'. Creation is not a commodity but utterly dependent on God's ongoing creative speech-act. A revision of the doctrine of election focuses on creation in a Trinitarian perspective. Creation is an eschatological and soteriological category that is grounded biblically in the post-exilic hope for a new creation. As a promise, it is a critique of all utopic and dystopic claims in human history. This has two consequences. First, the need to regain a realistic concept of the political that allows for conflicting aims and that challenges the concept of dominion. And second, to regain a realistic approach to 'nature' that defines the ethical concern as 'habitability'. The fundamental challenge is to live in a disenchanted world while waiting for the world to come. This tension is enacted in the Eucharist.

Keywords

Eco-theology, creation *ex nihilo*, New Creation, Karl Barth, Eucharist

Introduction

In the early 1970s calling somebody an 'eco' was intended to be an insult or at least a way of ridiculing another person. In those years the general feeling in the industrialized countries of the northern hemisphere was determined by the experience of the '*trente années glorieuses*', the thirty glorious years of uninhibited economic growth from

1945 to 1975.¹ However, by 1972, when it published its study on the ‘The Limits to Growth’, the Club of Rome had already marked those concerns that meanwhile have become even more apparent. Today we know how the climate is affected by the ‘fossil economy’ and the lifestyle related to it, and scientists observe a dramatic extinction of species. Today ‘eco’ is no longer an insult. It has become the key-term to denote our consciousness about the condition of the possibility of human life on planet earth. The perception of the state of the ‘oikos’ is reflected in different conceptual terms such as ‘anthropocene’² (Paul Crutzen), ‘capitalocene’³ (Jason Moore) or ‘ecocene’ (Catherine Keller),⁴ all of which have different political implications. Eco-theology, therefore, is a response to this context. To be more precise: the term reflects a changed perception of context and the claim that this has to be reflected in theology.

A Short History of Environmental Ethics and Eco-Theology (the WCC as context)

In order to describe phases in the development of such eco-theologies it is helpful to look at the programmatic formulas that were developed in the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the past 70 years. From its founding General Assembly in Amsterdam 1948 to the Fourth Assembly in Uppsala 1968 the WCC referred to the context as ‘*Responsible Society*’. The ecological question was only indirectly raised in two contexts: the threat of nuclear weapons (in the light of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and the effects of the ‘rapid social change’ that was triggered by the post-war economic growth and the processes of decolonization.

From 1968 to the Sixth Assembly in Vancouver 1983 the context was described in terms of the challenges that emerged at that time from the globalized context as ‘*Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society*’. The issues named there reflected at the same time social movements, scientific research and theological reflection. The term ‘sustainability’ was introduced in the context of a most remarkable conference at MIT in Harvard in 1966 on ‘Church and Society’. The ‘oikoumene’ began to reflect on the ‘oikologia’ of the ‘blue planet’ (remember the iconic

¹ Jean Fourastié’s term; see his *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979).

² For this see Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, Francois Gemenne (eds.), *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch* (London: Routledge, 2016).

³ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London & New York: Verso, 2015), ch. III, 7.

⁴ Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 91.

image from 1969) in which the human habitat is embedded. The ‘environment’ was invented. Theological reflection in those years tried to respond to the insights of a slowly emerging computer-based eco-science that was visible in the ‘The Limits to Growth’ study and in the concerns and imaginations of the still young ecological movement. The main format, though, was not eco-theology but ‘environmental ethics’.

From 1983 to the Seventh Assembly of the WCC in Canberra 1991 a shift in language occurred. The programme formula now was ‘*Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*’. The shift from the political term, ‘sustainability’, which can be made operative, to the theological formula, ‘integrity of creation’, still has a great impact. The understanding of ‘eco’ had shifted in the ecumenical movement in various ways. Overall, the influence of indigenous, feminist, and Eastern Orthodox reflections on the theology of creation can be detected. The earth – in the now emerging theo-poetic language – can be heard ‘singing’, it may be addressed as a caring ‘mother’, or be praised for being ‘theophanic’. Consequently, the understanding of nature that has shaped the Western theological approach since the late Middle Ages came under fire. Eco-theologies now struggled with the objectified perspective of the Cartesian world-view and the Kantian epistemology that had been prepared by the nominalist rationalization (and digitalization) of the ‘book of nature’, as well as by the establishment of a ‘virtual reality’ on canvas (and screens) by the invention of the central perspective in early Renaissance painting. Theology now no longer emphasized the transcendence but the world-immanence of God, as did Jürgen Moltmann in his path-breaking book *God in Creation* (1985).⁵

Since 1991 the WCC tried to establish a new programme formula; though it never really took on, the call for a ‘Theology of Life’ indicated which way ethical and dogmatic reflection may develop in response to violence, injustice, poverty, lack of freedom, or insecurity, which may somehow be interconnected and endanger the ‘web of life’ in which we are embedded. Something similar can be observed in the political arena: from the ‘Earth Summit’ in Rio de Janeiro (1992) to the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ of the UN 2015 aiming for the ‘well-being for all at all ages’. From now on ‘eco’ means more than just the relation to ‘nature’. This is the main reason why ‘oikologia’ also embraces questions of political economy and social justice or addresses issues such as losing the sense of security in today’s world. The 9th General Assembly of the WCC to be held in 2022 in Karlsruhe will certainly be a stage for this new kind of eco-theology.

All these eco-theologies are still being developed following the trajectories of longstanding theological traditions. Roman Catholic

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 2013; first published in German 1985, then by Fortress Press in English, 1993).

reflections still refer to the logic of the ‘order of grace’ in its relation to an ‘order of nature’. Protestant reflections still follow either Schleiermacher’s concept of religion as a separate inner ‘province’ apart from an outward ‘nature’, or sign up to a Kantian epistemology that takes the experience of ‘nature’ and the so-called ‘natural sciences’ as a framework for theological reflection. A third strand follows the strictly theocentric approach of Karl Barth, who transforms the analogy of being into an analogy of transfigured being in Christ. The Orthodox draw on the Church Fathers of the first millennium as does Anglican ‘Radical Orthodoxy’, though the latter also draws on Barth, claiming that a new ‘analogical turn’ (referring especially to Nicholas of Cusa) could liberate theology from its lockdown to the modern world-view.⁶

Unsurprisingly, therefore, we observe a rising – overwhelming – tide of eco-theological research and publications.⁷ Who would dare to offer a complete overview? Yet, what I intend to offer is an elementary typology of dogmatic approaches before proceeding to establish a dogmatic framework that seems to me necessary in today’s world. I do that as a Protestant theologian in Barth’s footsteps and as an ordained minister of a United Church, the Evangelische Kirche in Hessen and Nassau in Germany.

The Two Types of Eco-Theology

From a dogmatic perspective I see two major approaches. They are determined by the way in which they correlate the terms ‘eco’ and ‘theology’. I call them eco-centric and theo-centric.

Eco-centric Eco-Theology

The dominant eco-centric strand of reflection struggles with the anthropocentrism of Western creation theology and wants to establish a new understanding of the ‘oikologia’ that overcomes the antithetical distinctions that have shaped our understanding of ‘nature’. Instead of taking for granted the perspective of the isolated ‘ego’ and its identification

⁶ See Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids MI & Cambridge UK: William Eerdmans Publishing, 2013).

⁷ Here is a conference-related selection of recent publications: Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology: Theology for a Fragile Earth* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2017); Klara A. Jørgenson, Alan G. Padgett (eds.), *Ecotheology: A Christian Conversation* (Grand Rapids MI & Cambridge UK: William Eerdmans Publishing, 2020); Dermot A. Lane, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue: The Wisdom of Laudato Si’* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2020); Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

with the social position of white, male, rich men (who are considered not to be part of ‘nature’), eco-centric theologians try to sketch what a ‘web of life’ would look like that is not power-ridden or suffers from exploitation. Thus, a new reading of the so-called Noah-covenant is possible, by which we realize that God’s covenant is a covenant with all creation (Genesis 9:9) since God realizes that human wrath and destructiveness will not disappear.

In effect these eco-theologies may emphasize just one perspective, be it feminist or post-colonial,⁸ either emphasizing eco-justice, earth stewardship or a new spirituality of nature.⁹ Nevertheless, their aim is ‘intersectional’: they may hold all possible damages to life on earth in view and work together in solidarity. Pope Francis, with a similar intention in his ‘Laudato Si’, speaks of ‘integral theology’.

Such eco-centric approaches try to understand ‘nature’ as overcoming the epistemological and ontological dualisms of nature and culture, subject and object, as well as materiality and discourse.¹⁰ This includes insights from the natural sciences about the ‘symbiotic planet’ with human beings as ‘holobiontic’ creatures.¹¹ Bruno Latour has influenced the imagination with his ‘Actor-Network-Theory’, which considers all organic and inorganic life-forms as ‘actants’.¹² Support for this way of thinking is found in authors such as Donna Haraway,¹³ Jane Bennet,¹⁴ Karen Barad¹⁵ and others, whose explorations have been called ‘new materialism’.¹⁶

One of the results of this widening of the perspective, though, can be the diffusion of the ‘anthropos’.¹⁷ The borders between animals and human beings as well as between human beings and digitalized machines

⁸ Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Hilda P. Koster (eds.), *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); Sophia Chirongoma, Esther Mombo (eds.), *Mother Earth, Postcolonial and Liberation Theologies* (Minneapolis: Lexington Books & Fortress Academic, 2021).

⁹ Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace. Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008).

¹⁰ Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (trans. Janet Lloyd; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014).

¹¹ Lynn Margulis, *The Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson: 1998).

¹² Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹³ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Rick Dolphijn, Iris van der Tuin (eds.), *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012).

¹⁷ Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People* (London & New York: Verso, 2017).

are blurred. Meanwhile, post-humanists and transhumanists imagine a world in which the ‘anthropos’ is transformed into ‘hybrids’ of all sorts or replaced by technical objects with artificial intelligence.¹⁸ This trajectory opens up a possibility by which the earth may become uninhabitable for human beings as we know them, but may become suitable for other natures or virtual realities, which may find a new and improved home – and in the case of the transhumanist vision – for an immortal anthropic machine. This, by the way, is a new form of anthropocentrism, which leaves behind the limitations of the human body and its entanglement with ‘nature’.

Dogmatically, we observe here a tendency to come up with a *neo-animist* understanding of the world we live in,¹⁹ which in theological reflection is sometimes called *panentheistic*.²⁰ Although this approach takes the distinction between the infinite God and finite creation into consideration, its main concern is that God is perceived in an androcentric way as a sovereign power untouched by the sighing and suffering of creation. The incarnation, therefore, is the clue to the doctrine of God and of creation. Elizabeth Johnson speaks of ‘deep incarnation’, ‘deep crucifixion’, and ‘deep resurrection’, in order to break up an androcentric understanding of incarnation.²¹ The descending movement of God – becoming not simply human, but a creature among creatures – determines the understanding of the ‘oikos’ earth. As a result, it is, according to Sallie McFague, ‘God’s body’ that we crucify by damaging life on earth.²² In addition, Catherine Keller has tried to introduce an apophatic perspective that avoids the animistic impasse.²³ But in the end it is difficult to secure God’s transcendence by just stating it, while the panentheistic matrix shapes the substantial eco-theological reflections.

In this type of eco-theology we can easily detect the traditions of liberation, of feminist and of political theologies that emerged since the 1960s. Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Dorothee Sölle come to mind, but also Leonardo Boff and Rosemary Radford

¹⁸ Donna J. Haraway, *Simions, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1998).

¹⁹ Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

²⁰ Arthur R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford & New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press 1979); this prominently represents such a naturalist and panentheistic position that it excludes the radically new of the ‘coming of Christ’, because it knows only an evolutionary ‘being and becoming’.

²¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2018).

²² Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993); Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

²³ Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Ruether,²⁴ The emphasis is on the suffering and crucified God as the locus of revelation. And the ethical imperative is to care for the integrity of creation. An unresolved question, though, remains with us: in what way is the suffering God more than a symbol of solidarity? What about salvation that involves those who have become the victims of history? The question can also be transformed in view of recent pantheistic eco-theologies: in what way is an animistic understanding of creation of salvific significance? What about the hope for a new heaven and a new earth? And finally: do we really want to say that ecological disaster would be the end of creation?

Theo-centric Eco-Theology

The other type of eco-theology follows a theo-centric approach. Here traditions such as the Anglican Radical Orthodoxy,²⁵ the French Roman Catholic Ressourcement-Theology,²⁶ modern Orthodox thinkers in Europe and the US²⁷ and a renewed Barthian theology (Christian Link, Günter Thomas)²⁸ seem to work in a similar direction. *The focus here is on the creation out of nothing, 'creatio ex nihilo'*. Creation is neither wilfully fabricated from some pre-existent materiality, nor is it an outpouring or an emanation of the divine into the material world. Rather, creation is the expression of the dynamic fullness of life by which God becomes revealed as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the triune God: creating, indwelling creation, and communicating between God and creation.

Understanding creation as intrinsically tied to God challenges especially the Reformed doctrine of election in two ways. Following Calvin, it had been emphasized that salvation depends solely on God's sovereignty and the act of electing or refusing it (double predestina-

²⁴ Exemplary is Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1994).

²⁵ Related creation theologies are offered by Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018); Simon Oliver, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2017).

²⁶ See the interpretation by Bryan C. Hollon, *Everything is Sacred: Spiritual Exegesis in the Political Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

²⁷ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018); David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2019).

²⁸ Christian Link, *Schöpfung: Ein theologischer Entwurf im Gegenüber von Naturwissenschaft und Ökologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012); Günter Thomas, *Gottes Lebendigkeit: Beiträge zur systematischen Theologie* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019); Günter Thomas, *Neue Schöpfung: Systematisch-theologische Untersuchungen zur Hoffnung auf das 'Leben in der zukünftigen Welt'* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

tion). The doctrine of election was thus positioned in soteriology, i.e. on the playing field of creation and human history, and seemed to suggest a choice by God in the modern anthropomorphic sense of the word. If creation is God's eternal self-determination to be 'God for us' – as is revealed in the history of Jesus Christ – the old doctrine of election is transformed and moved into the doctrine of God. God does not need or will creation. Rather, creation is a finite expression of God's infinite being. The world is not God's body (in a panentheistic sense); yet the transcendent God can be intimately present to the world, as is expressed in the divine acts of covenanting, to which the biblical narratives bear witness.

This understanding of creation stops short in describing the inner being of God.²⁹ However, Sarah Coakley – from a Roman Catholic perspective - wants to go further; she speaks of a 'trinitarian *ontology of desire*', qualifying a more general but very popular approach that sees 'relationality' as the ground of the divine being.³⁰ Both approaches, though, are problematic in that they presuppose a striving force in God (either 'desire' or 'relationality'), which denies the gratuity of God's 'choosing life' out of nothing. Others, such as Catherine Keller, want to get rid of the concept of 'election' altogether, because she associates it with Carl Schmitt's concept of sovereignty as decision about the state of emergency. But this despotic understanding of election has nothing to do with the gratuity of God's self-determination in creation, which finds its expression in human history in the 'covenants' of the biblical God. Creation, therefore, may be best understood not as the result of a (despotic) decision, nor of a (longing) desire, but – corresponding to the covenanting of the biblical God – as the free and fully gratuitous self-determination of God.

To start with creation out of nothing also implies that we cannot assign ecological ruptures, violence, and death to other godlike forces or to human sinfulness. *Creation itself is disruptive and awaits salvation*. In other words: *violence and death are woven into the web of life*. The Book of Job must be read together with the creation narratives in Genesis in order to avoid a sentimental and romantic understanding of creation. The two answers that Job gets from God, which respond to his questions about his unjustified suffering, clarify that there are two spheres of creation that resist human control. One is the sphere of wild animals – be it wild donkeys or viruses – that constantly threatens cultivated nature with destruction and death. The other sphere is that of Leviathan and Behemoth, those beasts who threaten to push creation back into chaos. Humanity should not try to play with them, but leave

²⁹ Michael T. Dempsey (ed.), *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: William Eerdmans Publishing, 2011).

³⁰ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 6.

that to God, who holds them under control. Both spheres belong to the creation that God has called ‘good’. And the Book of Job, though it tells of a restitution of Job’s life and wealth, fails to answer the question whether the destruction and the people killed around Job produced just some more victims in the process of history and nature that we have to accept. It is the prophet Ezekiel who insists that this would not be acceptable. He sees the divine breath of life as a stormy wind over the killing fields of history that wakes up and renews the dead. Creation, which is filled with death and destruction, is in need of a new creation.

The creation that comes out of nothing is, therefore, not something where we can make a distinction between the original creation – which then would look like a product – and the ongoing, continuous creation. *Creation is not a commodity, but utterly dependent on God’s ongoing creative speech-act* (for which the Hebrew term ‘bara’ is reserved) that is described in Genesis as God taking a breath and then speaking the Word, through which creation comes into existence. Without the divine fullness of life, to which the *pneuma* and the *logos* belong, creation would fall back into a nothingness that we cannot even imagine, because it has no being in itself. And we also do not need to feel threatened by this nothingness, because creation participates in the divine fullness of life that can never be exhausted.

Dogmatic Revisions – A Tentative Sketch

One dogmatic consequence is the *need for a revised pneumatology*. The Holy Spirit not only revives but is also the giver of life, which stems from the fullness of life in the triune God. In consequence, *we have to revise the dogmatic topology*, which can no longer be constructed by separate loci that invite the idea of a sequence of divine acts like creation, redemption and consummation, which may even be associated with different divine ‘persons’. Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth both sensed that the restrictions of such a ‘systematic’ approach cannot be the last word in a Christian dogmatic. Maybe we need a reset ‘theological grammar’³¹ in a way that allows for a plurality of theological languages and dialects, which can be accessed in various ways. Barth has indicated and to some extent shown in the fragments of the ‘Ethics of Reconciliation’ of his unfinished *Church Dogmatics* (published under the title ‘The Christian Life’),³² that he would need to begin writing

³¹ For this approach see Dietrich Ritschl, *Logic of Theology: A Brief Account of the Relationship Between Basic Concepts in Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987); George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

³² Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981).

it anew with a strong pneumatological emphasis³³ and taking up the old insight that the order of faith (and way of life) springs from the way we pray liturgically (*lex orandi – lex credendi – lex vivendi*). Maybe we should imagine this as an open and circular movement. But – and this is essential – the dogmatic movement begins with and returns to the zero-point of the creation out of nothing but God (*creatio ex nihilo*), which implies the reliable promise (soteriology) of the new creation (eschatology), and which reveals God as creating (Father), indwelling creation (Son) and communicating (Holy Spirit) the fullness of life to creation, as well as the sighing of creation for the Trinitarian God.

The above-mentioned revision of election and divine providence has another consequence that is spelled out with great clarity by the orthodox theologian, David Bentley Hart. If creation is not the playground for a bad-tempered old man with a beard, who elects and condemns according to some impenetrable sovereign will, then *any theology of a double-predestination has lost its ground*. Every creature, organic or inorganic, that has existed, exists, and will exist, is shielded by the divine fullness of life. How could we assume that any creature could get lost to a nothingness that has no existence in itself but can only be identified as a negated possibility?

Another insight of this theocentric eco-theology is the dogmatic clarification that *creation is itself a soteriological and eschatological category*. Creation is not a saga about the origin of things, in the way natural sciences explore the history of the universe, but about the meaning and the ‘telos’ of the world. Barth tried to revise the doctrine of creation along those lines when he stated that the covenant must be understood as the inner ground of creation and, in line with Calvin, creation must be seen as the external ground of the covenant. But this thought was still not radical enough, as an ongoing, androcentric perspective in his doctrine of creation showed. Given the biblical origins of the ‘creation saga’ (as Barth called it, in order to differentiate it from ‘myth’) we must instead say that *the hope for a new creation is the inner ground of creation*. Or, to use the language of Rowan Williams, Christ, the first-born of the new creation, is the ‘heart of creation’.

As we know, the creation narratives emerged in the context of the Babylonian exile. The people of God, defeated in history and deprived of the temple in which the name of God resided, began to trust in the divine power to overcome all historical and natural obstacles and bring about a new creation. This hope may have started small but in the end, as we can read in Isaiah or the Book of Revelation, it embraced the whole cosmos. The liturgical celebration of this hope for a new heaven and a new earth, most likely shaped the narratives of creation.

³³ Andrew K. Gabriel, *Barth’s Doctrine of Creation: Creation, Nature, Jesus, and the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

These biblical narratives may use and struggle with other creation narratives known to the authors of the different layers of the first chapters of Genesis, but the intention is clearly to develop what we call '*creatio ex nihilo*'. There is nothing that can explain the creation associated with God's breathing and speaking. And it is this creation, brought forth by *ruah* and *dabar*, by *pneuma* and *logos*, by Spirit and Word, that God calls 'good'. A creation that is completed with God taking a deep breath on the Sabbath, so that all creation is fanned by the wind that blows from the renewed creation, of which prophets such as Ezekiel and John speak.

Creation out of nothing therefore is a promise, a theological utopia, and a soteriological dogmatic concept. As such it is profoundly relevant to the way in which we relate to the world we live in and which is endangered as a human habitat. In other words: creation out of nothing has ethical implications. Some of them at least should be sketched.

Ethical Implications of '*creatio ex nihilo*'

This theo-centric eco-theology offers *a critique of all dystopic and utopic claims* that human beings could in one or the other way bring about the end of time. The integrity of creation is not something we can either secure or endanger. Creation is something we can trust in. It is a promise. And it is sustained by God.

In the light of these considerations *it does not make sense to suggest that humanity could secure 'the integrity of creation'*, as if creation were a commodity that has been handed over to humanity. The reference to the divine commandment in the Garden of Eden to protect and behold the habitat of paradise is misleading. Human life that takes place outside Eden has no such task and must struggle to sustain itself on earth. This human responsibility would be threatened by either postulating a theo-nomic ethic of the social or by claiming (absolute) ethical autonomy for the individual.

Regaining a Realistic Concept of the Political

If we see creation as promise, we can develop a realistic political theology. All we can do is to avoid chaos (by not playing with Leviathan and Behemoth) and to limit the damage to life inflicted by violence, poverty, lack of freedom, destruction of nature, and insecurity. *Such an ecological ethic must accept that there are all sorts of conflicts of aims.* The aim of reducing carbon-dioxide may restrict individual freedom and create more poverty. This requires political decisions that may be difficult in democratic societies, which are based on exactly the affluence that has generated the ecological crises that we face.

Unfortunately, the UN's 'Sustainable Development Goals' ignore the conflictual nature of those goals (including the other issues mentioned above) and do not address the question of affluence. Thereby, the intended 'ethics of sustainability' is not addressing the real challenges.

To respond to this promise we need a concept of the political that is not tied up with the concept of sovereignty that Carl Schmitt proposed. Catherine Keller, unfortunately, understands creation out of nothing as the exercise of a (white, male, etc.) sovereign, who decides on the exceptional state of emergency. She does not mention or know of the debate that the Roman Catholic convert, Erik Peterson, had with Carl Schmitt in the first half of the 20th century. Peterson argued that Schmitt used a (mono-)theistic concept for his claim that his understanding of sovereignty was a secularized theological concept. Peterson instead demonstrated that the Trinitarian theology of the Church Fathers undermined this understanding of sovereignty as exceptionalist decision. Catherine Keller dismisses this possibility and takes a pantheistic stance that deeply resists the creative power of the Word of God, which she understands as 'absolute decision'.³⁴ Her process theology, by which creation is like God 'becoming'³⁵ and is threatened by the (pre-existent) abyssal chaos, leads to the idea of an 'ecodivine *intercarnation*'³⁶ and to a political theology of 'coalitional intersectionality'³⁷. This political theology of radical immanence ends, not accidentally, with a self-asserting question: 'why not become the new earth, the new public, we imagine?'³⁸

That there is no polity sufficient to become the necessary global agent arises as a major problem. Why? *There is no cosmo-politics*. The concept of politics derives from the link between territory and sovereignty. The concept of political freedom, as the basis for a civil society is based on affluence, an affluence that was only possible by the extension of sovereignty into colonies. Both concepts, territorial sovereignty and individual freedom, are therefore rooted in the exploitation of 'cheap nature' (i.e., cheap energy, cheap food, cheap raw materials, and cheap labour), which is the basis of capitalist/socialist production and consumption. To develop an eco-social market economy, therefore, might not be that easy and may depend on the growing awareness, especially in the industrialized countries, that nature has a price and is no longer free or even for sale.

³⁴ Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 43.

³⁵ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

³⁶ Keller, *Political Theology*, p. 99.

³⁷ Keller, *Political Theology*, p. 156.

³⁸ Keller, *Political Theology*, p. 180.

Already in the 1970s Michel Foucault observed the emergence of a new form of governance. Besides the shift from a governance by discipline to the governance by (self-)control, he also identified *the new form of 'environmental governance'* that tries to control and regulate 'nature' by defining it as the 'environment' of the social.³⁹ Non-human agents, geological forces, and technological artefacts are co-opted and used to defend existing power-structures and lifestyles. The term 'anthropocene' can be used in such a way because it not only makes social and economic positions invisible, but is also suited to fuel techno-managerial and neo-capitalist imaginations. This disqualifies the term 'anthropocene' from our eco-theological reflections.

Creation out of nothing challenges the concept of dominion, which implies the control of 'nature'. Human responsibility is of a very different nature, as a new reading of the creation narratives shows. Instead of claiming a 'dominion', human creatures are called to respond to the gift of creation – whereby God gives fullness out of the fullness of life – with contemplation and praise, as is emphasized in Pope Francis's Encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. A creation-ethic is first of all shaped by adoration. It responds to the ongoing gift of creation by praising the creator and by being grateful for the beauty and goodness of the world we live in, but also by begging and by moaning about all that destroys life and makes the world ugly.

This response of bringing creation before God in these four modes of prayer is related biblically to a theology of the (unspeakable) name of God, YHWH, who stands for the presence of the absent God. The texts contain a divine self-differentiation: God, who lets the name of God dwell in the Temple and in the midst of the people Israel (as well as in Jesus of Nazareth in the NT). This representative nature of the name is reflected in the right and the responsibility of humans to name other creatures. Naming is a very specific kind of care, of doing justice to the created world, to which human beings are called.

Regaining a Realistic Approach to Nature

Additionally, such a creation-theology frees us to be realistic about the earthly '*oikologia*' and to face the real challenges of the ecological crises. Earth system science tells us that we are not in control of the planet. Rather, we live on the 'Mantle of the Earth' (Veronica Della

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (Basingstoke: Picador Books, 2010).

Dora)⁴⁰ in 'Critical Zones' (Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel)⁴¹ that allow for the life forms we know only by very thin layers of the biosphere and the atmosphere. The earth is not ours; we may or may not find a habitat on earth. And we also know that the stable climatic conditions that we experience have only existed for about 12,000 years. The Holocene is a very short and exceptional moment in the history of planet earth. It is a wonder that homo sapiens were able to develop civilisations in this tiny habitat.

The *ethical concern* that we associate with the term 'eco', therefore, should be described with the term '*habitability*', coined by the Indian historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty.⁴² Instead of claiming that we have inherited the world from our ancestors or that we have borrowed it from our children (both metaphors are problematic, because they suggest non-political family relations and conceive the earth as a commodity) we need to develop a humble concept of responsibility in view of the ecological challenges that we face.

So we have to take seriously that *our understanding and perception of 'nature'* is the result of a historical process by which the world has been transformed into an object, a commodity to be dominated and exploited by human subjects. The concept of 'nature', as Pierre Charbonnier has shown in his recent 'environmental history of political ideas' is itself dependent on human 'subsisting, dwelling and knowing'⁴³: the way 'human collectives derive their means of physical reproduction', the 'territorial character of all social existence', and the 'processes by which we ensure an intellectual mastery of things'.

Charbonnier reconstructs our conceptions of society (i.e., of autonomy and sovereignty) and of nature (i.e., the very material structure of the world as well as cultural otherness) as having been co-constructed. The current ecological crises, therefore, are also crises of the political. And this goes deeper than a critique of the 'capitalist mode of production' and the 'techno-scientific objectification of the world'. Our ways of inhabiting the earth and imagining the future can no longer be upheld. Since there is no way back into a (neo-)medieval world or to a lost past, we will have to find a new way of living in the critical zone that

⁴⁰ Veronica Della Dora, *The Mantle of the Earth: Genealogies of a Geographical Metaphor* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

⁴¹ Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (eds.), *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, (Cambridge, MA & Karlsruhe: MIT Press & ZKM | Center for Art and Media, 2020).

⁴² Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category', *Critical Inquiry* 46 (2019), pp. 1-31; see also Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009), pp. 197-222.

⁴³ Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), p. 241.

is our habitat. Maybe we even have to think about living in the ‘ruins’ of this habitat.⁴⁴

Conclusion: Living in a Disenchanted World - Longing for the World to Come

It needs to be repeated. There is no way back to the enchanted world of pre-modernity and to the ‘symbolic realism’ that shaped Christian theology in the first Millennium.⁴⁵ The only way forward is through the critique of the disenchanted world-view, recognizing that in fact, according to Bruno Latour, ‘we never have been modern’. The world we live in is not under our control, and the virtual realities we create are only mirrors of ourselves. Yet, nothing prevents us from awaiting the new heaven and the new earth, of which we are told in the ‘non-identical repetitions’ (Nicholas of Cusa) of Christian worship. In listening to and feeling the breath and the word of God we may be able to see what the world is meant to become. That sets us free from ‘eco-grief’ as well as from overstressing ourselves by striving to protect the ‘integrity of creation’.

Karl Barth saw with great clarity that the premise of the ‘natural’ that constitutes the modern world-view, which is dominated by the so-called natural sciences and the exploitation of cheap nature, can no longer be upheld – not least because it makes the understanding of the incarnation as ‘*assumptio carnis*’ dependent on the *Zeitgeist*. Instead, Barth radicalizes the modern world-view by demonstrating that it does not use its critical potential for self-reflection. Theologically, he marks the border with God as ‘Wholly other’ and by emphasizing the ‘Lordship of Christ’, who not only descended and took on flesh, but ascended and draws all flesh from the old into the new creation. In this he walks in the footsteps of Aquinas, who insisted that there is no ‘*natura pura*’ to which grace is subsequently added. Creation, in other words, is ‘graced nature’ (de Lubac), or, in Protestant terminology, ‘*creatura verbi*’. The theological methodology that Barth invites us to apply, therefore, may be described as *an analogy of the transfigured being* that we associate with the coming of Christ and the new creation.

Unfortunately, Barth himself has not used the full potential of this approach. As a result, Barth’s creation theology⁴⁶ is often dismissed because of his deeply problematic approach to gender that was caught

⁴⁴ Cf. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁴⁵ See: Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 221-247.

⁴⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (13 part-volumes, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969-80), Vol 3,1 and 2.

up in a kind of natural theology. If we move beyond Barth and apply the analogy of the transfigured being, then neither the claim of a natural order of the sexes nor the claim that gender is independent from biology can be sustained theologically. In the transfigured Christ, the revealed heart of creation, there is neither male nor female in the way we perceive sex and gender. And the world to come is neither a patriarchal heaven nor an LGBTIQ paradise. Our real being as humans has yet to be revealed by God the creator in the transfiguration of heaven and earth.

The other example, at which Barth only hints and which is spelled out especially in Orthodox theology, is the Eucharist as ‘an advance on the new creation’⁴⁷ or ‘an advent of the world to come’.⁴⁸ The Church in bread and wine, the earth’s gifts, partakes in Christ’s transfiguration, his ascension from the old creation to the new. In the midst of ‘angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven’, we eat and drink together in the very presence of God. Alexander Schmemmann understands the meal not as a representation of the absent Christ, but as an ascent of the gathered church into the heavenly Jerusalem, taking with it all humanity and all creation.⁴⁹ The Church is drawn up to the heavenly garden city to dine with Christ at his table and enjoy the divine fullness of life. In the epiphany of the healed and transformed creation, the cosmos is revealed as divine creation, as sacramental.

At the table of the Lord we celebrate the new creation. Therefore, we must not be frightened by the realization that - in view of the pandemic, but also of climate change or the extinction of species – our old life is over. It would be a bleak consolation to claim that everything will be all right again. The fiction of man (!) controlling the world is about to crumble. We will have to settle into the highly fragile ecological niche that the current Earth Age offers us. We Europeans, too, will have to live with the devastation that has already been caused. This is the new normal.

And yet, on this fragile planet and in the midst of damaged life, people can gather at the table of the Lord, who draws ‘all creatures great and small’ into eternal life.

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⁴⁷ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2011), p. 72.

⁴⁸ Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, p. 77.

⁴⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987).