

THE FOUR TASKS OF CHRISTIAN ECOTHEOLOGY: REVISITING THE CURRENT DEBATE

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Abstract

This contribution offers a description of the tasks of Christian ecotheology both from a de facto and from a de iure perspective. It suggests that this entails both a twofold critique and a twofold constructive task, i.e. an ecological critique of Christianity and a Christian critique of ecological destruction, a constructive contribution to Christian authenticity and on that basis to multi-disciplinary discourse on ecological concerns in the public sphere. This is unpacked in subsequent sections, holding these dual tasks together through the notion of an ecological reformation and the tension between vision and discernment. It is suggested that a constructive contribution to Christian authenticity is indeed theologically crucial, namely, to discern the movements of the Spirit, now amidst the advent of the Anthropocene. This contribution raises but does not address the theological question as to what God is up to in a time like this.

Keywords: Anthropocene; Christian ecotheology; ecological reformation; providence

Five decades of ecotheology¹

Christian ecotheology emerged as a scholarly discourse in the 1970s,² partly in response to growing ecological concerns, expressed for example in the contested report to the Club of Rome on *Limits to growth* (1972),³ and partly in response to the equally contested thesis by Lynn White that Christianity is a root cause of the environmental crisis given its deeply anthropocentric orientation.⁴ Sources of inspiration to address these challenges emerged from a retrieval of the biblical roots and subsequent history of the Christian tradition, its classic texts, doctrines, moral codes, forms of praxis, saints and leading theologians.⁵ For a decade or two ecotheology retained a clear focus, namely

¹ This contribution is based on a paper presented at a conference entitled “Together towards eco-theologies, ethics of sustainability and eco-friendly churches”, held in Wuppertal, Germany, in preparation for the 11th assembly of the World Council of Churches to be held in Karlsruhe in 2021. The argument was further tested in a paper entitled “Four tasks of Christian ecotheology”, read at an international conference on “Churches in Southern Africa as civil society actors for ecological sustainability”, held at the University of Pretoria, 28-31 October 2019. An earlier, extended version was published as conference proceedings. See Ernst M. Conradie, “What is God really up to in a time like this? Discerning the Spirit’s movements as core task of Christian ecotheology?”, in Lukas Andrianos et al. (eds), *Kairos for creation: Confessing hope for the earth* (Solingen: Foedus-Verlag, 2019), 31-44.

² There were of course precursors to the emergence of ecotheology. See especially Panu Pihkala, *Joseph Sittler and early ecotheology* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2017).

³ See Donella H. Meadows et al., *The limits to growth: A report for the Club of Rome’s project on the predicament of mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

⁴ Lynn White, “The historical roots of our ecological crisis”, *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-1207 (1205).

⁵ One reference may suffice, namely to the now classic study by H. Paul Santmire, *The travail of nature*

reflection on the relationship between “man” and nature, later reformulated as the place and role of humanity within the biophysical environment,⁶ or (for some) humanity’s significance in cosmic evolution.⁷ If anything, ecotheology could be equated with renewed attention to the doctrine of creation, anthropology and environmental ethics.

Since the 1990s ecotheology has become an increasingly amorphous discourse – covering a wide array of themes and underlying problems, situated in diverse geographical contexts, expressed in multiple languages, emerging in basically all confessional traditions and schools of theology, covering all the traditional sub-disciplines of Christian theology, trapped in the same old methodological disputes (e.g. between biblical studies and systematic theology, systematic theology and practical theology, religion and theology).⁸ Arguments are typically reiterated in different contexts, often in isolation from what emerges elsewhere. At the same time, ecotheology is characterised by global divides – along confessional lines, between the North and the South, the West and the East, on issues of gender and sexual orientation and, especially, by reference to contemporary science (especially in the global North) and/or traditional, indigenous wisdom (widespread in the global South).⁹ Worldviews clearly play an important role albeit that this category is itself contested and open to confusion.¹⁰ With other theological discourses, ecotheology shares the need to distinguish Christian theology from other forms of theology (especially in the Abrahamic faiths but also with reference to notions of the “Supreme Being” in Indigenous religion), theology from religious studies, the humanities from the social sciences and, in the Anthropocene, the humanities from the natural sciences.

A twofold critique and a twofold constructive contribution

Given the increasingly amorphous character of Christian theology there is little hope of gaining methodological clarity and a sense of direction for future discourse. Indeed, it is hard to discern any “current paths and emerging horizons”.¹¹ In this contribution I will nevertheless suggest that, at best, throughout the last five decades Christian ecotheology arguably retained both a critical and a constructive task. As I have often suggested, ecotheology offers a dual critique, namely both an ecological critique of Christianity and

(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

- ⁶ It may suffice to mention only one such contribution amongst numerous others, namely by James M. Gustafson, *A sense of the divine: The natural environment from a Theocentric perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).
- ⁷ See especially the contributions in the tradition of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry, particularly Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).
- ⁸ From time to time I have offered reviews of such developments. See especially Ernst M. Conradie, “Reformed perspectives from the South African context on an agenda for ecological theology”, *Ecotheology: The Journal of Religion, Nature and the Environment* 10:3 (2005), 281-314; *Christianity and ecological theology: Resources for further research* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2006); “Contemporary challenges to Christian ecotheology: Some reflections on the state of the debate after five decades”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 147 (2013), 106-123.
- ⁹ See, for example, Heather Eaton, *Introducing ecofeminist theologies* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005).
- ¹⁰ See Ernst M. Conradie, “Views on worldviews: An overview of the use of the term worldview in selected theological discourses”, *Scriptura* 113 (2014), 1-12; “Ways of viewing an evolving world amidst ecological destruction”, *Scriptura* 117 (2018), 1-13.
- ¹¹ See Ernst M. Conradie, Sigurd Bergmann, Celia Deane-Drummond and Denis Edwards (eds), *Christian faith and the earth: Current paths and emerging horizons in ecotheology* (London: T&T Clark, 2014).

a Christian critique of ecological destruction. This is similar to feminist theology that offers a feminist critique of Christianity and a Christian critique of patriarchy, and to Black theology that offers a “Black” critique of Christianity and a Christian critique of white supremacy. These dual critiques need to be held together. The genius of Christian ecotheology lies in its ability to maintain this dual critique. Without a critique of Christianity, it becomes an apologetic exercise that overlooks the need for a radical ecological reformation of Christianity and merely reiterates human responsibility towards the environment through notions of stewardship or priesthood. Without a Christian critique of ecological destruction, ecotheology loses its ability to offer any distinct contribution to wider debates. Ecotheology then becomes nothing more than one branch of “religion and ecology” and cannot avoid the traps of self-secularisation.

Such a dual critique would itself become empty without a recognition of the more constructive task of ecotheology. This constructive task is also of a dual nature. This includes both a contribution to Christian authenticity and, on that particular basis, also a contribution to public, inter-disciplinary discourse on sustainability¹² – where such a contribution is often highly contested. I will suggest below that the former entails five key prophetic and pastoral tasks, namely to read the signs of the times (the symptoms), to expose the underlying root causes of the problem (diagnostics), to discern the counter-movement of the Spirit, to tell the story of God’s work accordingly and to express a prophetic vision of what the world could and should be like.

In the discussion I will offer some further reflection first on the twofold critical task of Christian ecotheology (under the rubric of an ecological reformation of Christianity) and then on the twofold constructive task (under the rubric of vision and discernment), deliberately keeping these together.

An ecological reformation of Christianity

There is something deeply unnerving for Christians, both in the global North and in the global South, regarding the dual critique mentioned above. Several layers of such unease may be identified, painting with rather broad brush strokes:

First, the prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power is alive and well, for example in ecumenical calls for climate justice and the recognition of climate debt. The World Council of Churches has taken the lead here with sustained statements over several decades.¹³ This has helped to ensure that environmental issues are framed as matters of justice (and not merely nature conservation or wilderness preservation). The intricate links between sustainability, peace, health, poverty and gender have to be recognised as “transversals” that are at least dimensions of all other social challenges.¹⁴ These efforts are to be commended. However, on a cautionary note, it is also true that such calls are hardly heard by those in positions of political and economic power so that these all too

¹² This is indeed highly contested. See my contribution to the debate in Ernst M. Conradie, “Twelve theses on the place of Christian theology in multi-disciplinary conversations”, *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1:1 (2015), 375-386.

¹³ See e.g. alongside many earlier contributions, Rogate Mshana (ed.), *Poverty, wealth and ecology in Africa: Ecumenical perspectives* (Geneva: WCC, 2012).

¹⁴ The integral relatedness between poverty and ecology is evident in two South African ecumenical statements, namely *The land is crying for justice: A discussion document on Christianity and environmental justice in South Africa* (Stellenbosch: Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa, 2002); and *The Oikos journey: A theological reflection on the economic crisis in South Africa* (Durban: Diakonia Council of Churches, 2006).

often come from a safe distance where prophets do not have to carry the consequences of their words.¹⁵ Moreover, Christians do not take the lead here in the sense that environmental activists in the forefront of such challenges to power typically do not align themselves with Christianity. It seems that the divides between right-wing and left-wing Christianity (in the 1970s “evangelicals” versus “ecumenicals”) are often deeper on issues of (climate) justice than between Christians and activists in other religious traditions. In fact, one may observe that natural scientists, against their own methodological inclinations, have become the prophets of our day by reiterating warnings over climate change, the loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification and a range of other “planetary boundaries”, speaking truth to power. They may be heard, but their warnings are not necessarily heeded, and some have been targeted, intimidated and vilified.¹⁶ There is also a danger of false prophets here, not least when scientists are portrayed as the self-appointed saviours of human civilisation.

Second, orthodox and evangelical Christians may well be concerned that external criteria (ecological sustainability) are applied to critique Christianity. Is this not another form of natural theology, albeit of a progressive kind? This can be circumvented by discovering that ecological concerns are deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, its sacred texts, doctrines, moral codes and forms of praxis. If so, it is not Christianity that is at fault but the ways in which the Christian gospel has been appropriated to legitimise domination. Accordingly, the problem is not the command in Genesis 1:27 but that this command has been gravely misunderstood. However, as the ecological critique of Christianity deepened, this apologetic position became harder to sustain. The Bible may contain sources of ecological wisdom but at least some “grey” texts are deeply ambiguous.¹⁷ Accordingly, the problem does not only lie with the interpretation of Genesis 1:27 but with the harshness of the command itself.¹⁸ Likewise, every aspect of the Christian faith has become contested, for example the emphasis on God’s transcendence, human supremacy, dualist views on the soul rather the body, Spirit rather than matter, the “myth” of the fall of humanity and the original “goodness” of creation, anthropocentric soteriologies, divine election, Christocentric exclusivism, eschatological escapism and so forth.¹⁹ This critique is readily extended to Christian ethics, pastoral praxis, ecclesial ministries and especially to Christian mission given its alignment with colonialism. Put differently, such an ecological reformation is not only a matter of ethics

¹⁵ This is my core argument in Ernst M. Conradie, “Climate change and the common good: Some reflections from the South African context”, *International Journal of Public Theology* 4 (2010), 271-293.

¹⁶ See the account in Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of doubt* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

¹⁷ See, for example, Norman C. Habel, *An inconvenient text: Is a green reading of the Bible possible?* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009).

¹⁸ This is much discussed in literature on ecotheology and especially in an ecological biblical hermeneutics. The challenge is posted starkly by Norman Habel in his essay “Geophany: The earth story in Genesis” in Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (eds), *The earth story in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 34-48. For an overview, see my essay, Ernst M. Conradie, “What on earth is an ecological hermeneutics? Some broad parameters”, in David G. Horrell et al. (eds), *Ecological hermeneutics: Biblical, historical, and theological perspectives* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 295-314.

¹⁹ My lifetime commitment is to address such issues through monographs such as *Hope for the earth – Vistas on a new century* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005); *An ecological Christian anthropology: At home on earth?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); *The earth in God’s economy: Creation, salvation and consummation in ecological perspective* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2015); and *Redeeming sin? Social diagnostics amid ecological destruction* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

but also of ecclesiology.²⁰ A Christian blessing of discourse on sustainability on the basis of a rejuvenated doctrine of creation would not suffice.

Third, there is some bitter irony here concerning global divides. While so-called secular North-Western Europe is turning its back on Christianity, the centre of gravity in global Christianity is moving South and East, found especially in the proliferation of multiple forms of Pentecostalism – and to some extent the Americanisation of Christianity. Wherever this has happened, the ecological critique of Christianity has deepened. In the South the alignment of Christianity with colonialism prompted calls for decolonising Christianity, the heart of the Christian gospel and the Trinitarian core of the Christian faith.²¹ In the African context this begs many further questions about the continuity between Christianity and African traditional religion and culture. Some argue for their compatibility, while others resist Christianity as a colonising, divisive religion.²² Likewise, in the East the Christian faith is scrutinised in conversation with Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism.

Fourth, there is another way in which this dual critique is unnerving. The more the ecological critique of Christianity is emphasised, the less room there seems to be for a Christian critique of ecological destruction. To point any fingers leads to a recognition of more fingers pointing back at the complicity of Christianity. If Christianity is indeed part of the underlying problem, as is widely assumed from outside Christianity, then the most significant contribution that Christians can make to address ecological problems may be to get their own house in order. This may be hard to swallow as it implies that Christians should stop proclaiming that it has a message that can save the world. The question is no longer whether there can be salvation outside the church, but whether there is salvation inside the church,²³ whether the church itself and its message can still be salvaged, whether its decline is inevitable and even needs to be celebrated.

In the *T&T Clark handbook of Christian theology and climate change* that Hilda Koster and I edited, we took this critique as a point of departure, namely suggesting that if North-Atlantic Christianity is indeed associated with the root causes of anthropogenic climate change, then addressing North-Atlantic Christian theology from within may be crucial in order to address climate change.²⁴ Again, the most significant contribution that Christians can make to global discourse on climate change is to get their own house in order. Of course, there are alternatives, namely to abandon Christianity and to opt for another religion or something like secular humanism.

Fifth, for Christianity in the global South the challenge is different. Where people have embraced Christianity (as is the case in most of Africa) and, with it, aspects of

²⁰ For a discussion from within the African context, see Ernst M. Conradie, Hans S.A. Engdahl and Isabel Apowo Phiri (eds), "Ecclesiology and ethics: The state of ecumenical theology in Africa", *The Ecumenical Review* 67:4 (2016), 495-497, 498-663; also Ernst M. Conradie (ed.), *South African perspectives on notions and forms of ecumenicity* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2013).

²¹ For a recent, provocative contribution to this debate, see Ernst M. Conradie and Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa, "'Decolonising the doctrine of the Trinity' or 'The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity'?", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 161 (2018), 37-53.

²² Teddy Sakupapa, "The decolonising content of African theology and the decolonisation of African theology: A decolonial analysis", *Missionalia* 46:3 (2018), 406-424.

²³ For this comment, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 384.

²⁴ See Ernst M. Conradie and Hilda P. Koster (eds), *The T&T Clark handbook of Christian theology and climate change* (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

Western culture – and American forms of consumerism²⁵ – they need to figure out what this really means given the contested and tainted legacy of Christianity and the vibrancy of other religious traditions. In generalised terms, while some people resisted colonisation and also Christianity as the colonisation of consciousness, some appropriated Christianity in order to survive amidst colonial oppression – and now readily abandon it. Others may have become Christians in order to gain access to the inner secrets of Western culture – and its cultural artefacts in terms of guns, cars, aeroplanes, televisions, computers and cellular phones (and soccer!). The key to such technology may be science and therefore education and behind that modernity, but many surmise (correctly) that the rise of science is partly due to and partly despite Christianity.

Yet others have discerned the liberative and inclusive impulse of the Christian gospel. They understood the message better than the Western messengers ever did – slaves better than slave owners, the colonised better than their colonisers, Dalits better than English landlords, those who are gay better than those who are straight. But they may well wonder whether Christianity is really needed in order to maintain such an impulse. This is exacerbated by the bad press that churches often receive, by ecclesial hierarchies, its patriarchal leadership, its alignment with political power, its oppressive teachings on contraception, abortion, HIV, sexual orientation and so forth. Yet, it is also true that many have embraced Christianity deeply and enthusiastically as a source of stability, resilience and sustenance. They operate with a hermeneutics of trust in the Bible, the tradition and the church. They find themselves bewildered when confronted with contemporary challenges. One example is the covenantal promise, symbolised by God's rainbow, that the earth will never again be destroyed through water – which poses an existential crisis of faith for Christians in Kiribati and Tuvalu.²⁶

Calls for an ongoing ecological reformation of Christianity have to be understood in this light.²⁷ In one of the earliest versions of such a call James Nash observed that this implies both a recognition that Christianity needs to be reformed (or else a reformation is not necessary) and that it can indeed be reformed from within (or else a reformation is not possible).²⁸ As I have argued elsewhere, such a reformation can be prompted anywhere, but the impulse for the reformation then becomes re-appropriated to address other problems so that it soon becomes comprehensive, touching pretty much on all aspects – the biblical texts, the history of the Christian tradition, Christian doctrine, moral codes, forms of praxis, rituals, spirituality and so forth.²⁹ The Lutheran reformation may have started with malpractices around the selling of indulgences but soon had implications for almost every single aspect of society. Likewise, the Genevan

²⁵ See Ernst M. Conradie, *Christianity and a critique of consumerism: A survey of six points of entry* (Wellington: Bible Media, 2009).

²⁶ I was first alerted to this in conversation with Clive Pearson and have since picked this up in numerous further conversations, most recently with Upolu Vaai (Pacific Theological Seminary).

²⁷ See especially Lisa Dahill and James B. Martin-Schramm (eds), *Eco-reformation: Grace and hope for a planet in peril* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016); also Ernst M. Conradie, Elizabeth Tsalampouni and Dietrich Werner (eds), "Manifesto on an ecological reformation of all Christian traditions: The Volos Call", in Dietrich Werner and Elizabeth Jeglitzka (eds), *Climate justice and food security: Theological education and Christian leadership development* (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2016), 99-108.

²⁸ See James A. Nash, "Towards the ecological reformation of Christianity", *Interpretation* 50:1 (1996), 5-15.

²⁹ See especially Ernst M. Conradie and Miranda N. Pillay (eds), *Ecclesial deform and reform movements in the South African context* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2015).

reformation was set in motion by the city's invitation to Calvin to stay there as a refugee, but soon he challenged the authorities for not being welcoming enough to the floods of (often wealthy) refugees flocking to the city. This again had far-reaching implications for every aspect of society and also shaped Calvin's own theology. Given the polemical nature of such a reformation, ongoing theological reflection is necessarily required for the sake of clarification. This suggests a dialectic between reformation and critical reflection on such reformation.

Vision and discernment: The royal, priestly and prophetic tasks of ecotheology

Does Christianity then have any distinctive constructive contribution to offer in collaborative, multi-disciplinary efforts in public forums to address escalating ecological concerns? The question mark in the last sentence signals that the answer should not be taken for granted and that the content of any such answer will necessarily be contested. The priority may need to remain the dual critique rather than the dual constructive contributions. I will nevertheless proceed to offer some reflections on the latter.

My reflections are shaped by the form of prophetic Kairos theology that emerged in South Africa in the 1980s with specific reference to the *Belhar Confession* (1982/1986),³⁰ the *Kairos Document* (1985/1986), the *Road to Damascus* (1989) and later the *Accra Confession* (2004). Common to these documents is the recognition of the difference between *chronos* and *kairos*,³¹ between the ongoing (priestly) tasks of "doing theology" and the prophetic possibility of a moment of crisis where the truth of the gospel is at stake.

There is also the more practical task of exercising responsibility regarding earthkeeping at the micro- and macro-levels (the so-called "royal" task of believers). This requires critical reflection on ethos, praxis and wisdom.³² Arguably, this constructive task in society can only come to fruition if it is indeed based on a contribution to Christian authenticity. From a theological perspective this may be the most important of the three responsibilities (prophetic, priestly and royal) given that Christianity is not an aim in itself but is aimed at the coming reign of God. This task clearly requires constant engagement in the public sphere between churches, faith-based organisations, various levels of government, business and industry on a range of concrete issues but also on moral visions, rights, values, middle axioms, policies and programmes. It, for example, requires critical engagement with the sustainable development goals (SDGs) as proposed by the United Nations. I will not explore this "royal" task in any detail here since there is ample literature in this regard. Suffice to say that the distinct contribution of Christian ecotheology in such debates in the public sphere is not always clear. It is understandable and indeed sometimes necessary that Christians merely reiterate what is said by others or translate Christian convictions in highly generalised categories in order to find the common ground that may be necessary. At the same time, Christians should not shy away from making a contribution to the common good if they

³⁰ See especially Daan Cloete and Dirk J. Smit (eds), *A moment of truth: The confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, 1982* (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans, 1984).

³¹ One excellent discussion is by Albert Nolan, "Theology in a prophetic mode", in Buti Thlagale and Itumeleng Mosala (eds), *Hammering swords into ploughshares* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), 131-140.

³² In addition to ample available material on environmental ethics, see also Ernst M. Conradie, *Christianity and earthkeeping: In search of an inspiring vision* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2011).

are the only ones who are able to make such a contribution.

The priestly task of Christian (eco)theology is necessary in order to keep alive what may be called a liturgical vision of the world.³³ Worshippers enter the Christian liturgy with the burdens of the world on their shoulders, as sinners and as sinned against, with all their natural theologies, ideologies, idolatries and heresies. They bring with them views and analyses of the world around them and its dominant powers, e.g. it is money that makes the world go round; it is the rich, strong, famous, dexterous, talkative and beautiful who rule the world. They come with “warped” views of the world³⁴ as “oh so beautiful” (romanticism), as “red in tooth and claw” (social Darwinism), as natural resources available for exploitation (capitalism), as something so sublime that it is to be worshipped (New Age mysticism), or as a threat to be tamed and brought under human control (ecomodernism).

Through the liturgy worshippers may slowly learn to see the world in a new light, in the light of the Light of the world. They may begin to see the world around them through God’s eyes, as God’s beloved creation. They may realise that this messed-up world and the messed-up lives in and around them are nevertheless beloved, so much so that for God it is even worth dying for.³⁵ They may learn to see the invisible, an intuition deeply embedded in Hebrew, Greek and African sensibilities. They may begin to see the earth in the light of “heaven”, in terms of what the world may become and in a hidden way already is.

This is a deeply counter-intuitive vision. For those with little power in society it may require long services to retrain their eyes, to see that it really is love that makes the world go round, that God’s love works through the vulnerability of the cross. For those in positions of power it may take even longer to see this, but they often don’t have time. Seeing things differently does make a world of difference. In Desmond Tutu’s vision, it means to see the beggar as one’s brother, the prostitute as one’s sister, the rapist as one’s uncle.³⁶ When believers exit from the liturgy with God’s blessing, they are inspired by the vision that a different world is not only possible but has already been established, even though it remains hidden. The “liturgy after the liturgy” enables them to transform the world according to the core identity and characteristics of the Triune God, namely mercy and therefore justice.

Constructive discourse on Christian ecotheology, sustainability, environmental ethics, climate justice and so forth needs to attend to many such ongoing (priestly) tasks and arcane disciplines. We need to read and reinterpret biblical texts with an ecological hermeneutics, and we need to recover some and critique other stories from the history (his-story) of Christianity. We need to engage critically with the content and significance of the Christian faith. We need to explore common ethical categories such as justice,

³³ I developed this more fully in Chapter 2 of *The earth in God’s economy*, especially building on the work of Gordon Lathrop, *Holy ground: A liturgical cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

³⁴ For such “warped” worldviews see Howard A. Snyder, *Salvation means creation healed: The ecology of sin and grace* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011).

³⁵ See the comment by Douglas John Hall: “This world, for all its pain and anguish of spirit, in spite of its injustice and cruelty, the deadly competition of the species and their never wholly successful struggle to survive – this world is the world for which God has offered up his ‘only begotten Son’”, in *The steward: A Biblical model come of age* (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans, 1990), 120.

³⁶ This is not a direct quotation but builds on Tutu’s typical sayings. See for example Desmond M. Tutu, *God has a dream: A vision of hope for our time* (New York: Double Day, 2005).

rights, duties, responsibilities, values and virtues, what is good and what is right. We need to engage in critical reflection on ecclesial praxis (liturgies, preaching, eco-congregations, pastoral care, ministries, etc). And we need to reflect on God's mission in the world, also in seeking common ground through dialogue with other living faiths and indeed with all other sectors of society, including government, business and industry, trade unions and the like. Again, this is both a matter of "ecclesiology" and of "ethics". All of these are necessary tasks to keep the vision alive. In this sense Christian discourse on sustainability not only needs to be sustained (in the imperative) but in another sense also sustains (in the indicative) the daily praxis of Christian communities and the vocations of Christians in society. These tasks can best be sustained by the recognition that it is God's mercy that nourishes and sustains us forever.³⁷

The prophetic task is not always present but needs to be recognised when appropriate. This requires a dialectic between vision and discernment.³⁸ I suggest that this typically requires 1) a discernment of the "signs of the time" (if you like, the symptoms of the underlying disease), 2) a prophetic critique of ruling powers but also against heresies (a diagnostics of the root causes of the disease),³⁹ 3) seeking to discern the counter-movements of God's Spirit and discovering the direction in which they lead in order to know and follow God's will (the remediating work of God to address what is wrong),⁴⁰ 4) to tell, through Christian witness and theological reflection, the story of God's work moving in that direction, and 5) the expression of a prophetic vision of what the world could be and should be like as a critical comment on how the world has become and now is. Indeed, it is this vision (step 5) that enables a recognition of the signs of the time (step 1) – so that this prompts an ongoing spiral of theological reflection.

The fourth of these theological tasks is in my view crucial but also dangerous – as any attempt to detect the "finger of God" in human history is fraught with the danger of legitimising narrow group interests. This has left a trail of blood and tears throughout the history of Christianity, not least in South Africa.⁴¹ One may retort that there is only one

³⁷ See Ernst M. Conradie, "Is it not God's mercy that nourishes and sustains us ... forever? Some theological perspectives on entangled sustainabilities", *Scriptura* 116 (2017), 38-54.

³⁸ This is how Charles Wood uses the term "vision", i.e. to indicate a synoptic understanding of a range of data, a grasp of things in their wholeness and relatedness, a seeing of connections. He contrasts this with the need for discernment, i.e. to gain insight into particular situations in their particularity, to appreciate differences, to distinguish. In this way he seeks to overcome misperceptions regarding the relationship between theory and praxis. He argues that vision and discernment are dialectically related. There is no vision without discernment and no discernment without vision. See Wood, *Vision and discernment: An orientation in theological study* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 67-76.

³⁹ See my proposal that Christian sin-talk may be regarded, at least from the outside, as a form of social diagnostics. This opens up the possibility of multi-disciplinary conversation on the root causes of ecological destruction since forms of diagnosis are also found in many other disciplines, not just medicine and psychology. Whether sin-talk can be retrieved in the public sphere on this basis requires a more detailed defense. See Ernst M. Conradie, *Redeeming sin? Social diagnostics amid ecological destruction* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

⁴⁰ See Ernst M. Conradie, "What makes the world go round? Some reformed perspectives on pneumatology and ecology", *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6 (2012), 294-305, building on the discussion on a "hermeneutics of nature" by Jürgen Moltmann in *Sun of Righteousness, Arise: God's future for humanity and the earth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 189-208. See also the chapter by Denis Edwards on "Discernment of the Spirit" in his *Breath of life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 158-169.

⁴¹ This has always been an extremely dangerous question, as is well recognised by the South African theologian Jaap Durand in an essay on "the finger of God" in history, with reference to apartheid theology. See Jaap Durand, "God in history: An unresolved problem", in Adrio König and Marie Henri Keane (eds), *The*

thing that is more dangerous than raising this question of what God is doing – and that is failing to raise it at all. I will refrain from taking up this task here, as I have done so elsewhere.⁴²

Telling the story as core to the constructive task

The liturgical vision outlined above is not expressed in any one image or model, but in the form of a narrative. In my view one of the crucial tasks of Christian ecotheology is therefore to find coherent ways (plural) of telling the story of God’s work in the world. This requires a juggling act in which at least seven “chapters” of the story are kept alive, namely 1) creation in the beginning, 2) ongoing creation throughout evolutionary history, 3) the emergence of humanity, its rise and fall, 4) providence (common grace), 5) the particular history of salvation, 6) the formation of the church, its upbuilding, ministries and missions and 7) the consummation of God’s work.⁴³ Such a narrative necessarily prompts further reflection on this God’s identity and character.

One crucial problem is how to do justice to God’s work of creation *and* salvation.⁴⁴ Another is to explain whether consummation implies restoration (Reformed), elevation (Roman Catholic), divinisation (Orthodox), replacement (Anabaptist) or recycling (liberalism).⁴⁵ There are deep confessional divides here, so this task can only be addressed ecumenically. The task of the juggler is not so much to decide which cone to start with but to keep all the cones in the air. To privilege one is to let the others fall.

In years to come I hope to contribute to ecumenical collaboration in addressing this task through a series of twelve edited volumes with contributions from the global South and the global North, the West and the East, involving senior scholars and emerging voices. My hope is that if such a juggling act can be maintained, the seven chapters together may offer an interpretative lens through which the story of our times, of the advent of the Anthropocene, may be told.

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⁴² See Ernst M. Conradie, “The story of God’s work: An open-ended narrative”, in Ernst M. Conradie and Hilda P. Koster (eds), *T&T Clark handbook on Christian theology and climate change* (London et al.: T&T Clark, 2019), 462-466; also Conradie, “What is God really up to in a time like this?”.

⁴³ I have often discussed these seven “chapters”, for example in *The earth in God’s economy* and in an essay “What is the place of the earth in God’s economy? Doing justice to creation, salvation, and consummation”, in Ernst M. Conradie et al. (eds), *Christian faith and the earth: Current paths and emerging horizons in ecotheology* (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 65-96.

⁴⁴ For more a more detailed discussion, see my *Saving the earth? The legacy of Reformed views on “Re-creation”* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013).

⁴⁵ For further discussion, see Chapter 5 of *The earth in God’s economy*.

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