

## THE EARTH IN GOD'S ECONOMY: REFLECTIONS ON THE NARRATIVE OF GOD'S WORK

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### Abstract

*This essay is an abbreviated version of an inaugural lecture, read on 24 October 2007 at the University of the Western Cape. It investigates the role of cosmological narratives that help people to understand where they come from, who they are, how they can cope with the demands of life and with evil, and where they are going to. It focuses on one such a narrative, namely the Christian story of God's work of creation, evolution, the emergence of human beings and human culture, the distortions resulting from human sin, God's providence, redemption, the formation of the church, its ministries and missions and the consummation of all things. These themes have traditionally been captured under the notion of 'God's economy'. This term is derived from the Greek word *oikos* which is understood in the Christian tradition as 'the whole household of God'. In contemporary ecumenical theology this term provides a clue as to how the moral of this story may be understood to address ecological degradation, economic injustices and ecumenical fellowship. The argument of the essay is that a retrieval of the underlying narrative structure of the story of God's work can help to avoid the ways in which one 'chapter' of the story tends to be subsumed under another.*

**Key Words:** Cosmological narratives, Economic trinity, Ecotheology, *oikos*

### Introductory Comments

This essay is an abbreviated version of my inaugural which also served as an introduction to the colloquium on "How are they telling the story?" that was held at the University of the Western Cape from 24 to 26 October 2007. The primary task of the colloquium was to investigate the various ways in which the story of God's work is told (or not told) by a selection of (mostly) contemporary theologians. Several South African theologians were invited to reconstruct the diverging ways in which their own long-standing conversation partners have been telling this story.

The reference to 'story' in the title of the colloquium is primarily to the story of God's work as outlined in Christian witnesses. This is a story with an audacious scope, typically told in mainly seven 'chapters' which would, in a simplified form, include at least the following:

- The triune God's resolve to *create* 'in the beginning', 'out of nothing', or better, out of the overflowing love of God;
- God's presence in the evolutionary *history* of the cosmos and of the earth itself, leading to the (late) emergence of humanity on the scene – on the late afternoon of the sixth day, after God had a siesta, as has been suggested;<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Van de Beek 1987:46.

- The history of human *culture*, in the joys and sorrows of everyday life, through grandeur in the spheres of governance, the economy, architecture, technological innovation, education, literature, art and religion, but also in all its misery, understood in the Christian tradition especially in terms of the devastating impact of human sin on earth;
- God's *providence* in history, keeping the "whole world in 'his' hands", guiding the course of history, interacting with (human) agents, notwithstanding the impact of sin and evil;
- The history of *redemption* and the promise of future redemption, told in multiple ways by the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and through the apostolic witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth;
- The formation of the *church* – its worship, sacraments, ministries and missions – and the subsequent history of the Christian tradition, for better but often also for worse; and
- The expected completion, fulfilment or *consummation* of God's work, "on earth as it is in heaven", culminating in the banquet of the "Lamb that was slain", in the "feast of the Sabbath", in the renewal of God's good creation.

The purpose of this essay is to offer some preliminary reflections on this narrative of God's work on earth.

### **Narratives, Cosmological Narratives and Grand Narratives**

In using the term narrative, I have a particular kind of narrative in mind. Postmodern critics may want to label these as 'grand narratives' and they are indeed 'grand' in terms of their extraordinary scope. In the South African society there are several of these narratives, typically written across one another, as if on a palimpsest where one text is partially effaced to make room for writing another. The image of writing on a palimpsest also indicates that these are different versions of and perspectives on the same (hi)story, not different stories altogether. One may detect a number of layers of writing on this palimpsest:

Firstly, there is the story of the universe itself – as told by contemporary science. Only during the last few decades have scientists been able to reconstruct this story as a single narrative, connecting the insights of astrophysics, astronomy, geology, evolutionary biology, palaeontology, archaeology and various branches of human history with each other, as if in a somewhat disjointed relay race. This story is told in many books on popular science. One well-known example is *The universe story: From the primordial flaring forth to the ecozoic era*, written by Brian Swimme, a mathematician with poetic flair, together with Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest and self-confessed 'geologist' and for many the guru of the environmental movement.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most remarkable insights of contemporary science is that the whole cosmos is inherently historical. Everything, including the 'laws of nature', is subject to change. Feminist theologian Sallie McFague comments that ours is a dynamic, unfinished, 'story-shaped universe.'<sup>3</sup> Catholic theologian John Haught observes that scientists have become story-tellers:

Science has increasingly and almost in spite of itself taken on the lineaments of a story of the cosmos. The cosmos itself increasingly becomes a narrative, a great adventure ... The most expressive metaphor for what science finds in nature is no longer *law*, but *story* ... as a result of developments in physics and astronomy, we discern the inherently narrative

<sup>2</sup> See Swimme & Berry 1987.

<sup>3</sup> McFague 1993:105. See also Moltmann 1985:197ff.

character of all physical reality. Scientists, in spite of much initial resistance to their new task, have now become story-tellers. The cosmos they describe is no longer just a set of laws, but a narrative the quest for whose outcome is perhaps the major intellectual and spiritual inquiry of our time.<sup>4</sup>

A number of other layers of writing this story may be briefly identified. There is the story of the history of philosophy, the mother of the sciences. It is a history which Nietzsche's Zarathustra could write in six devastating theses. Then there is the contested story of South Africa, a 'story of many stories', perhaps best captured in the title of Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *A long walk to freedom*, which is for many not merely a biography but indeed a construction of the story of South Africa.

Elsewhere in Africa we find different kinds of stories, where the whole of history is best captured in fables. One fable told in numerous variants all over Africa is where the Supreme Being in the beginning granted a wish to humans. He [sic] then instructed both the lizard and the chameleon to bring a wish from the humans. Whichever message would reach the Creator first would be granted. The people then sent a message through the chameleon – whom they believed would be faster – to ask God to allow all people to live forever or to return to life on earth after death. However, the chameleon lingered on the way and the message was delayed. The lizard's contrary message then reached God first – that all people will be mortal. Through this story humans could project their own sense of failure onto the chameleon.<sup>5</sup>

Then there is the his-story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – which unites and divides Jews, Christians, Muslims and also adherents to the Baha'i faith. It may also be told as a her-story – of Sara, Rebecca and Rachel, or as the story of Hagar and Ishmael. And there is the story of Jesus Christ, told in the Nicene Creed with astonishing scope and brevity – the one who is "eternally begotten of the Father ... became incarnate from the virgin Mary ... was crucified under Pontius Pilate ... rose from the dead .... ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father ... (and) will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead ...". The narrative which I will focus on here is even more comprehensive in scope, namely the story of God's work on earth. But more about that further on...

Let me now offer a number of observations on such stories:

- a) The postmodern critique that such 'grand' narratives are dangerous and hegemonic have to be taken to heart. Jean Francois Lyotard, who coined the phrase 'incredulity towards meta-narratives', speaks for many when he says: "The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one..."<sup>6</sup> 'Post-modern thinking', says philosopher Richard Kearney, "...refuses to reduce the complex multiplicity of our cultural signs and images to a systematic synthesis ... (it) renounces the modern temptation – from Descartes and Spinoza to Hegel and Marx – to totalize the plurality of our human discourse in a single system or foundation."<sup>7</sup> Percesepe adds: "The grand meta-narratives of the good, the true, and the beautiful have been fractured; like Humpty Dumpty they have had a great fall."<sup>8</sup> That such narratives can easily become distorted, that they serve to legitimise a host of oppressive ideologies, is abundantly evident from the history of Christianity, a story written in the

<sup>4</sup> Haught 1993:62, 122.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Martin Ott's informative study on the Kungoni Arts Centre in Mua, Malawi (2000:301f).

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard 1987:74.

<sup>7</sup> Kearney 1991:182.

<sup>8</sup> Percesepe 1991:128.

blood of both martyrs and heretics and, especially the victims of crusaders for Christ. Such dangers are also evident from the reigning global conflict over the proper interpretation of the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

At the same time, it may well be impossible to avoid such encompassing narratives. Those who pretend to make do without cosmological narratives in order to allow an endless play of signifiers should be treated with a hermeneutics of suspicion as well. As Wayne Booth argues, pluralist approaches are often trapped in what he describes as 'paradoxical umbrellas', that is, categories which are employed to comprehend such plurality.<sup>9</sup> Pluralist approaches have a tendency to become as absolutist as the monist or exclusivist approaches which they reject. Religious pluralism, for example, can easily lead to the view that *only* pluralist views on religious plurality are deemed acceptable. Then any form of religion is welcome at the dialogue table – as long as tolerance is preached and as long as exclusivist truth claims are not made.<sup>10</sup> In this way pluralism, paradoxically, becomes again 'the only way'.

Religiously informed grand narratives (whether Western or African in origin) may simply be replaced by equally pervasive and homogenising secular worldviews. The social fragmentation, unleashed by the Heraclitean flux, may well be substituted by kitsch alternatives – by the 19<sup>th</sup> century myth of progress,<sup>11</sup> by hegemonic forms of what Robert Bellah and others termed 'civil religion',<sup>12</sup> or by some or other form of totalitarian rule that rushes to fill the social and political vacuum, or by the commercial homogeneity of a consumerist culture,<sup>13</sup> or by the 'End of history' announced by Francis Fukuyama (as 'a very sad time'), or by the widespread quasi-soteriological belief in neo-liberal circles that *limitless* economic growth is indeed possible and desirable on a finite planet.<sup>14</sup> The question is therefore not whether we employ narratives that embrace the whole of reality (which may be inescapable) but whether such meta-narratives have become hegemonic.

b) Scholars from different traditions have stressed the role that cosmological narratives play in virtually all cultures. Cosmological narratives provide us with stories of the origin and destiny of the universe and of the place of humanity within the cosmos. In the words of Thomas Berry:

For peoples, generally, their story of the universe and the human role in the universe is their primary source of intelligibility and value. Only through this story of how the universe came to be in the beginning and how it came to be as it is does a person come to appreciate the meaning of life or to derive the psychic energy needed to deal effectively with those crisis moments that occur in the life of the individual and in the life of the society. Such a story is the basis of ritual initiation throughout the world. It communicates the most sacred of mysteries. ... Our story not only interprets the past, it also guides and inspires our shaping the future.<sup>15</sup>

Cosmological narratives locate human life within a cosmic order across which the

<sup>9</sup> Booth 1979:28f, 92f.

<sup>10</sup> But, as David Tracy (1987:91) observes, "Does anyone really wish that Luther, instead of simply stating, 'Here I stand; I can do no other,' had added *sotto voce*, 'But if it really bothers you, I will move'?" On Tracy's own notion of dialogue, see my doctoral work and an article with the same title (Conradie 1996).

<sup>11</sup> On the (decline of the) myth of progress as a secular meta-narrative, see Bauckham & Hart 1999:9f.

<sup>12</sup> See the excellent recent essay by Dirkie Smit (2007:101-124) on "Civil religion in South Africa".

<sup>13</sup> Colin Gunton (1993:13) observes the pressures of a culture of consumerism towards homogeneity: "We might instance the consumer culture, with its imposing of social uniformity in the name of choice – a Coca Cola advertisement in every village throughout the world." On consumerism, see my forthcoming essay on "Christianity and consumerism: A survey of recent literature" and the current postgraduate project by John Fischer on "A theology of possession in African Christian theologies".

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed and nuanced discussion of such limits to economic growth, see Conradie 2006:27-40.

<sup>15</sup> Berry 1988:xi.

moral fabric of society is often woven.<sup>16</sup> Every model of the cosmos conveys an ethos as well as a mythos.<sup>17</sup> Creation stories are recalled and celebrated in worship and ritual because they tell us who we are and how we can live in a meaningful world.<sup>18</sup> There seems, therefore, to be an inextricable link between cosmologies and a code of moral values,<sup>19</sup> even though the relationship between cosmos and ethos is quite complex.<sup>20</sup> Cosmologies provide a sense of identity, orientation and order. They explain why things are what they are (symbolic-cognitive) and how things should be (normative). They address the inner depths of the human soul (emotive) and motivate people to action (conative).<sup>21</sup>

The classic task of *religious* cosmologies is to provide a sense of the whole and of where we fit into it, a frame of reference with ultimate explanatory power, absolute legitimacy, moral cohesion and cosmic scope. They provide what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann termed a 'symbolic universe' – which is the product of the 'social construction of reality' and indeed the social construction of 'ultimate reality'.<sup>22</sup> Such cosmologies create a moral order and as such they can easily become distorted and oppressive – as the 'orders of creation' defined by the neo-Calvinist architects of apartheid theology amply illustrate. Nevertheless, when such cosmologies lose their grasp of the whole this typically leads to cultural disorientation – with very serious social consequences. Thomas Berry again articulates this concern eloquently:

It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. We have not yet learned the new story. Our traditional story of the universe sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purposes, and energized action. It consecrated suffering and integrated knowledge. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime, punish transgressors. Everything was taken care of because the story was there...<sup>23</sup>

From quite a different perspective, scholars such as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck within the so-called Yale school of Christian theology, also drawing on insights from Northrop Frey and Paul Ricoeur, have emphasised the role of biblical narratives within Western civilization along similar lines. They suggest that stories do not only form part of one's cultural heritage; one may also argue that cultures, indeed entire civilisations, live within the symbolic 'world' created by certain paradigmatic stories. Such stories construct, as it were, a habitable world, a frame of reference which enables people to orientate themselves and to cope with life and its many demands.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Barbour 1989:128.

<sup>17</sup> The relation between cosmos and ethos is therefore dialectical: The way in which a cosmos is structured reveals something of the community's ethos but the constructed cosmos also shapes the community's ethos. See Brown 1999:2, 10ff.

<sup>18</sup> Barbour 1989:146, also De Lange 1997:31-32.

<sup>19</sup> See Rasmussen 1994:178.

<sup>20</sup> On the complex relationship between cosmology and ethics, given the critique against the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy', see Barbour 1989:128f, Brown 1999:2f, De Lange 1997, Ellis & Murphy 1996 & Rasmussen 1994:178. See also the discussion in the last section.

<sup>21</sup> De Lange 1997:27.

<sup>22</sup> See Berger and Thomas Luckmann 1967.

<sup>23</sup> Berry 1988:123.

<sup>24</sup> See Lindbeck 1989:95f, also Frei 1974. See also Kort 1996 on the role played by narratives to shape the interpretative 'world'.

- c) Such stories fulfil this function by helping us to answer what I would describe as the 'big questions' in life. These are questions which all human beings ask, children and grown-ups alike. Firstly, there are questions about origin: Where do I come from? Where do my people come from? Where does the universe itself come from? From the Big Bang, yes, but where does the Big Bang come from? Secondly, there are questions about identity: Who am I? Where do I belong? What am I doing here? What is the purpose of my life? Thirdly there are questions about suffering: How can I cope with the many demands of life? Indeed, how can I cope with myself? Why am I in pain? Why do the innocent have to suffer so much (a question once described as 'the rock of atheism')? Where does evil come from? How can we overcome evil? Fourthly, there are questions about destiny: Where is my life heading towards? What will happen to me when I die? How will the universe end? With a bang when everything will collapse in the heat of a cosmic black hole? Or with a whimper, in a cold silent night?<sup>25</sup> How should we assess the unpalatable truth that, whether 'fried' or 'frozen', it seems assured that all life will finally come to an end?<sup>26</sup>
- d) A number of salient points concerning these questions should be noted. Firstly, it seems to me that these are questions which we as human beings cannot help but ask. Secondly, these are questions which we can never answer conclusively, precisely because these are ultimate questions and because we are finite beings. I would like to emphasise that science *qua* science cannot provide final answers to these questions either, although many famous scientists could not resist the temptation to transgress beyond their disciplines to seek speculative answers to these questions.<sup>27</sup> In the style of Qohelet it seems that we have to conclude that we belong to a species which seems to be compelled to ask questions which it cannot answer. Perhaps this characterises the pathos of human existence. Thirdly, we cannot avoid answering these questions either. We simply cannot get up in the morning and go on with life without some form of a plausible answer. Fourthly, the answers which we do give matter; they shape the ways in which we live our daily lives, for better or for worse.

The best example here is perhaps the question as to what will happen to me when I die. This is a question which we all ask but which none of us can really answer (despite fervent religious beliefs with regard to life after death), simply because we do not and cannot know what will happen to us when we die. The moment of death remains clouded in mystery. This recognition may prompt some to avoid such a question because it is unanswerable and leads to so much speculation. However, we should not fool ourselves here: The answers which we *do* give shape our lives profoundly.<sup>28</sup> For example: If you are convinced that when you die, your corpse will become food for worms,<sup>29</sup> nothing more, nothing less, then that is an answer too and perhaps a difficult

<sup>25</sup> Ruether 1992:42.

<sup>26</sup> For many scientists it seems that the final destiny of the physical universe is the void of utter meaninglessness. We live in a pointless or tragic universe, one that lacks any telos, any ultimate purpose. This is well expressed in a famous comment by Stephen Weinberg (1977:154-155): "It is very hard to realize that this all is just a tiny part of an overwhelmingly hostile universe. It is even harder to realize that this present universe has evolved from unspeakably unfamiliar condition, and faces a future extinction of endless cold or intolerable heat. The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless."

<sup>27</sup> I am thinking here of the quasi-religious overtones in comments by famous scientists such as Fritjof Capra, Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking and EO Wilson. See also the science-based, if rather speculative, eschatologies proposed by physicists Freeman Dyson (1979) and Frank Tipler (1994).

<sup>28</sup> See my *Lewe anderkant die dood?* (Conradie 2006) for a more detailed exposition. See also Conradie 2000/2005, 2002 and Durand 1993.

<sup>29</sup> The Middle Platonist Celsus criticised the Christian expectation of the resurrection of the dead as a "hope for

answer to live by. For many in a consumer society this would imply that we desperately need to eat and drink and be merry because tomorrow we may be dead – albeit that the merriness will inevitably be undermined by the desperation. Or in cruder terms: If it is more or less inevitable that I am going to die from AIDS, then I might as well have as many sexual partners as I wish to have.

A fifth observation with regard to these questions is important here. It is typically within religious traditions that these questions are addressed and answered. Secularised people may also revert to art, poetry, music, history or even science to find adequate answers for themselves. In religious traditions such answers are provided in the form of myths and rituals, through the kind of paradigmatic narratives that I referred to above.

This observation begs many further questions about the relationship between religion and culture and also between different religious traditions. In other words: This requires clarity on the immensely complex interaction between the different layers of the story written on the palimpsest. This cannot be addressed here in any detail. Suffice it to say that the Christian version of the story, the story of who God is (the so-called immanent trinity) and what God is doing in the world (the economic trinity), in my opinion may help one to understand the ultimate significance of the other layers of the story.

A sixth observation is that not just any answer to these questions will do if indeed we need to live by them. We need to find *plausible* answers. Even though we cannot answer these questions, we are quite able to distinguish between more and less plausible answers and this makes a world of difference to us because we tend to structure our daily lives according to these answers. The criteria for plausibility here are quite complex – which is a function of the multiple relationships between the various layers of the story. Let me simply say that we need to jointly consider answers to all three questions famously raised by Kant: What can I know? What should I do? What can I hope for? Plausibility cannot be judged only in terms of a (reductionist) notion of scientific (or forensic) truth. Scientific, moral, legal, existential and artistic dimensions of truth have to be held together here. This need for plausibility precludes a purely constructivist and therefore relativist understanding of cosmological narratives where we may simply construct any kind of story as it may please us and where one version of the story would be as appropriate as another given different contexts.

Within the Christian tradition this poses a serious challenge. The problem is that its cosmological narratives (especially Genesis 1 and 2) are derived from a period before Copernicus, Darwin and Einstein. For many the story is therefore no longer plausible. This has created a tension between answers to the question what we can know and do know and what we can hope for (where Kant saw room for religion). One may argue that the priestly authors of Genesis 1 made use of the best available science of their day to construct a story about *Elohim* (not Marduk) as the creator who is able to direct the forces of chaos (as experienced in the time of the Babylonian exile).<sup>30</sup> The challenge for contemporary Christian theology is perhaps to do the same: To make use of the best available science of our day to tell the story of the universe in such a way that we can again live by this story.<sup>31</sup>

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worms”: “For what form of human soul would have any further desire for a body that has rotted.” See Daley 2002:138.

<sup>30</sup> See the wonderful essay ‘God en chaos’ by Van Ruler (1972) on God’s creative use of the forces of chaos.

<sup>31</sup> See my *Waar op dees aarde vind mens God?* for some more detailed reflections on this challenge (Conradie 2006:179f, 210f).

Finally, it is also important to note that we tend to tell these stories in fragments. It remains true that we cannot answer these questions – despite the pretence of creationists and fundamentalists to the contrary. The stories which we tell in response to these questions are therefore never all that tidy, comprehensive or coherent. Even where I have to account for my own life story, my memory will be selective; there are many aspects of my life that will remain hidden to me, that are repressed at a subconscious level, that I cannot and do not grasp.<sup>32</sup> We therefore have to gather various fragments<sup>33</sup> in order to tell the story and we end up telling the story in fragments. And we live from such fragments. At best we can see sparks of infinity through these fragments.

This also applies to the narrative of God's work. One may say that God's story can only be told by Godself. This insight is indeed crucial to protect story-tellers from the totalising and oppressive strategies that are evident in so many cosmological narratives.<sup>34</sup>

- e) The remarkable scope of such cosmological narratives is also significant here. As American Christian ethicist Larry Rasmussen notes, storytellers of all cultures seem to refuse to stop short of telling the cosmic story itself, however pretentious that may seem.<sup>35</sup> With an astonishing sense of that which is ultimate, they tell specific stories about the cosmos as a whole, about the origins and the destiny of the entire universe. However, the universal scope of such stories is only possible on the basis of their particularity. As David Tracy has observed, the universality of classics has to do with what he calls a 'journey of intensification' into the particular. Poets and novelists seem to have the ability to explore the depths of a very particular situation ("One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich") in order to discover there something that is so deeply human that it can speak to humans in many other contexts and other ages.<sup>36</sup> Andrew Greeley comments that Mozart was a Viennese, that Shakespeare was a Londoner, that Dante was a Florentine and one may add that Kant lived his entire life in the district of Königsberg.<sup>37</sup> None of them were global travellers. The global peace-keeping role played by a Desmond Tutu or a Nelson Mandela is only possible on the basis of their decades of experience shaped by the South African struggle against apartheid.

It should therefore be noted that my analysis here of religious narratives (in the

<sup>32</sup> H Richard Niebuhr emphasised that the meaning of our lives typically escape us because our memories are so selective. We do not really know what we have done and are still doing to others, not even to those closest to us, for example to our own children. He then suggests that Christian revelation helps Christians to disclose the deeper meaning of their past, present and future. See Niebuhr's *The meaning of revelation* (1941) and the reinterpretation of his views by Smit (2007:309f) within the South African context of the healing of memories.

<sup>33</sup> See the provisional reflections by David Tracy (2000) on classic 'fragmenting forms' such as apocalyptic theology and apophatic theology and the postmodern retrieval of such fragmenting forms in order to resist modernist attempts at totalising systems or closure. He contrasts the category of 'fragment' with that of 'symbol' where the hope is maintained to grasp something of the whole. Tracy does recognise the need for 'gathering the fragments' in a non-totalising way.

<sup>34</sup> See also the comment by Robert Jenson (2000:17): "If the story the Bible tells, running from creation to consummation and plotted by Exodus or Exodus-Resurrection, is *true*, it is not just our story but God's. If it is God's story, it is universal. And if it is the *triune* God's story, it cannot be oppressive."

<sup>35</sup> Rasmussen 1994:176.

<sup>36</sup> Tracy 1979:112.

<sup>37</sup> Greeley (1974:698) says: "The greatness of all these men's contributions was derived mainly from the particularities of the tiny spectrum of the time-space continuum they inhabited. They indeed transcended such limitations and spoke to all men (and women – EMC) of all ages, but their transcendence did not come from denying their own cultural roots, but rather from discerning the richness and universality latent in their own cultural heritage."



plural) should not be understood as a point of departure. It is an attempt to reflect on and abstract from the highly particular story of which I am part and from which I live, namely the story of God's work as told in the reformed tradition and understood best in ecumenical dialogue and in fellowship with other traditions. If this is a story about nothing less than the whole of reality (and even of what transcends reality), then it remains a particular, socially constructed story in which others are positioned and portrayed in a particular way.<sup>38</sup> I nevertheless hope that this account may help others to find commonalities with their stories, since there are indeed many themes that may provide a point of entry to find such common ground.<sup>39</sup> There can also be no doubt about the compelling need to work together with others towards social transformation in Africa or to confront daunting ecological challenges.

To make this more explicit: The Christian story should not merely be understood as one attempt alongside others to provide answers to the questions which all people ask and which may be identified through phenomenological reflection. Christian truth claims cannot be based upon or translated into other more general categories – whether religious, ethical, anthropological or cosmological – without detracting from the ultimacy of their scope. Instead, I maintain that it is only in reflecting on this particular

<sup>38</sup> If a religious cosmology offers, as I have suggested here, a social construction of the whole of reality and even of that which transcends reality (Ultimate Reality), then it can no longer offer an all-encompassing interpretative framework if the validity of other constructions of the ultimate are acknowledged. By definition, a recognition of the validity of another ultimate next to my construction of the ultimate would imply that my construction no longer describes that which is ultimate (see Nürnberger 1985:99). Of course, the distinction between my construction of ultimate reality and ultimate reality itself has to be recognised here, in the same way that the truth in all its complexity cannot be reduced to one particular understanding of the truth. A particular construction of the ultimate remains nothing more than a historically conditioned social construction, but it is a construction of nothing less than the ultimate. Both sides of this formulation are significant: On the one hand, a construction of ultimate reality should not be confused with ultimate reality itself. This distinction is maintained in the Christian category of 'witnessing'. As Nürnberger (1985:99-100) observes (over and against the claims of Christian fundamentalists), this requires "the humble recognition of the fact that we do not possess the truth. At best the truth possesses us. ... God is not in our hands and he [sic] does not need our protection. We are in his hands and need his protection. Christians who cannot abandon themselves to the certainty that the power of Christ's suffering love is able to hold its own against the claims to truth and validity of other ultimates, are not bearers of the missionary charisma. ... The missionary is a witness, not a bulldozer." On the other hand, the danger of reductionism has to be recognised as well. Peter Berger (1967:152) uses the term 'symbolic sub-universe' to describe the situation in which religious traditions find themselves where they no longer offer an interpretative framework for the whole of reality, but only one for family life, sexuality, personal self-fulfilment and so forth. When the scope of religion is restricted in this way, a new construction of the ultimate will typically emerge in such a situation. This also accounts for the emergence of the 'paradoxical umbrellas' discussed above. Such paradoxical umbrellas are powerful, often dangerous and totalitarian, but as I suggested above, probably inevitable. In this sense even the word *religions* (in the plural) is problematic. Every one religion would tend to offer a framework within which all other religions may be placed. It would therefore be more honest for one to acknowledge the framework which one employs than to pretend that one is able to avoid such a framework. It remains odd that while few would dare to speak in the name of the whole Christian tradition, given the conflicting diversity of interpretations of Christianity, many seem to be less inhibited to express what they find to be common amongst the world religions. See also my essay "On cosmology, plurality and morality" (Conradie 2001).

<sup>39</sup> Many would suggest that such common ground may be found especially in the sphere of common moral values, even though such values may be interpreted in different ways in different religious traditions. In several contributions Catholic theologian Hans Küng has argued that a global ethos is necessary to address the global challenges that the earth community is faced with. His argument is that there is no survival possible without a global ethos. There is no world peace without peace between the religions (with ample examples). And there is no peace between religions without dialogue between the religions. See Küng 1991 and the subsequent formulation of an *Earth Charter* (see [www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org)).

story that one may discover the questions to which it provides answers. From this perspective the story is therefore primary; the questions are secondary.

### God's Economy

The whole work of God, all seven the 'chapters' outlined above, has traditionally been described as the 'economy of the triune God' (*oikonomia tou theou*). This is also the basis of the distinction between the so-called 'immanent' trinity and the 'economic' trinity, that is, between who God is in all eternity and what God has done, is doing and will be doing in history.<sup>40</sup>

In ecumenical literature there emerged over the last decade or two a trend that may now be called an 'oikothology'.<sup>41</sup> The root metaphor for this theology is the notion of the 'whole household of God'. The power of this metaphor lies in its ability to integrate three core ecumenical themes on the basis of the Greek word 'oikos' (household) – which forms the etymological root of the quests for economic justice (amidst the inequalities and multiple injustices that characterise the current neo-liberal economic order), ecological sustainability (amidst the degradation and destruction of ecosystems) and ecumenical fellowship (amidst the many denominational and theological divisions that characterise Christianity worldwide).

The discipline of economics reflects on appropriate laws or rules (*nomoi*) for the household; on the art of administering the global household. The science of ecology gathers knowledge on the 'logic' (*logos*, the underlying principles) of the same household, that is, the incredibly intricate ways in which ecosystems interact to ensure the functioning of the biosphere. The earth, our planet, is indeed a single *oikos*. The word *oikos* is also the root of *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited world. Christian communities live from the conviction that the whole household (*oikos*) belongs to God and has to answer to God's economy.<sup>42</sup> Larry Rasmussen explains the links between economy, ecology and the ecumenical movement by referring to the notion of *oikos* (household):

Creation is pictured as a vast public household. The English words 'economics', 'ecumenics,' and 'ecology' all share the same root and reference. 'Economics' means providing for the household's material and service needs and managing the household well. But the word also has a theological meaning. One of the classic theological expressions for bringing creation to full health is the unfolding drama of 'the divine economy' ... One of the marks of that economy is shared abundance. 'Ecumenics' means treating the inhabitants of the household as a single family, human and nonhuman together, and fostering the unity of that family. 'Ecology' is knowledge of that systematic interdependence upon which the life of the household depends. And if English had adopted the Greek word for steward (*oikonomos*), we would immediately recognize the steward as the trustee, the caretaker of creation imaged as *oikos*.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> The distinction between the immanent and the economic trinity has been widely discussed in twentieth century Christian theology. Many would want to follow Catholic theologian Karl Rahner's famous 'rule', namely that talk about the immanent trinity is only possible on the basis of the economic trinity, that is, in terms of discerning the presence of the triune God in history. The same would apply to the distinction between the person and the work of God, between who God is and what God is doing. The rather one-sided focus of this contribution is clearly on the work of God. See also chapters 5 and 6 of my *Waar op dees aarde vind mens God?* (Conradie 2006).

<sup>41</sup> In addition to the many ecumenical contributions in this regard, see also the doctoral thesis by Warmback (2006) who explores resources for the construction of an 'oikothology', drawing especially from the earthkeeping initiatives in the Anglican diocese of Umzimvubu in South Africa.

<sup>42</sup> Meeks (1989) speaks of God as 'the Economist' to describe the way in which God is redeeming the world (through the *nomoi* of *Torah* and gospel) and its implications for the economy.

<sup>43</sup> Rasmussen 1994:118.

In a number of recent contributions<sup>44</sup> I have indicated how the notion of the whole household of God may serve as an ecumenical root metaphor for a wide variety of other theological themes as well – an ecological doctrine of creation based on the indwelling of God’s Spirit in creation, an anthropology of stewardship (the *oikonomos*) or one of being ‘at-home-on-earth’,<sup>45</sup> a Christology affirming that Christ is the cornerstone of this house (Eph 2:20),<sup>46</sup> a soteriology and an ecclesiology focusing on becoming members of the ‘household of God’ (Eph 2:19-22), alternatively an ecclesiology based on the notion of being sojourners (*paroikoi*) who are precisely *not* at home (yet),<sup>47</sup> an understanding of the

<sup>44</sup> See especially Conradie 2007. In this essay I investigate the question how the metaphor of the household of God may be employed in an ecclesiological context to re-describe the nature and mission of the church in society. I argued that the use of household imagery in ecological, economic and ecumenical discourse has led to considerable confusion on the parameters of such a household. Is the house that we are called to inhabit that of the Christian family as a household of faith, the (local) church, the ecumenical church, the ‘wider ecumenism’ of the unity of all humankind, the management of the house in the global economy, or the whole biosphere as a household of life? Although the root (*oikos*) is present at all these levels, it is not clear what the ‘house’ includes and excludes in each case and how it is constituted (by God, by faith, through ecumenical fellowship, by society, by offering a planetary habitat for humans, etc). More specifically, I investigated the place and mission of the church within the larger household of God. This was done with reference to ecumenical discourse on ‘Ecclesiology and Ethics’, to the contributions of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth and to a number of recent African ecclesiologies.

<sup>45</sup> The earth is a habitable house that human beings inhabit. This was already captured neatly by Karl Barth: “Because it is dry one can live *on* the earth; because it has been covered with plants one can live *from* the earth. Future creation will be the furnishing of this house as a dwelling. But the twofold work of the third day is that of making the house a *house*.” See Barth (CD 3.1, 1960:143), also quoted in Welker 1999:40. See also Müller-Fahrenholz (2002:86) on the notion of an ‘enoikische Selbstverständnis’ suggesting an anthropology of ‘inhabitation’ instead of ‘domination’. There are numerous contributions toward a theological anthropology which focus on the need for humans to recognise that they are ‘at home on earth’ (for an overview, see Conradie 2005:6-7, 26-40). For a critical engagement with such discourse, while staying with the root metaphor of the household of God, see my *An ecological Christian anthropology: At home on earth?* (Conradie 2005).

<sup>46</sup> There is a tendency in ecumenical discourse on the *oikos* metaphor to move away from a Christological focus towards a pneumatological orientation. This is especially evident in Konrad Raiser’s influential work *Ecumenism in transition* (1991). Raiser explores the need for a paradigm shift in ecumenical theology from a ‘narrow’ Christological focus towards a ‘broader’ pneumatological orientation which would supplement (but not replace) the earlier paradigm.

<sup>47</sup> See Müller-Fahrenholz (1995, 2002) but also various contributions on the notion of the church as resident aliens (*paroikia*). Accordingly, the church is a community of ‘aliens and strangers’ (*paroikoi* and *parepidemoi*), without citizen rights, in the world (1 Peter 2:11). Müller-Fahrenholz (1995:110) regards an emphasis on the *paroikia* character of the church as an important corrective which becomes necessary whenever the primary ecodominical task of the church is threatened. He says: “There is an undeniable tension between *oikodomé* and *paroikia*. Whereas the former implies purpose and creativity, the latter tends towards separation of earth and heaven and fosters an escapist spirituality. But this need not be the case. The notion of *paroikia* is useful in underscoring that the followers of Christ can only be strangers in a world that rejects them. ... Ecodominical communities cannot be at peace with the violent powers that threaten to throw the world into chaos; rather they must seek to correct and transform a world in crisis.”

In a South African reformed contribution, Flip Theron (Theron 1997:257) acknowledges, with specific reference to Müller-Fahrenholz, that the emphasis on the *paroikia* character of the church may foster an escapist spirituality, but simply adds that this does not need to happen. By contrast, Theron insists that the metaphor of the church as *paroikia* in society is of fundamental (instead of corrective) importance for an understanding of the nature of the church since it is (for him) a function of the eschatological character of the church. He thus recalls that, “The English ‘parish’, the Dutch ‘parogie’ and the German ‘Pfarrer’ which derive from this word (*paroikia*), still remind us that the church consists of ‘resident aliens’. Training a ‘Pfarrer’ involves training a ‘foreigner’. The education of a parson, implies training for a *paroikia*” (Theron 1997:257). He eloquently warns against the danger of the church becoming a mere reflection of society: “Quite understandably the church is always tempted to lay another foundation than the ‘one already laid’ namely the crucified Christ (1 Cor 3:11). That happens when it becomes fascinated by the isolated form of creation in stead of focusing on the *trans*-forming and therefore critical character of the creative Word of the cross. It

Eucharist as the table fellowship of the household gathered together, the need for God's Word spoken *at* the table, and an eschatology expressing the hope that the house which we as humans inhabit (the earth) will indeed become God's home.<sup>48</sup> It has also been used for a pastoral theology toward the edification of the household (*oikodomé*),<sup>49</sup> and an ethics of eco-justice,<sup>50</sup> inhabitation, homemaking, hospitality and sufficient nourishment.<sup>51</sup>

In ecumenical discourse on 'Life and Work' and on 'Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation', the household of God serves as a theological root metaphor to reflect on a number of ethical themes: The integrity of the biophysical foundations of this house (the earth's biosphere), the economic management of the household's affairs, the need for peace and reconciliation amidst ethnic, religious and domestic violence within this single household, a concern for issues of health and education; the place and plight of women and children within this household and an ecumenical sense of the unity not only of the church, but also of the whole of humankind and of all of God's creation, the whole inhabited world (*oikoumene*).

It should be clear that the household of God as a theological root metaphor has considerable strengths. It builds on and provides impetus to the widespread recognition (especially in indigenous and ecological theologies) of the theological significance of place (and not only of time) and locality.<sup>52</sup> The metaphor of the household of God will appeal to families who treasure a sense of homeliness and those (often women) for whom homemaking constitutes a major part of their daily lives. Perhaps it will also appeal to those, for example in Africa, who have been denied a home: (environmental) refugees, the homeless waiting upon some housing scheme, those who were forcibly removed from their ancestral homes

then loses its *paroikia* character and becomes nothing more than a reflection of society. The salt has lost its saltiness. 'It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men' (Matt 5:13)" (Theron 1997:261-262).

<sup>48</sup> See especially Moltmann 1985, 1996 and my *Hope for the earth* (Conradie 2000 / 2005) which employs the distinction between 'house' and 'home', suggesting that the earth is the house which we as humans inhabit, but that it is not our home yet. Christian hope may be interpreted as the hope to be at home with God, on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>49</sup> In his stimulating study, *God's Spirit: Transforming a world in crisis*, Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz developed the notion of 'ecodomy', derived from the Greek word *oikodomé*. Ecodomy is the art of inhabiting instead of dominating the earth, our house. Müller-Fahrenholz (1995:109) explains: "In its literal sense this term refers to the building of the house, but its meaning can be extended to any constructive process. So the apostle Paul uses the word for the building up of Christian communities. He calls his apostolic mission a service to the *oikodomé* of Christ (2 Cor. 13:10). He reminds members of Christian communities that they should behave towards each other in the spirit of *oikodomé* (Rom. 14:19). They are called to use their specific gifts and talents (charisms) for the *oikodomé* of the Body of Christ (Eph. 2:21), just as they are reinforced and strengthened by the pneumatic energy of this body." Müller-Fahrenholz subsequently calls on Christian congregations to become ecodominical centres and to form ecodominical networks and covenants which can respond to the demands of the contemporary world. The calling of the church is to become partners in God's ecodomy. Oikodomia is therefore not 'Gemeindeaufbau' im parochialen Sinn, sondern 'Hausbau' mit ökumenischer Reichweite" (2002:87).

<sup>50</sup> The term 'ecojustice' is often used in ecumenical discourse to capture the need for a comprehensive sense of justice that can respond to both economic injustice and ecological degradation. Ecojustice within the household of God is for example stressed in the study document on *Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth* produced by the Justice, Peace and Creation team of the WCC (2005). The term 'ecojustice' was coined by William Gibson and popularised by Dieter Hessel. See especially Hessel 1992.

<sup>51</sup> See the eloquent description of what 'home' entails by Douglas Meeks (1989:36): "Home is where everyone knows your name. Home is where you can always count on being confronted, forgiven, loved, and cared for. Home is where there is always a place for you at the table. And, finally, home is where you can count on sharing what is on the table."

<sup>52</sup> The category of space / place emphasises the rootedness of all forms of life and highlights the relationship between the issues of ecology (inhabited space) and justice (the control over space). See Bergmann 2007.

(also under apartheid in South Africa), street children, battered women, (potential) rape victims for whom 'home' is indeed a dangerous place and all those who have not found a place where they can feel at home. It may also be applicable to countless species whose habitat has been invaded for the sake of human interests. Clearly, although the earth does not provide a home for all yet, the yearning of Christian hope is that all God's creatures will find a lasting home in God's household.

Like all metaphors, the notion of the 'household of God' has certain limitations. Since any notion of the household is necessarily a form of social construction, it can easily be employed to serve the interests of patriarchs (the proverbial *paterfamilias*), possessive parents, the propagation of preconceived 'family values', the restriction of slaves, women and children to the private sphere, or the domestication (!) of emancipatory struggles.<sup>53</sup> Many a dictator has tried to portray himself as a 'family man'. In pluralist, industrialised societies the influence of the household is often restricted to the sphere of the private or to recreation after hours. The use of the *oikos* metaphor may therefore unwittingly reinforce the marginalisation and privatisation of Christian witness in society.

Alternatively, the inclusiveness of the notion of a household may be expanded to such an extent that it has no boundaries – unlike any particular household. The application of the anthropomorphic notion of home to non-human species is not by itself problematic since other species also engage in house-building activities. However, ecosystems do not, strictly speaking, provide a house for species, but a habitat to thrive in.<sup>54</sup> If a household can offer no sense of belonging inside and can exclude nothing on the outside, then it would become virtually meaningless and would no longer offer any sense of being at home. The household with its fenced vegetable and fruit garden epitomises the human need for *surrounded* social and moral space. Indeed, housing typically precedes life. The enclosure does not only define and protect; it also demarcates an open frontier describing the identity of the household but on that basis also the possibility of communication with what lies outside the enclosure.<sup>55</sup>

I will not explore these ethical themes any further here. Instead, I will return the theological roots of the metaphor, namely in the work (economy) of the triune God.

### The Earth in God's Economy

On the basis of the preceding section I will now offer seven comments on the story of God's work and, more specifically, on the place of the earth in God's economy.

Firstly, it should be noted that the history of God's work can *only*<sup>56</sup> be told in the form of a story. God's work may be understood as a narrative, an immense story, a drama.

<sup>53</sup> The crucial question is therefore how *oikos* and *polis* (political power and rule) are related to one another and how both of these are related to *kosmos*. See Meeks 1989:8.

<sup>54</sup> As Michael Welker (1999:144) observes, the image of the earth as a house does not take the self-productive activity of the earth into account. This is, in fact, already evident from the earth's own agency according to the first creation narrative in Genesis. Earth is portrayed not so much as a house but rather as an active empowering agent which brings forth life.

<sup>55</sup> See Moltmann 1985:144. As Konrad Raiser (1991:88) suggests, the ecumenical household "constantly displays this duality between boundary and openness, independence and relationship, rest and movement, the familiar and the alien, continuity and discontinuity."

<sup>56</sup> In the light of the comments by Smit (in his essay on Barth elsewhere in this volume), this formulation may be toned down to read that it can 'best' be told in the form of a story. Kort (1996:13) also finds an extraordinary if not completely necessary relation between narratives and the interpretative worlds fashioned from beliefs that people live by and embody.

Christianity is essentially a historical religion. The God of Christianity is a God of history.<sup>57</sup> Theological reflection on the work of God can therefore only be adequate if it does justice to the underlying narrative structure of God's work. Christian faith may be understood not as a set of beliefs or propositions, but as an attempt to capture the meaning of this story, to discern the presence of God in history from within our particular situation as it is embedded in history. Accordingly, the church is a story-shaped<sup>58</sup> and story-telling community and Christian worship<sup>59</sup> is the continued recital, proclamation and celebration of this story through which the 'dangerous memory' (JB Metz) of the passion of Jesus Christ is kept alive.<sup>60</sup> Telling the story is both an act of remembrance and, since the story is still unfinished, also of anticipation.<sup>61</sup> Christian theology reflects on the content and significance of this story. This does not imply that theological reflection takes place only in a narrative form. This is evidently not the case. There is room for a multiplicity of genres expressing theological reflection, including dialogue, argumentation, logical analysis, dissertation, biography, story-telling and doxology.<sup>62</sup>

Any such reflective attempt to understand the meaning (or the moral) of the story will never capture its full richness. It will always be relatively less adequate. It may sometimes be necessary to explain a metaphor, the plot of a film or even a joke, but such an explanation would necessarily lose the poetic power of the original. It may also be helpful to read the reflections of others on an event (perhaps a music concert or a sports event) in order to grasp its significance, but this will lose something of the excitement of being a witness to the event itself. Likewise, it may be possible to capture the content of the Christian faith in a number of propositions, but this will remain tentative and provisional. Christian doctrine is therefore nothing more than a set of condensed narratives, abbreviated stories, reminders of what should not be forgotten.<sup>63</sup> It is striking that in their reflections on this story scholastic, orthodox, evangelical and fundamentalist theologians have so often captured the meaning of the story in a set of abiding (propositional) truth claims than cannot do justice to the narrative structure of this story.<sup>64</sup> As a result they have lost a sense that this is indeed an immense story that should also capture the attention of children.

Secondly, this is a story of God's love for and loyalty (*hesed*) to creation. This is the deepest intuition of the Christian faith, namely that God is a passionate God of love. There is no need here to explore how this God of love is named in Christian discourse on the triune God, on God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as Creator, Wisdom and Counsellor.<sup>65</sup> I

<sup>57</sup> For a careful argument in this regard, see Van Ruler's essay "The kingdom of God and history" (1989:89-103).

<sup>58</sup> Lindbeck 1997.

<sup>59</sup> See also the following formulation by Dietrich Ritschl: "(In) worship ... is celebrated the over-arching story in which what is of lasting importance is contained and from which what is of momentary urgency can be seen ... Worship allows (the) constantly renewed attempt to envisage an overarching story of God with humanity and the whole of creation." Quoted in Smit 2007:433.

<sup>60</sup> See the essay on "Public worship: A tale of two stories" in Smit 2007:425-443. He draws on a wide range of narrative theologians emphasising the narrative structure of Christian communities, worship and prayer.

<sup>61</sup> See Moltmann 2000:31-33. Since what is being remembered includes the suffering of the past as well as the promises of God, the orientation of the story telling is towards the future.

<sup>62</sup> See again Smit's essay on Barth elsewhere in this volume.

<sup>63</sup> See Smit 1994:44-46, also 2007:441-442.

<sup>64</sup> In recent decades the narrative structure of the Christian faith has been retrieved by a diversity of contributions to 'narrative theology'. The work of Edmund Arens, Hans Frei, Stanley Hauerwas, George Lindbeck, Johann Baptist Metz, H Richard Niebuhr, Dietrich Ritschl and David Tracy, amongst many others, may be mentioned in this regard.

<sup>65</sup> For some provisional reflections, see chapter 6 of my *Waar op dees aarde vind mens God?* (Conradie 2006).

will merely observe that this love may be expressed in characteristics such as God's compassion, providing care, God's faithfulness and God's magnanimous grace. But perhaps the most apt description here is that of God's joy in creation.<sup>66</sup> It may be true that the chief aim of humankind is to love God and to enjoy God for ever. It is also true that God is concerned about God's own name and honour, and wishes to be worshipped and glorified. However, the Christian confession is that God is not merely concerned with Godself, but in the well-being and the flourishing of the whole of creation. The best analogy here is perhaps one of a loving parent who has received a new-born baby – with all the joy, pain, anxiety, excitement, vulnerability and open-endedness that this entails. The birth of the baby is for the parent only the beginning of a life together. Indeed, God is the Father who treasures and 'keeps' every moment in time, the Mother who brings forth and nurtures new life.<sup>67</sup> Such love is essentially relational and can only flourish on the basis of mutual respect and reciprocity.

Thirdly, for Christians, especially in the Protestant tradition, the plot of this drama is essentially one of creativity, radical distortion and redemption, of creation and new creation, of construction, destruction and reconstruction, of freedom, oppression and liberation, of relatedness, alienation and reconciliation, of life, death and new life. The core predicament is not merely one of survival in a hostile environment, of finding food and shelter, or of overcoming pain, sickness and death. It is certainly not merely one of ignorance which may be resolved through better education, information and insight. It is also not a problem which can be resolved merely through self-help therapy. Instead, it is one of coming to terms with the destructive legacy (evil) of what Christians call human sin. To ignore or to underplay the problem of sin is to offer a shallow, superficial and unpersuasive account of the plot of this drama. Indeed, history is to be understood as "a permanent syntax of guilt and atonement, and the cross as the most essential life form of the kingdom of God in history."<sup>68</sup> This, in no uncertain terms, is also the message of numerous theological movements of the past few decades – feminist theology, political theology, black theology, liberation theology, ecotheology and various indigenous theologies, to mention only a few. The environmental crisis, seen from this perspective, is one contemporary manifestation of the legacy of human sin, alongside and reinforced by domination in the name of differences of race, class, gender, culture, education and sexual orientation.<sup>69</sup>

This plot is best captured by the Christian symbols of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the dialectic tension between cross and resurrection Christians proleptically find the clue to the meaning of history.<sup>70</sup> The cross reminds us of the horrors of history (authoritarian rule, evil, suffering and death), counters any rendering of history as evolutionary progress and indicates that history has to be redeemed, not only completed.<sup>71</sup> The resurrection forms the basis of the Christian hope that history can indeed be redeemed. This dialectic between cross and resurrection also illuminates other aspects of God's love. God's love is one which seeks to overcome alienation. Since reciprocity cannot be taken for granted, God willingly becomes vulnerable, awaiting an appropriate (human) response. The Christian tradition has used categories such as God's compassion, *kenosis* (self-emptying love), and self-risk to describe such love.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>66</sup> See Van Ruler's essay "Hoe waardeert men de stof" (1972) and Moltmann 1973.

<sup>67</sup> For some reflections on these metaphors see Conradie 2006:241-246.

<sup>68</sup> Van Ruler 1989:103.

<sup>69</sup> See my essay on ecological reinterpretations of Christian notions of sin (Conradie 2006).

<sup>70</sup> On the notion of *prolepsis*, see the work of Ted Peters (1992), following insights of Wolfhart Pannenberg.

<sup>71</sup> Bauckham & Hart 1999:40.

<sup>72</sup> See the volume of essays on creation as *kenosis* edited by Polkinghorne 2001.

In the fourth place, this is a story that is told again and again within Christian communities. It is told in word and in images, in myth and in ritual, in the celebration of the Christian liturgy.<sup>73</sup> It is not only told, it has to be played, performed and re-enacted. The purpose of telling the story is, of course, partly one of finding our place and our vocation within this story. While the focus of any story is typically on the past, on what has happened thus far, the rationale for telling it is to come to terms with the present and to anticipate what the future may hold. One may therefore identify an interplay between the practices of a local community and its telling of the story. The one reinforces the other. This obviously applies to Christian earthkeeping practices as well. To be engaged in earthkeeping is to tell the story in such a way that God's love for the whole earth is evident. To tell the story of God's love for the earth is to reinforce such earthkeeping practices. To bear witness through Christian earthkeeping is to continue telling the story of God's love for creation in a contemporary setting.<sup>74</sup>

Fifthly, this is a story that may be told as a sequel over many nights, precisely because it is such an immense narrative. One may have to focus on one episode or on one theme at a time. However, it is only when an episode is embedded within the larger story that its place and significance can be appropriated. In this way, the whole set of episodes, themes and symbols reverberate with one another.<sup>75</sup> The problem though, as I noted above, is that this is by no means easy, because we know the story only in fragments and have to live from these fragments, from the crumbs of bread that we have gathered. Few theologians in the history of Christianity have dared to tell the whole story and even the greatest – let us say Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin and Karl Barth – have been severely criticised for distorting the story.

It should therefore not be surprising that theologians have so often contorted the story in some or other way. My suspicion is that theologians typically tend to subsume one episode of the story under another and therefore fail to do full justice to the story. In each case this has serious repercussions for the way in which the place of the earth within the larger story is understood. For example, in the history of the Protestant tradition the doctrine of creation has all too often been subsumed under redemption,<sup>76</sup> albeit that redemption itself has been understood in quite different ways.<sup>77</sup> This has prompted several contemporary retrievals of

<sup>73</sup> On the significance of the Christian liturgy for reorientation, to learn to see the world through God's eyes – with compassion – see the essay by Smit 1997.

<sup>74</sup> For me this is best expressed in the tree planting Eucharists enacted within the context of Association of African Earthkeeping Churches in the Masvingo district in Zimbabwe. See Daneel 1999.

<sup>75</sup> It may be possible to defend a Christian rationale for earthkeeping on the basis of categories such as stewardship, God's covenant, a sense of God's sacred presence, God's promises or God's household. However, these themes become arid, less persuasive and easily marginalised if they are not embedded within the larger story.

<sup>76</sup> Jürgen Moltmann (1985:34) has described this as a "theological retreat from cosmology into personal faith." When the various sciences emancipated themselves from the medieval theological cosmology, science and theology increasingly (and until recently) drifted apart. Christian theology could no longer provide satisfactory answers to the problems energetically posed by new generations of philosophers, astronomers and scientists. In an attempt to protect itself from the scientific questioning of the status of the biblical creation narratives, Christian theology tried to demarcate its own field of specialisation by detaching the doctrine of creation from cosmology. Liberal Protestant theology explained faith in creation as an expression of a feeling of 'absolute dependence' (Schleiermacher). As a result of these developments, Christian theology has focused increasingly on the problem of human (personal or societal) salvation or liberation. Preoccupied with the 'inner agenda of guilt', theologians became unable to respond to the 'outer agenda' of ecological despair (Santmire 1989:267). See also Conradie 1997.

<sup>77</sup> In the Christian tradition the notion of 'salvation' has been understood in especially three quite different ways, namely 1) as God's victory over the forces of evil, death and destruction on the basis of the resurrection of



an adequate theology of creation.<sup>78</sup> In Catholic theology the temptation is to subsume the whole story under the doctrine of the church. In many twentieth century theologies, theology has become a response to the theodicy problem so that both creation and redemption tend to be subsumed under the doctrine of providence or in some cases merely under evolutionary history. In response to such suffering, yet other theologies subsume everything under the mission of the church, that is, under the social agenda of the church, for example in terms of the ecumenical notions of ‘Life and Work’, ‘Church and Society’ and ‘Ecclesiology and Ethics’,<sup>79</sup> or in terms of theological models such as being a church ‘for’ others (Bonhoeffer) or a ‘servant model’ of the church (Avery Dulles). In secularised societies yet others pursue the same social agenda but eventually see no real need for the church in this regard.<sup>80</sup>

My intuition is that all the episodes may come to fruition in the story’s ending, in the hope for the consummation of all things.<sup>81</sup> In the eschaton, the goodness of creation is affirmed and the predicament of sin is addressed at the same time.<sup>82</sup> However, this may also account for the immense confusion that characterises the Christian eschatologies of the last century. The myriad of eschatological approaches tends to inhibit a clear and inspiring vision of hope for the earth in an age of ecological anxiety.<sup>83</sup> It has also led to a paradoxical

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Jesus Christ – including healing in the case of sickness, victory amidst military threats, rescue from threats to safety, rain in the context of droughts, feeding in the context of famine, liberation from political and economic oppression, overcoming the impact of disasters (including environmental disasters), the establishment of good governance amidst anarchy and corruption, exorcism from the power of evil spirits and pervasive ideologies and, finally, new life (resurrection), even in the face of death itself; 2) as reconciliation in a context of alienation, with specific reference to the cross of Jesus Christ, which becomes possible on the basis of a liberating word of forgiveness – in the context of personal relations, in terms of inter-group conflicts (labour disputes, war, civil war, colonialism, apartheid), in economic transactions where debt is incurred, in terms of jurisprudence in order to address injustices through a word of legal pardoning or amnesty, and in religious terms with reference to the relationship between God and humanity (typically using these same metaphors to describe the healing of such a relationship); and 3) as finding an inspiring example to follow in order to cope with the demands of life and of society and to adopt a caring ethos (or sometimes merely to find personal fulfilment) – typically with reference to the life, ministry, parables, wisdom, suffering and death of Jesus Christ, but also with reference to the judges, kings, prophets and priests of Israel and to the saints, martyrs, church leaders and theologians in the history of Christianity – where these examples are then codified in moral codes, books of wisdom, catechisms and even in a bill of rights. For one account of (the relationship between) these soteriological paradigms, see my essay on “Healing in soteriological perspective” (Conradie 2006), following the famous analysis by Gustaf Aulén.

<sup>78</sup> Behind much of the current ecumenical discourse on the *oikos* metaphor lurks the ecological doctrine of creation of Jürgen Moltmann. In his seminal work *God in creation* (1985) Moltmann emphasises the indwelling of God in creation through the Spirit (1985:98-103). In ecumenical theology on the theme of creation, see especially Bedford-Strohm 2001, Duchrow & Liedke 1987 and Lönning 1989. In reformed theology see also Van de Beek 1996 and Welker 1999. In South African reformed literature, see especially Durand 1982 and König 1982.

<sup>79</sup> The theme of “Ecclesiology and Ethics” lies at the core of current ecumenical discourse (see especially Best & Robra 1997; also various essays in Smit 2007).

<sup>80</sup> See the comments by Wolfgang Huber (1998:31) on the dangers of ‘self-secularisation’ where this route is followed, that is, where Christianity is reduced to the social agenda of the church. He pleads that the church should take its own message seriously and that it should make a distinct contribution on this basis. Dulles (1987) also recognises this point.

<sup>81</sup> This would entail the redemption of the world and not redemption from the world. As Jürgen Moltmann (1996:260) notes, without cosmology eschatology will turn into a Gnostic myth of redemption. Instead, the consummation has to be seen as an act of creating anew.

<sup>82</sup> I have argued elsewhere (Conradie 1999, 2000) that Christian hope responds to three distinct aspects of the human predicament, namely human sin, finitude in time (mortality and transience) and the limitations of human knowledge and power in space. An adequate notion of the eschaton requires an integration (but not a conflation) of these aspects of the human predicament.

<sup>83</sup> See my proposal for a ‘road map’ for Christian eschatology at the dawn of a new century (Conradie 1999).

tension between hope, the central theme of any Christian eschatology, and eschatological reflection itself. In such a context we apparently do not know what we hope for, only that we hope or, even worse, that to hope is rather important.

Finally, it should be noted that this story remains incomplete. We cannot tell this story from God's perspective from a privileged vantage point where the end of the story is already known to us. We do not know how the story will end (that would amount to eschatological creationism<sup>84</sup>). We tell the story from within the midst of history. This implies that those who live by this story lives within it.<sup>85</sup> As in any other story, we can anticipate, on the basis of a memory of the past and attention to the present, where the story is heading towards. Such anticipation accounts for much of the excitement in hearing a story, reading a book or watching a film, because our expectations may be confirmed or we may be surprised by new developments. As in other stories there are clues that help us to discern the plot, but these clues are not sufficient to be able to predict how the rest of the story will unfold. That would be too facile and joyless. For Christians, the life, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ provide the clearest clues to the meaning of God's story.

### **An Ecological Moral to the Story?**

Several Christian theologians have detected an ecological moral to the story of the universe as told by contemporary science. They typically draw on Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry's work, but also on that of Teilhard de Chardin and on insights from process thinking.<sup>86</sup> The following four aspects of this ecological moral, derived especially from astrophysics and evolutionary biology, can be mentioned here:

Firstly, compared to the immense scale of the universe the history of the human species seems to pale into insignificance, both in space and in time. We are merely a brief episode in the history of the universe. From evolutionary biology we have learnt that life on earth has evolved slowly and over billions of years. We are but one species amongst millions of other species. The human species is not much older than 2 or 3 million years, while *homo sapiens sapiens* have emerged only very recently, perhaps 120 000 years ago.

Secondly, the history of humanity is radically integrated with that of the cosmos. Life on earth, in fact, the earth itself only became possible after an earlier generation of stars burnt themselves out so that heavier metals were formed. Indeed, as many ecological theologians have commented, we are made from the ashes of dead stars. All the elements in the human brain, in our hands and in our hearts, were forged in the furnaces of stars. Everything in the cosmos is related to everything else through their common origin. This observation was dramatically illustrated by the pictures of the earth taken from space. This illustrated that human beings form part of a thin envelope of life, namely the earth's biosphere. If human beings form part of a larger organism, one may be tempted to ask what function human beings fulfil within this organism. Tim Cooper notes that the place of humans within the earth community may be understood in terms of two metaphors. We may function as the nervous system of the organism that can register and respond to any pain impulses that threaten the organism. Alternatively, humanity may form a colossal,

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<sup>84</sup> See Van de Beek 1996:215.

<sup>85</sup> See Bauckham & Hart 1999:36.

<sup>86</sup> See especially Boff 1997, Edwards 2004, Haught 1993, McDaniel 1995, McFague 1993, Primavesi 2000 & Rasmussen 1996. See also my discussion and critique of this approach in *An ecological Christian anthropology* (Conradie 2005:26-40).

cancerous growth that threatens the survival of the whole ecosystem.<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, evolutionary biology since the days of Charles Darwin has confirmed the continuity between the human species and other species, most notably the great apes.<sup>88</sup> We share as much as 99% of our genetic code with the chimpanzees. As Sallie McFague comments, we are close relatives to other forms of life on earth and ‘distant cousins’ to the stars and other objects in space.<sup>89</sup> This continuity between humans and other species is also being confirmed by recent developments within the neurosciences.

Thirdly, we form part of a dynamic and evolving universe. As Thomas Berry notes, we do not live within an ordered cosmos, we participate in a process of cosmogenesis (Teilhard).<sup>90</sup> The history of the universe does not suggest a linear development but a story full of novelty and unexpected surprises. Moreover, the history of life on earth suggests a pattern of increasing complexity and an underlying tendency towards self-organisation,<sup>91</sup> even though the laws of thermodynamics also describe the ‘arrow of time’ towards increasing entropy. The human brain is certainly the most complex organism that we know of ever to emerge. What should also be noted here is that the more complex forms of organisms depend on others for their survival. In fact, the higher and more complex an organism is, the more vulnerable it is and therefore dependent on the levels that support it. As Sallie McFague comments: “The plants can do very well without us, in fact better, but we would quickly perish without them.”<sup>92</sup>

Fourthly, the history of species that have come and gone suggests that the human species itself is finite. Species seldom have a lifespan beyond 10 million years. We will not be here when the earth’s story comes to an end in about 5 billion years when it will be divulged by the sun becoming a supernova. Other species (perhaps even a more intelligent *homo excelsior* who may look down on us) will inhabit the earth long after *homo sapiens* has disappeared from the planet.

The way in which an ecological moral is derived from scientific insights calls for critical reflection on the question whether this is not an obvious example of what Hume has famously denounced as the naturalistic fallacy. He argued that there is no *necessary* relationship between the order of nature (*cosmos*) and a particular (moral) order of society (*polis*). Frits de Lange, likewise, argued that many ecological theologies do not escape from the naturalistic fallacy. He criticises the work of Rosemary Ruether, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and others who find ethical implications in the reconstruction of the story of the universe in contemporary science.<sup>93</sup>

From within Christian theology one may also argue that deriving such an ecological moral from the story of the universe is an obvious example of what is often denounced as

<sup>87</sup> See Cooper 1990:150-1. These metaphors are derived from Peter Russel’s book *The awakening earth*.

<sup>88</sup> Barbour (1997:253) provides an excellent overview of the evolution of humankind in relation with the apes, stressing both similarities and differences. Ayala’s (1998:33) comment in this regard is noteworthy: “Our closest biological relatives are the great apes and, among them, the chimpanzees, who are more closely related to us than they are to the gorillas, and much more closely than to the orangutans.”

<sup>89</sup> McFague 1993:27.

<sup>90</sup> Berry 1999:26.

<sup>91</sup> The legacy of Teilhard’s position on increasing complexity is evident here. See also Berry 1999:26.

<sup>92</sup> McFague 1993:106.

<sup>93</sup> See De Lange 1997:107-114. Phil Hefner’s (1993:188) assessment of this dialectic between facts and values, cosmos and ethos is perhaps more nuanced. He argues that, “All values finally receive their validity from their being rooted in and being in harmony with the way things really are. Although we may not derive our *oughts* from our experience of the *is*, the *ought* would have no real substance if it were not rooted in the *is*. We want to know that our actions are in harmony with the fundamental character of reality. Ultimately that is what grounds both the mandates and the prohibitions of our moralities” (see also De Lange 1997:112-113).

an all too shallow form of 'natural theology'. Can such an ecological moral be called authentically *Christian*? Despite the critical thrust of these questions it has to be acknowledged that the emphasis on the earth community to which we all belong resonates particularly well with a) the biblical notion of human (*adam*) rootedness in the soil (*adamah*), b) the ecumenical adage of the 'integrity of creation' and c) a theological appreciation for community (*koinonia*).

A more serious criticism against such an ecological moral is related to the emphasis on a sense of *belonging* to the earth. While this may be helpful in order to resist the alienation between humans and the earth that is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition, there is a tendency in such a sense of belonging to underplay various aspects of the human predicament, including those of (natural) suffering, the need to come to terms with human finitude, and especially the pervasive and devastating reality of human sin. Any awareness of these aspects of the human predicament has to question an all too easy affirmation that we are at home on earth. If so, the house that we inhabit is not always a very comfortable one! Instead, in Christian terms, a sense of belonging is perhaps best understood as the very content of an eschatological *longing*. It is only through the Christian longing for the new earth that we can discover our belonging, in body and in soul, to this earth. *The earth may therefore be our (only) house but it is not our home yet.*<sup>94</sup>

In my view there is a clear need to understand any such an ecological moral to the story within the context of a thorough reintegration of the themes of creation, history, sin, providence, redemption, church, mission and consummation. In particular, there is a need to balance the themes of creation and redemption with one another. As Joseph Sittler noted in his famous address to the World Council of Churches (New Delhi 1961): "A doctrine of redemption is meaningful only when it swings within the larger orbit of a doctrine of creation."<sup>95</sup>

Theological reflection on the story of God's work may thus be described as an act of juggling where attention to any one theme has to be balanced by attention to the others. To subsume any theme under any other would be to catch that one and to let all the others fall. That, if anything, is the moral of my story as well. It seems to me that this act of juggling requires a way of seeing, a certain eschatological vision. This, I suggest, is a vision of God's creative, protective, nurturing, corrective, innovative and vindicating love for and loyalty to all of creation.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>94</sup> This is the thesis that I developed in my *An ecological Christian anthropology: At home on earth?* (Conradie 2005).

<sup>95</sup> Sittler in Bakken & Bouma-Prediger (2000:40). See also my earlier comments (Conradie 2004:266-268) on the need for a reintegration of the doctrines of creation and redemption as one of the crucial tasks on the agenda of a Christian ecological theology.

<sup>96</sup> See my proposal in this regard (Conradie 2000:259f).

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