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Social Justice and Ecological Responsibility: A Moral Case for International Collaborative Action on Environmental Degradation and Climate-Induced Displacement

James Stephen Mastaler
Loyola University Chicago, james.mastaler@gmail.com

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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY:
A MORAL CASE FOR INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIVE ACTION ON
ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND CLIMATE-INDUCED DISPLACEMENT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY
JAMES STEPHEN MASTALER
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ABSTRACT

The contemporary ecological crisis, manifest in human-induced climate change, is a powerful form of structural violence against the poorest communities on the planet. As such, my research resides at the nexus of structural poverty, gender disparity, ecological degradation, and climate-induced displacement. The social justice implications emerging from this nexus require responsible moral deliberation and discernment over the international community’s role in minimizing the human tragedies accompanying forced displacement and migration. While asserting the interconnectedness and dependency of all life upon mutual flourishing, responsible decision-making expands the range of felt moral concern to include ecological flourishing. Social justice is only possible in tandem with climate justice and a concern for the whole person cannot be fully separated from environmental concern. As a response to both concerns, I critically correlate traditionally humanitarian issues within the context of the ecological crisis and I rely on an expanded understanding of a preferential option for the poor and oppressed as my orienting theological framework. My goal is to inspire a practical vision of social justice and ecological responsibility that together form a “Theology of Mobilization” that seriously addresses the systemic plight of those carrying the heaviest burden of the ecological and climate crisis. My work makes an appeal to all people of good will who are open to critical engagement with Christian moral and intellectual traditions, while also pushing for an attentive response to the needs of the planet’s most vulnerable communities.
INTRODUCTION

The most important moral challenge of our generation is the contemporary ecological crisis. Humanity has never before confronted a problem that so powerfully threatens the flourishing of our entire species, much less the functioning and vitality of the entire planetary life support system. We are polluting the land, water, and air that people need to survive and thrive. Furthermore, humanity’s presence on earth has grown so inconceivably powerful that, for the first time in earth’s history, the actions of a single species is transforming the very geography of the earth’s surface and the chemical composition of the planet’s air and water.

The rate of change, in terms of resultant biodiversity loss and geochemical processes, is so astonishing that some scientists now argue we are quite literally ushering in a new epoch—a unit of geological time, the last of which (the Holocene epoch) began over 10,000 years ago following the glaciations of the last Ice Age.\(^1\) We live and work at an important moment in human and earth history.\(^2\) The decisions of this, and future, generations are literally re/shaping the world in which we live. If, as it is said, with great

\(^1\) See Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "Are we Now Living in the Anthropocene?" *GSA Today: A Publication of the Geological Society of America* 18, no. 2 (2008), 4-8. See also *Fate of Mountain Glaciers in the Anthropocene* (Vatican: Pontifical Academy of Sciences, May 11, 2011).

power comes great responsibility,\(^3\) then humanity has a moral obligation to use our newfound power to create a better world in which all are able to survive and thrive. As Hans Jonas argues, human power has expanded so greatly during the last century that it requires an unprecedented expansion of moral responsibility.\(^4\)

Despite the pressing nature of the ecological crisis, too many international, national, corporate, and religious institutions have failed to adopt overt normative stances that might compel us toward the collective, structural change necessary to sustain the vitality of earth’s ecosystems. Some national governments and some global institutional structures, like the United Nations, are grappling with how to respond to the multifaceted challenges of the ecological crisis and of climate change in particular. While some religious communities have discussed the moral significance of the crisis and advocated collective action on the part of governmental and global institutions, both individual and collective action has failed to materialize in any significant way. The deeply held values and beliefs expressed by our international declarations and by our world’s religious bodies do not inform action in the way they could and should. There is a gap between what we say we ought to do and what we actually do.

That gap is understandable, given the historical context in which the world’s religious traditions have developed. Those trained in ethical reasoning, either

\(^3\) This specific phrase was probably made famous in U.S. popular culture when Stan Lee introduced it into his comics in 1962. However, the phrase is best attributed to either François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire 1694-1778) or the Christian biblical tradition (Luke 12:48).

professionally or via a religious tradition or both, have typically not spent much time on ecological concerns relative to other moral dilemmas emerging from the human experience, like birth and death, sexuality, or war. Meanwhile, the scope of this present ecological crisis carries risks dwarfing these moral issues, which are still receiving the lion’s share of attention. If we do not address the ecological crisis, eventually we may not be able to address any of these other moral issues. The field of Christian ethics is only just beginning to address such issues as climate change and the climate-induced displacement that results when people lose their homelands and/or livelihoods as sea levels rise and climate patterns shift. Christian ethicists are trained to deliberate on moral problems, yet other well-meaning scientists, compelled by their conscience, have been forced to work beyond their expertise to fill the void left by my discipline’s general slowness to respond.\(^5\) If Christian ethicists focused more on the ecological and climate crisis and if they did their job better, then the gap between values and actions—between theory and praxis—might be much smaller.

Part of the problem may be that the ecological crisis is so new that ethicists and religious communities, like societies in general, have not had the time to contemplate and process climate displacement as we have other moral issues. This alone, however, does not explain why others have been quicker to respond. It is evident that the discourse in major streams of modern Catholic and Protestant theologies and ethics has been swayed toward human-focused and human-centered concerns. The dominant lens through which

\(^5\) For example, James Hansen has argued that climate change is on par with slavery. “NASA Scientist: Climate Change is a Moral Issue on Par with Slavery.” Friday 6 April 2012. http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/apr/06/nasa-scientist-climate-change
Christian theologians, ethicists, ministers, and lay thinkers approach moral problems does not yet adequately situate the human person within the obvious ecologically embedded and mutually dependent context in which we recognize ourselves today. Human power and planetary fragility turn on its head the historical paradigm out of which the world’s religious traditions have been operating for millennia, in which human frailty in the face of planetary power has been the dominant normative understanding.

Another part of the problem is that climate change and other ecological concerns are inherently complex. Specifically, climate-induced displacement resides at the crossroads of so many different disciplines that any suitable response requires interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary proficiency. This need for inter and multidisciplinary attention is a formidable challenge as few scientists are ethicists by training and few ethicists really have a mastery of the ecological sciences. It must be noted, however, that a number of scientists, such as E.O. Wilson, Holmes Rolston III, and Aldo Leopold, have argued persuasively within the moral arena.6 The effort of these and other scientists who offer the public moral and ethical arguments is commendable. Little evidence, however, suggests that their arguments are as persuasive as they would like them to be, especially among those who disagree from the onset. Scientists are not formally trained in the discipline of “oughts” and “shoulds,” and they often work out of

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disciplines that intentionally eschew moral discourse and categories. As such, advocating too ardently in the public square in favor of a certain moral position can sometimes discredit them professionally.

True interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary collaboration is exceedingly difficult but very necessary, especially for the ecological and climate crises. Holmes Rolston, working in that academic space where religion and science meet, has noted:

The interface between science and religion is, in a certain sense, a no-man’s [sic] land. No specialized science is competent here, nor does classical theology or academic philosophy really own this territory. This is an interdisciplinary zone where inquirers come from many fields.”

As a Christian ethicist intent on responding to these crises, I seek to occupy this space—to use the best science of our day, motivated by an ethic of responsibility, as a lens through which I approach and respond to the specific moral problems emerging from the climate crisis.

My research is not, however, an effort to present myself as a climate scientist, or my work as climate science, any more than it is an effort to present myself as a social scientist or to write climate policy. Rather, my research follows Sallie McFague’s

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argument “that theology be done within the contemporary scientific worldview.”

Human understanding of how the universe works has evolved and increased tremendously with discoveries made by the likes of Sir Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein. Similarly, Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace’s insights on natural selection and evolutionary processes offer a challenge to traditional religious conceptions regarding what it means to be human in light of these processes. The traditions simply must engage these “new” forms of knowledge if they are to be both relevant and responsible. My project endeavors to make a moral case that is responsive to scientific conclusions but critically engaged with the Christian traditions of moral and ethical reasoning. If individual and collective action is what is needed, then Christianity’s roughly two billion believers need to be on board to help push forward some of that change.

My colleagues in the environmental sciences and climate advocacy community sometimes express concern when they discover they are working alongside a Christian ethicist at UN gatherings on climate change and other such venues. I have attended several Conference of the Parties (COP) for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) since the 2010 COP in Cancun, Mexico, as a member of the Sierra Club delegation sponsored by the Club’s International Climate Negotiations Group. Rarely, though occasionally, does a colleague’s surprise turn hostile toward me with an outright dismissal of anything I might have to say on the topic. I am often asked what right I might have to stick my nose in what is otherwise often deemed the business of science and political advocacy. The underlying assumption in some circles appears to be

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that climate change is, either primarily or exclusively, a scientific issue or a public policy concern.

From my first-hand experiences at UN COPs and as a former Sierra Club advocate and current life member, fellow activists and allies may sometimes concede that climate change is an economic, political, and/or social issue, but it is harder to convince them that it is also, fundamentally, a religious issue as well. The world’s religions have a critical role to play in mobilizing a response to the ecological and climate crisis and while many do not recognize or understand how/why this is the case, several others do.\(^\text{10}\)

Having lived and worked in Bangladesh, formally studied ecology in South Asia and social justice issues in East Africa, I am increasingly convinced that the challenges of the ecological and climate crisis are at least as much about religious issues as they are economic, political, and social.

I am also hopeful that the world’s religious traditions, including Christianity, can help resolve some of these issues by constructively engaging the challenges of this ecological crisis, and particularly the injustice of climate change and climate-induced displacement. It is because of the many intersections between ecological concern and concern for the poor that a central focus of this dissertation is on the specific problem of climate-induced displacement. While there is much that can be done to reduce the future intensity of ecological degradation and climate change, a certain amount of change is

already taking place and it is affecting those at the margins of society most severely, especially in South Asia and Africa. These changes, like sea-level rise along delta communities and small island nations, droughts and floods affecting agricultural production and ecosystem-based livelihoods, shifting habitats and disease transmission zones, are all beginning to occur now. The world’s poorest, most vulnerable communities are already disproportionately exposed to these risks and are increasingly displaced by them.

Climate change is partly about our collective recognition of planetary boundaries and learning to live within them but there are also undeniable social justice concerns that can no longer be fully separated from ecological concerns. The two must be addressed together and that requires a tremendous paradigm shift in the way we think about ourselves, act upon the Earth and regard those with whom we share it. Loyola University president and Secretary for Higher Education for the Society of Jesus, Michael J. Garanzini, S.J., describes the kind of response required by such interlaced threats to human and ecological well-being:

[A] commitment to ecology and the environment is an expansion and undergirding of an ongoing commitment to protecting and caring for all forms of life at the margins: the poor, the disenfranchised, the alienated and ill, the aged and disabled, new life and old life—it is an embrace of the fragility of life and a call to protect it in all its forms.  

Care for the Earth and care for the poor are two sides of the same coin. It is somewhat more obvious that adequate care for the poor depends upon care for the Earth since the

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poor are generally more directly ecosystem-dependent than the wealthy (though all people require a functioning planet for our continued existence). Less obvious but just as certain, is that care for the Earth now depends upon care for the poor. Our species has grown so numerous and so powerful that even the poorest among us have become a formidable ecological force and now wield a collective environmental footprint capable of degrading and diminishing the planet’s life support systems, albeit not as destructively as the wealthiest among us. ¹²

Policies that mitigate the drivers of climate change, like fossil fuel consumption and ecological degradation, are as much an appropriate response to the injustice of climate change and climate-induced displacements as are policies empowering vulnerable populations to survive and thrive in place and/or in new locations. Perhaps the next stage in our human evolutionary development is less biological and more a continuation of our cultural and spiritual development; maybe it is a recognition of our collective power and a resolve to use that newfound power for the common good of all life on Earth, and maybe someday, beyond it.

Religious traditions offer a kind of creative potential essential to nourishing the tremendous cultural and spiritual transformation necessary for a new generation to make sense of their world in light of this challenge—to make sense of it in a way that preserves and sustains the earth and extends a “commitment to protecting and caring for all forms

of life at the margins.\textsuperscript{13} We cannot be so naïve as to believe, however, that all people are ready to share equally the responsibility for mitigating climate change. The UNFCCC calls for “common but differentiated responsibilities” as part of any internationally agreed-upon climate solution.\textsuperscript{14} This stated goal embodies a concern for the poor and oppressed that is bound by justice. It recognizes the need for the poorest among us to claim the basic resources they need, while calling for greater restraint and effort on the part of those most able to give it.

Central to these complementary ecological and social justice concerns is the argument that justice for the earth and for all people is not simply about everyone making equal sacrifices.\textsuperscript{15} Any adequate response to the ecological crisis in general, and the climate challenge in particular, simply must include a promise to the poorest and most vulnerable. That promise includes a requisite commitment to preserve and enhance the functioning and vitality of the Earth’s planetary life support systems on which all, including the poor, depend most. Moreover, that promise ought to guarantee more equitable access to the resources the poor need to help them survive and thrive. This is what the Christian traditions call God’s “preferential option for the poor” and it is one example of how Christian moral reasoning can contribute to an already robust

\textsuperscript{13} Garanzini, \textit{Faculty Convocation 2012}.


conversation taking place in civil society. This dissertation offers a theory of structured ethical reflection as it has grown out of the Christian traditions, and applies it to the social and climate challenges of our contemporary ecological context. An ethic of responsibility and a special concern for the poor permeate the entire project.

In chapter one, I argue that Christian ethics must act in service to the general society at large regarding the particular problem of climate change and climate-induced displacement. Since Christian ethics has a rich tradition of engaging social problems, I begin with an analysis of the social aspects of climate change and their moral significance before showing why religious leaders are particularly well-equipped to help mobilize a broad segment of society as mediators of climate science. I then describe how Christian ethical reflection can shape society’s understanding of needs and priorities. A description of my four-part methodology for this type of applied Christian ethics follows. I show how it emerges out of the Christian traditions as an expansion of the Christian ethic of responsibility. My method’s theoretical structure parallels the practical structure of the dissertation’s remaining chapters as each part of my method is applied in each of the successive chapters of the dissertation.

In chapter two, I explain why I have chosen a sustained focus on climate change and climate-induced displacement, by attending to the “signs of the times” with a “thick

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description”\textsuperscript{18} or case study that analyzes the systemic problems faced by the world’s most vulnerable populations. This chapter presents an exploration of what, precisely, is happening at the intersection of structural poverty, gender disparity, ecological degradation, and climate-induced displacement. I start here because, as H. Richard Niebuhr argues, the quality of moral deliberation and discernment depends on a solid understanding of what is already “going on” within a given context.\textsuperscript{19} Catholic Social Teachings, and prominent Christian ethicists like Miguel De La Torre, argue that everyday, lived experiences ought to act as a starting point as well.\textsuperscript{20}

This chapter investigates what is really “going on” within the context of climate-induced displacement so as to ground my ethical reflection in the challenges and problems emerging from the everyday, lived experiences of the poor and oppressed. This is part and parcel of what it means for me to do responsible Christian ethics. My experiences working, studying, and living alongside some of the world’s poorest people motivate my concern for the well-being of those generally most marginalized and at risk


\textsuperscript{19} Niebuhr, \textit{The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy,} 14, 59, 60, 63, 67, 121

to climate change and climate-induced displacement: the poor, poorer women, and sensitive ecosystems.

In chapter three, I dig deeper by exploring the underlying perspectives and worldviews or cultural narratives undergirding the ecological and climate crisis. Max Oelschlaeger argues that human beings are more usefully described as “storytelling culture-dwellers.” The origin of our ecological crisis resides in those spaces occupied by cultural stories, worldviews, religious narratives and underlying perspectives at least as much as our collective failure to use technology, science, and rational thought as appropriate tools for our collective response to environmental problems. Consequently, the key to social justice and ecological responsibility resides in those spaces too.

Any solution that does not address the worldviews and underlying perspectives, which play a fundamental role in collective and individual decision-making, will not prove itself adequate for the task ahead. If ecologists, climate scientists, activists, and policy makers plan to do something significant in response to the present and impending social and ecological disasters arising from environmental degradation and climate-induced displacement, then they have to acknowledge the basic role our cultural stories and narratives play in motivating and inspiring human actions. We have to reassess those theological anthropologies, those cultural and historical perspectives, which I argue contribute to the ecological and climate crisis and which allow us to turn a collective blind eye to the tides of displaced peoples beginning to surge all over the globe. I then turn to alternative perspectives from the margins of society that I think may aid in a

future transformation of human-earth relations and greater concern for those at the front-lines of climate change.

In chapter four, I argue that counter to what some prevailing assessments conclude of Christianity’s inherent inability to respond adequately to the ecological crisis, that the Christian traditions are up to the task of an expanded sense of moral concern even though that task won’t be easy or without challenges.22 If care for the Earth and care for the poor are increasingly two sides of the same coin, then whether a Christian concern for the poor can be extended authentically to the Earth, is an important question. This chapter directly engages that question, while naming the promises and possible limitations of such an extension of moral concern.

Sallie McFague acts as one of my primary dialogue partners as I grapple with what it means to take Christian concern for the poor and marginalized seriously in an era when the earth’s ecosystems and endangered species are some of our poorest and most marginalized “neighbors” in need.23 Can Christian concern for the poor authentically extend a promise of Christian hope to the Earth itself as neighbor in need or is that promise limited exclusively to the human poor? What might it mean to stand in solidarity with a polluted atmosphere, a dying marine reef ecosystem, or an endangered species? I cannot resolve all of these issues, but I pause to acknowledge them and wrestle with them. Extending moral concern to include consideration for the


“preservation and enhancement” of all life on Earth ought to become normative throughout the entire range of our decision-making, as Thomas Berry argues, if the human species is to respond adequately to all those displaced by climate change.24

In the fifth chapter, I offer a vision of social justice, ecological flourishing, and sustainable development as an antidote to the hope-crushing despair of the ecological crisis. I will point to specific policy recommendations that people of good will can advocate for on behalf of climate-induced displacees. There is precedence in past international deliberations for enhancing protection of vulnerable populations from national, political, racial, religious or social group persecution.25 The world’s nations can work together to create transformative, landmark policies that better protect and care for life at the margins if we only muster the will to do so. I conclude the dissertation with a call for personal and individual responsibility as a compliment to international collaborative action and I do so in a tone of hopefulness—hopefulness that just, equitable and ecologically sustainable development is possible.

Elizabeth Johnson argues that dominant thought forms in Christian theology have stressed the order of creation and divine providence for the bulk of Christian history and that it is really only in the modern period that main streams of Protestant and Catholic theology have become so exclusively focused upon human persons and the human


encounter with God in history. Setting aside contemporary tensions and debates, there are historically rich streams of creation-centered thinking from throughout the Christian traditions that can be drawn upon to help illuminate and inspire a better way forward—one sensitive to the needs of the planet’s most vulnerable communities rightfully seeking a better life for themselves within planetary boundaries and one sensitive to the needs of the Earth itself. It is past time for religious leaders lay and ordained, theologians, and ethicists to both draw upon existing resources within the Christian traditions and create new resources as necessary. Both retrieval and reconstruction is the goal of this work.


CHAPTER ONE

CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN THE MIDST OF AN ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

The contemporary ecological crisis in general, and human-induced climate change in particular, are both powerful forms of structural violence against the poorest communities on the planet. Human-induced climate change is such a key concern within the larger ecological crisis because inadequate adaptation planning for those least able to cope with it leads to climate-induced displacement: people compelled to relocate, internally or internationally, because climatological changes make viable livelihoods unachievable. Given the international community’s failure to prepare for climate-induced displacement, and given the Christian community’s professed commitments to solidarity with the poor and oppressed, Christians are morally obligated by their faith to urge their governments and institutions to ramp up adaptation planning. What is needed is a holistic humanitarian “social justice” response to climate change—one that specifically addresses structural poverty, gender disparity, ecological degradation, and climate-induced displacement.\(^1\)

International reports argue that technical, environmental solutions are ineffective if environmental issues are not addressed in tandem with accompanying social issues,

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like those noted above. This is why ecological specialists argue for, and work to create, formulations of broad-gauged responses. Such responses require the contributions of all members and segments of society working collaboratively toward inter- and multi-disciplinary solutions. The discipline of Christian ethics can offer critical service to the public square on the moral necessity of comprehensive responses to the ecological crisis that are sensitive to the needs of the poor. Christian ethicists and the religious leaders they train are not only capable of contributing to this dialogue but have an essential and irreplaceable role to play in helping to mobilize the kind of effort and commitment required by individuals and communities as a response to climate change and climate-induced displacement. A number of ecologists and environmentalists have long requested that religious leaders engage these issues head-on and help mobilize their communities’ energies to these concerns. While there has been some progress, it has not been on the scale required by the larger scope of the problem.

In this chapter, my first section introduces Christian ethics as a discipline with significant potential to contribute to the public discussion on climate change. The second

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section argues that climate change is a moral issue of concern for the general public, primarily because of its impact on human communities. The third section argues that Christian ethicists and the religious leaders they train are well-equipped to mediate climate science to a broad slice of the general public who might not otherwise be moved by statistics and scientific data. In the fourth section, I offer a description of what I think Christian ethics requires, if it is to be done responsibly within the contemporary social and ecological context. I then outline how I plan to apply a method of Christian ethics to the specific environmental and social challenges of climate-induced displacement—a method in which responsibility, narrative, and liberation ethics intersect so as to require close and critical attention to central narratives about meaning, with preference for the poor acting as a normative standard.

**Christian Ethics for the Common Good**

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite speaks and writes prolifically about the role of religion as it engages with societal needs. Her description of it helps clarify part of the role I envision theology and Christian ethics have to play in the public square, specifically as it relates to this dissertation’s topic. Thistlethwaite notes:

> Public theology is often used as a term to mean relating religious doctrines to things that are happening in the public square, like “abortion is evil” or “the budget is a moral document.” That is not what I mean. What I mean by Public Theology is really seeing the religious meaning that is being generated in the kinds of new media that pummel us all day long every day. It also means helping everybody get that these are major religious stories, competing stories, really, about who human beings are, what the world really is, and what people believe God is up to in the midst of all of it. 

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Our worldviews have an influential effect on the many conscious and subconscious decisions we make each day. Our underlying assumptions about humanness, divinity, and how we think human society and the world works shape and color the lens through which we see the field of action, challenges and possibilities before us. In turn, this lens powerfully influences the decisions we make as we encounter the world. Thistlethwaite argues that “the really big decisions are made” firstly at the subconscious level.6 Religious traditions shape, and are shaped by, a society’s predominating worldviews and perspectives. The fields of theology and ethics can shine a light on this dynamic, illuminating ways to make us more conscious of our subconscious decisions and more aware of the narratives and stories that guide our lives.

So, what precisely is happening that is failing to resonate with the public on climate change, and why is it not resonating? What is the story carrying so much moral significance that it must be told—what is happening that is so important that it demands a response from people of good will? And in turn, what stories of critical significance might be going largely ignored by society and by the world’s religious communities? Why are they being ignored? I will systematically address these questions soon, but at root is Thistlethwaite’s observation that most people do not really care for doctrine so much as they care about “making some meaningful sense of their lives and the world around them.”7

6 Ibid., 10.

7 Ibid., 12.
As scholars, however, theologians and ethicists answer questions like these by turning to a vast collection of sources and moral theories, among which doctrine is just one source. Sacred scriptures and texts, church traditions and social teachings, human reason, social analysis, hard and social science, and everyday lived experiences all act as sources for Christian ethics. Liberation theology, responsibility and narrative ethics act as the primary moral theories for this dissertation, while other Christian ethicists might rely on theories ranging from Natural Law to Virtue Ethics and Social Contract theory. These examples of various sources and theories orient the Christian ethicist’s academic discipline, but I think theologians and ethicists have a critically important role to play beyond the academy as well. We can help religious leaders and the general public to “really see” how the social aspects of moral problems like climate change engage our most deeply held affirmations—affirmations about what it means to be human and about our assumptions of who God might or might not be and what our responsibilities are to each other and to the Earth on which we all live and depend.

Social Aspects of Climate Change and their Ethical Significance

This project considers several different types of climate-induced displacements, including the displacement of peoples from more frequent and extreme weather events like flooding and hurricanes, to failing agricultural production, changes in disease transmission zones, and sea-level rise along deltas and small island nations.8 Some of these examples include situations where local place-based adaptation schemes and

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8 See Koko Warner et al., *In Search of Shelter: Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement* (Bonn, Germany: CARE Deutschland-Luxemburg, May 2009).
sustainable development projects may improve livelihoods and human flourishing. However, it also presents those instances in which these strategies may be an impossible or insufficient response to the challenges at hand.

The most relevant examples explored in this dissertation, concern those situations in which human livelihood and flourishing are increasingly rendered impossible for at least the majority of a community, regardless of the strategies employed to deal with climate change. In these situations, the only sufficient and realistic response for most people is to flee their particular locale in order to preserve their very lives and/or their children’s futures. Solutions to these most critical and desperate situations require immediate and serious ethical deliberation and moral discernment. They also demand a grounded, practical response and call to action.

The options available to climate change displacees are not yet on a par with the options available to those displaced by internationally recognized national, political, racial, religious, or social group persecutions. Individuals, families, and sometimes entire communities must choose between the risk and uncertainties of an uprooted and stateless life elsewhere or a near-certain loss of life and livelihood in their homeland. Those able to flee from environmental problems are not yet eligible, under current international law, to receive legal refugee status recognition as are those displaced for the

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other reasons mentioned.\textsuperscript{11} While responding to climate and extreme weather events is not yet within the United Nations Refugee Agency’s mandate, the Agency increasingly participates in such emergencies because of the pressing humanitarian needs that natural disasters prompt, climate-induced or otherwise.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the commissioner’s Office (the UNHCR) formally express a perceived need for the continued study of climate change and human rights.\textsuperscript{13}

Future frameworks may become available to address more adequately issues of human rights violations associated with climate change. In the meantime, many of the world’s most vulnerable populations do not and will not have access to the resources needed to develop sustainably, adapt locally, or migrate as needed, even as the international community fails to mitigate climate change. This raises important questions: What are the international community’s moral obligations in providing these vulnerable communities a legal option to flee from climate change when the only other alternative is their loss of life and livelihood? What is a more responsible path forward than the one our species presently travels? Are we not capable of better caring for the most vulnerable among us? These are some of the issues emerging out of the climate


\textsuperscript{12} UN High Commissioner for Refugees, \textit{Briefing Note: The Management of Humanitarian Emergencies Caused by Extreme Climate Events} (Published Electronically: UN High Commissioner for Refugees, April 2009), 1.

\textsuperscript{13} Guterres Antonio, "Millions Uprooted: Saving Refugees and the Displaced," \textit{Foreign Affairs} 87, no. 5 (2008), 90-99; UN High Commissioner for Refugees, \textit{Climate Change, Natural Disasters and Human Displacement: A UNHCR Perspective} (Published Electronically: The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2009), 1-12.
change and human rights discourse that need to be considered by the world’s religious communities.

One scientist writing on the health implications of climate change from a perspective of concern by the Christian community is L. Kristin Page. She provides a three-pronged framework for thinking through issues of climate-induced displacement and vulnerability.\textsuperscript{14} She creates distinct categories, the first of which is for those people and communities who become victims of extreme weather events such as flooding, hurricanes, or heat waves. These events have occurred naturally throughout the world for millennia but are newly significant because climate change models suggest they are intensifying and will increase in frequency. Notably, the impact of these events is typically not equally felt across the globe. It is almost always society’s most vulnerable populations that are disproportionately impacted by natural disasters, especially flooding,\textsuperscript{15} hurricanes,\textsuperscript{16} or heat waves.\textsuperscript{17} The poorest members of every society are

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  \item \textsuperscript{14} L. Kristen Page, "Global Climate Change: Implications for Global Health," in \textit{Christians, the Care of Creation & Global Climate Change}, ed. Lindy Scott (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 33.
usually those that bear the greatest burden of a disaster regardless of whether the society itself is considered wealthy or poor by international standards, though countries with poor economies tend to fare worse as a whole than other countries. Differences in impact upon the poor and vulnerable in society occur by degree among countries rather than by kind. The global poorest residing primarily in Africa and South Asia, however, are most affected by the worst effects of climate change and to a much more significant degree than in wealthier European and U.S. contexts. When it comes to a natural disaster, vulnerable populations in all societies typically suffer far more than their more affluent peers, but the vulnerable in the poorest societies generally suffer the worst.

A second category in Page’s framework describes a kind of marginalization and social vulnerability brought about by both disease transmission and food shortages exacerbated by climate change. Examples of the first include cholera and waterborne illness outbreaks increasing across much of Southeast Asia. Drought and agricultural failure across the African continent are sad examples of the latter. Simple geographical and ecosystem differences are partly responsible for the prevalence of certain disease vectors, like mosquitoes and the prevalence of malaria in some parts of the tropics, but


addressing social factors remains key to ending the affliction they cause communities.\textsuperscript{18}

Disease, however, is often compounded and more able to devastate human communities when it is accompanied by inadequate infrastructure for prevention and treatment. Social inequity greatly exaggerates any inherent geographical liabilities.\textsuperscript{19}

For example, food production under drought conditions is more adequately managed by affluent societies with better access to the resources and expertise necessary to mitigate a drought’s impact on the population. While some affluent societies are affluent in part because they have emerged in locales where the climate has been historically amenable to crop production and their populations have taken advantage of that resource, it is mostly the case that better access to resources, stable economies and political structures, improved infrastructure for delivery of product, crop insurance, aid programs, and ability to purchase food abroad while subsidizing expenses, all contribute to an affluent society’s ability to maintain an adequate, affordable food supply when food production is otherwise disrupted. The way any given society is or is not able to manage changes in disease transmission is similar.

The poor in the world’s poorest countries will face unfair social, political, and economic struggles in their efforts to adapt to climate change because their societies do not even have the resources and infrastructure to support them now. Put differently, the


poor are not displaced by disease or food production failures solely because technological solutions fail to exist but because enduring social, political, and economic injustices stand between those solutions and their appropriation by the poor. The causes of marginalization today will be, in many cases, the same causes that marginalize the poor in any future that relegates them to the periphery of societal concern. Climate change compounds existing ecological problems, amplifies their impact on society’s poorest and most vulnerable, and places social justice even further out of reach than it is under today’s more stable ecological and climatological conditions.  

As with disease transmission, it is sometimes argued that food security is a matter of simple geography. It appears, however, that geography alone is not exclusively responsible for food security or insecurity, but is one factor compounded by wealth and social policies. For example, a country’s physical size or landmass, geography, type of ecosystem and number of its ecosystems, all play a role in a nation’s prospects at food security. A small but populous country like Bangladesh is food insecure, partly because most of its territory exists over a river delta and its agricultural productivity is therefore limited almost entirely to whatever a river delta is capable of supporting. A large country...

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like the U.S. can grow temperate grain crops across vast swaths of its heartland, all kinds of fruits and vegetables in places like California, and many tropical crops in places like Florida. It is a continent size nation with a diversity of ecosystems that offer it advantages in adapting to climate change.

In the U.S., ecological and geographical diversity contributes to food security and a lack of it contributes to food insecurity for smaller countries like Bangladesh. Still, many small European countries have the kind of food policies, in combination with their relative wealth, that prove capable of creating food security for most of its citizens. To complicate the matter further, international policies on trade, agricultural subsidies, and copyrights over genetically modified (GM) seeds all influence the ability of a people’s ability to grow food and feed themselves in an increasingly globalized world. As with changes in the range of disease transmission, agricultural production and food security is more than just a matter of geography; food security is a matter of social equity and public policy and those two factors are probably more important in an increasingly globalized world than geographical factors alone.²²

One particularly challenging aspect of climate change for the poor, is highlighted by Page’s third category or organizing framework. It is also one of the most direct, obvious, and severe ways in which society’s most marginalized experience permanent and unavoidable displacement: sea-level rise. While this category has a longer-term impact horizon than the previously noted categories, this one may require the most diligent international collaboration as it describes those communities and populations at

direct risk of becoming displaced, or those already displaced, because their homelands are physically losing landmass.

While other ecological issues like erosion, freshwater contamination by seawater, and storm surges make many small developing island nations and atoll countries and their islands uninhabitable long before sea levels are expected to rise high enough to physically wash their land off the map, the certainty and permanent consequences of sea-level rise makes it a distinct category deserving special attention. The Maldivian government has been relocating its citizens from uninhabitable islands since 2010, demonstrating how pressing the problem of sea-level rise has already become even if its worst consequences for most of the world’s people are predicted to be much further down the road.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the most widely recognized authority on climate change and serves as the scientific standard bearer on global scientific consensus regarding climate change. As such, IPCC reports are often considered to be relatively conservative in their predictions and the amount of time necessary to reach scientific consensus on such complex issues tends to date the conclusions before they are even released to the public. It has been argued that the IPCC 4th Assessment Report was out of date by the time of publication and significantly

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23 Ibid. 6-7; See also Michael B. Gerrard and Gregory E. Wannier, eds., Threatened Island Nations: Legal Implications of Rising Seas and a Changing Climate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

underestimated the potential impact of problems like sea-level rise. For example, the IPCC’s report projected sea levels would rise “between 0.18 and 0.59 meters (6 inches to 2 feet) by the last decade of the century,” but Mich Lemonick references reputedly published research containing newer data that recalculates the projection to “0.8 to 2 meters (roughly 2 ½ to 6 ½ feet).” By even the most cautious estimates, significant changes are being observed and are expected to increase, and any morally adequate response requires collective action on behalf of those residing perilously at the frontlines of those changes.

Sea-level rise along river deltas and atoll sinking are cases demonstrating a particularly dire form of human displacement resulting from climate change and ecological degradation. One dramatic case is told visually in an Academy Award-

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27 Parry et al., *Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007*. 
nominated short documentary film I helped fund.\textsuperscript{28} The film tells the story of the Carteret Islanders whose small atoll is disappearing into the sea at such a rate that it may become totally uninhabitable by 2015. In 2005, already 980 people from these small islands were evacuated.\textsuperscript{29} Though the scientific community is still examining the precise causes leading to this island’s disappearance into the sea, as well as causes for other atoll sinking, island subsidence is probably not the primary factor. Whether sea-level rise is the primary factor or a small secondary factor alongside other human-induced ecological disruptions, which lead to shoreline erosion, it is most likely human-induced.\textsuperscript{30}

The people of the Carteret Islands represent just one of the first examples of the pressing nature of this kind of displacement and the people of the Kiribati Islands represent a second as their president aims to buy land for relocation in neighboring Fiji, in response to what he sees as relentlessly rising sea levels.\textsuperscript{31} Meanwhile, more affluent countries need not even consider the dire necessity of purchasing land from other nations in order to protect the lives and future livelihoods of its people. The Netherlands have a


\textsuperscript{31} Paul Chapman, "Entire Nation of Kiribati to be Relocated Over Rising Sea Level Threat: The Low-Lying Pacific Nation of Kiribati is Negotiating to Buy Land in Fiji so it can Relocate Islanders Under Threat from Rising Sea Levels," \textit{The Telegraph}, 17 March, 2012; James Heer. \textit{The President's Dilemma}, Film, directed by James Heer (Oley, PA: Television Trust for the Environment; BBC World Service; Bullfrog Films, 2011).
long history of building sea walls to keep back sea water, and they continue to invest incredibly vast sums of money into their building and maintenance in order to protect what they believe to be vital population centers. New York City is also considering a bold engineering plan to protect Manhattan from the kind of storm surges like those associated with Superstorm Sandy and which are expected to increase in frequency and intensity if climate change continues unabated.

The Dutch and the U.S. are wise to consider such large-scale programs and whether they are the most responsible use of so many resources. Social justice and sustainable development require a kind of place-based adaptation in which individuals and the social fabric of their communities are held in place and negative climate impacts are mitigated or adapted to as much as possible so that facilitated migration is an option of last resort. Nobody should be forced to flee his or her homeland. Ideally, ecological degradation and climate change could be entirely mitigated and no populations would ever be forced to flee their homelands or to potentially choose funding such massive engineering projects over other important projects. This is why the need for continued efforts to prevent the still-preventable consequences of climate change bears significant urgency and also why our collective inability to adequately mitigate the problem requires that we now prepare for that which is no longer preventable. As Lester Brown puts it, we

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need a national and global mobilization of energies to address climate change threats with all due seriousness.  

Ecological degradation, greenhouse gas emissions, and atmospheric carbon buildup continues apace and if it doesn’t stop, or until it stops, growing numbers of people will continue to become displaced by climate change. Estimates vary, but some estimate that as many as 150 million people may be displaced by climate changes over the next 50 years (1.5% of the predicted global population of nearly 10 billion in 2050). It is morally imperative that international and religious communities treat climate-induced displacement as the serious threat to justice and equitable human flourishing that it is. The waves of displaced peoples will continue to increase dramatically, even under the most conservative trajectories, unless action is taken on a scale appropriate to the problem.

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35 The UN projects population growth will remain largely unchanged in developed regions with large increases in least developed regions, leading to a total projected world population of 9.6 billion people sharing this planet by 2050. See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision, Key Findings and Advance Tables* (New York: United Nations, 2013).

The Role of Christian Ethicists and Religious Leaders

Christian ethicists and religious leaders can play an important role in mediating climate science, by integrating new ecological knowledge into established understandings of moral responsibility. The year after former U.S. Vice President and climate activist Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* made its theatrical debut, I started a graduate internship and then accepted an advocacy position with the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club.\(^{37}\) The Club was abuzz with activity and many staffers celebrating the “game changing” nature of the film and its effect upon public awareness about climate change. The film’s persuasive graphs, charts, and storytelling, its two Academy Awards, and Gore’s subsequent sharing of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for “informing the world of the dangers posed by climate change,” all appeared to invigorate the environmental movement in a way that many activists thought would lead to significant structural change.\(^{38}\) The empirical sciences, research, and rational thought appeared to be gaining a strong foothold on the hearts and minds of U.S. voters.

Progress toward climate awareness and the popular will to take steps necessary to mitigate the climate problem, however, was short-lived. Climate awareness ceded


ground to the claims and arguments of climate deniers. Gore’s fancy graphs and charts were soon all but forgotten. While they were well intentioned and seemingly momentous for the movement, the environmental community had missed a great opportunity to address the root causes of the climate crisis and direct the movement toward a conversation that could sustain enduring public interest. Years earlier, Gore himself had reflected that “the more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual.”

The lesson to be learned is that pummeling people with facts and figures does not necessarily a climate ally make. Deeper connections and a different language are more effective. Larry L. Rasmussen, interpreting Gore’s emphasis on the spiritual roots of the environmental crisis, notes:

The spiritual crisis rests in the alienated way in which we conceive ourselves apart from nature. [Gore says,] “We have misunderstood who we are, how we relate to our place within creation, and why our very existence assigns us a duty of moral alertness to the consequences of what we do.” Gore ends his book with his own statement of Christian faith as the reason for the hope that is in him and as the ultimate beliefs that buoy up his own part in the collective action “to change the very foundation of our civilization.” “Faith,” he writes, “is the primary force that enables us to choose meaning and direction and then hold to it despite all the buffeting chaos in life.” In brief, Gore seems to mean by “spiritual” what others mean by “worldview,” “cosmology,” and “ethics”: namely, “the collection of values and assumptions that determine our basic understanding of how we fit into the universe.”

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Rasmussen and Gore are both correct in their reflection that “sound science” and scientific awareness are not enough to create the kind of paradigm shift that challenges like climate change and the ecological crisis require of the world’s people. While sound science is necessary and scientific awareness is helpful, any success in affecting collective human consciousness and behavior must also engage the deeply held values and beliefs that both interpret and filter human perception as well as lead to and inspire direct action.

Scientific Literacy and Climate Concern (or Lack Thereof)

For those who do not envision a role in the climate debate for Christian ethicists and religious leaders, the underlying assumption is often that climate change is simply a matter of scientific illiteracy. As such, the solution to the climate crisis is greater scientific literacy among a public who, better understanding the issue, would work for political and technical fixes to the problem. In fact, I am often reminded by some of my colleagues of the counterproductive role some Christian communities have played in

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climate mitigation negotiations in the U.S. The involvement of religious leaders in the “greening” of religious thinking and congregational buildings and operations is all well and good, but the really heavy lifting is about improving scientific literacy among the public, or so goes the conventional wisdom among many liberal environmental groups.

While scientific literacy among the general U.S. public is not up to a level where many think it should be, admittedly contributing to greater confusion around the climate debate and other politicized scientific issues, improving scientific literacy among the general public appears not to be the panacea many believe it to be. Emerging data suggests it is a mistaken notion that better scientific literacy necessarily increases public

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42 One study suggests that self-identified Christians report lower levels of environmental concern than do non-Christians. See John M. Clements, Aaron M. McCright, and Chenyang Xiao, "Green Christians? an Empirical Examination of Environmental Concern within the U.S. General Public," Organization & Environment (July 14, 2013), 1-18. As an example of the intense skepticism regarding Christianity's positive contributions to the ecological crisis, Dr. Bron Taylor (Founder of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, ISSRNC, influential and well published Professor of Religion and Nature) posted an online article on the ISSRNC's Facebook Page referencing Clements, et. al.'s findings and alleging it is "[m]ore evidence that runs against the 'greening of Christianity' case." For both, see Roberta Kwok, "Greening of Christianity? Not Yet," Conservation this Week: The Source for Environmental Intelligence, July 26, 2013; Bron Raymond Taylor, "Facebook [Group]," Posted July 31, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/groups/ISSRNC (accessed August 1, 2013).

concern for climate risks. Some of the best science of the day is beginning to suggest that
the way issues are framed, the narratives and worldviews in which they fit, are a much
more effective way to increase public concern for climate risks since they are inherently
more successful in shaping the way individuals and communities make decisions on
issues.

The relationship between climate scientists and religious leaders is unnecessarily
confrontational in tone, and not nearly collaborative enough for significant progress to be
made with regard to increasing public concern for climate action. A lack of concern for
climate change or failure to accept its existence is more a failure to see oneself and one’s
world in a certain way than it is a lack of scientific literacy. Scientific literacy is
important and the empirical sciences are an important part of an ecologically informed,
contemporary western worldview. As I have argued, scientific knowledge informs my
own worldview as a Christian ethicist. Scientific knowledge alone, however, is not
generating the kind of knowledge that moves the general public to take action on
important environmental problems because it is not easily integrated into the sacred
stories and cosmic narratives that operate on both the conscious and subconscious
emotional levels.

Contemporary social science research increasingly affirms the influential role of
moral authorities like clergy, spiritual and religious leaders who profess to operate on the
level of the spiritual and ethical—of those who work on and in the language of values and

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44 Dan M. Kahan et al., "The Polarizing Impact of Science Literacy and Numeracy on
Perceived Climate Change Risks," *Nature Climate Change* 2, no. 10 (October, 2012),
732-735.
beliefs. A popular article written by Chris Mooney and published in *Mother Jones* summarizes some of the emerging research that describes how U.S. conservatives skeptical of climate science “are more likely to embrace climate science if it comes from a religious or business leader, who can set the issue in a context of values that differ from those of an environmentalist.” Mooney’s article was reprinted and passed around climate advocacy circles for the creative way in which it dips into social science research to explain the dissonance between the U.S. conservative voters, climate scientists, and their political advocates.

The popular nature of Mooney’s article, and the significance of the research to which it points, warrants a closer look at its claims, given my own argument that Christian ethicists ought to play a more active and influential, less cursory role in solving the climate and ecological challenge. The environmental community has experienced stifled political progress toward climate solutions at least in part because it does not adequately communicate the causes and consequences of climate change in a way that resonates with those deeply held values and beliefs central to many people’s core identities. Outreach and messaging tend to focus primarily on improving scientific literacy and confronting denial head-on among the “unconverted” rather than by telling moving stories or making tailored moral appeals so that each group is approached with

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methods and arguments appealing to that group’s particular worldview. Directly emphasizing the scientific reality of climate change to deniers is simply not as effective as working through the sacred stories and religious narratives—the worldview-level of ideas—that shape fundamental beliefs about who we are and what kind of people we think we ought to be in the world.

Dan M. Kahan, along with several of his distinguished colleagues, has spearheaded much of the research demonstrating the superior effectiveness of religious authorities over scientific authority on the topic of climate change. His research demonstrates that:

Members of the public with the highest degrees of science literacy and technical reasoning capacity were not the most concerned about climate change. Rather, they were the ones among whom cultural polarization was greatest. This result suggests that public divisions over climate change stem not from the public’s incomprehension of science but from a distinctive conflict of interest.

These rather surprising findings confirm that science literacy, or a lack of it, is not the primary distinguishing factor as to whether or not individuals are likely to accept or deny the reality of climate change. Rather, “cultural world-views explain more variance than science literacy.” The scientific community and environmental advocates can

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49 Ibid.
confront climate deniers head-on and dispense with all the scientific knowledge they can muster, and the simple reality is that they are unlikely to change very many minds.

This does not mean that media distortion, in which climate change is often addressed in public discourse or through biased media, is irrelevant. The era of the 24-hour news cycle has arrived and several news networks include entertaining, lively debates as a part of their allegedly fair and balanced coverage of controversial issues. Sometimes the networks serve one entrenched special interest or another by intentionally skewing these debates with the questions that are asked or by whom they choose to include in the debates. At other times the issue is unintentionally distorted when well meaning journalists give undue attention to climate deniers by allowing such a small number of people holding a given perspective to be equally represented in a debate—an overwhelming 97-98% of climate scientists share agreement on the anthropogenic aspect of climate change, not denial.50 When the issue is presented as though experts in the field give equal credence to each perspective, while those perspectives do not in fact hold equal weight, the media does the public an incredible disservice.51

Still, I do not think a media correction will entirely resolve the problem because even deeper issues are at play. As Kahan’s research shows, all that scientific information is filtered through the lens of a worldview that is either receptive to it or not. In fact, the


more scientific knowledge an individual has, the more likely that individual is to use that knowledge to affirm *preexisting* values and beliefs. As Kahan shows:

> [O]ur findings could be viewed as evidence of how remarkably well-equipped ordinary individuals are to discern which stances towards scientific information secure their personal interests…the reward for acquiring greater scientific knowledge and more reliable technical-reasoning capacities is a greater facility to discover and use—or explain away—evidence relating to their groups’ positions…simply improving the clarity of scientific information will not dispel public conflict so long as the climate-change debate continues to feature cultural meanings that divide citizens of opposing world-views. 

If climate scientists and activists wish to see a change in direction down the path we presently travel, then they will need to draw upon the tremendous creative potential of those other experts who are more fluent in the language of deeply held values and beliefs.

**Narrative, Worldviews, and the Function of Religion**

It is for these reasons noted in the previous section, that I think Christian ethicists and religious leaders can play an important role as educators about the climate and ecological crisis. They deal in the language of deeply held values and beliefs, the language of narrative, and of stories with deep cultural meanings—the language of worldviews. As Stanley Hauerwas describes it, Christian faith communities are “story-formed communities.” Their religious leaders help people to think through the conscious and subconscious aspects of their worldview and can help the community

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make sense of a world in which new scientific knowledge may seem to contradict preexisting values.

As Kahan and others indicate, and as I have argued in this chapter, the climate crisis is, among other things, a worldviews issue. It is also a moral problem and a justice issue. Since our worldviews shape our understandings of justice and morality, the climate crisis cannot be resolved unless it is engaged on such a level. The problem emerges from and resides in the territory of deeply held values and beliefs about who we think we are as people and about how we understand our relationship with the world. We need to know what story we are in and how we fit into that story and scientific literacy alone does not really help most people to do that adequately enough. Sacred stories and religious narratives help billions of people around the world to orient themselves and make sense of their world.

In other words, religion acts powerfully and influentially upon people’s emotions and motives and so it ought to be engaged in response to the climate and ecological crisis. Clifford J. Geertz may be remembered as one of the most prominent U.S. cultural anthropologists until his death in 2006.\(^\text{54}\) His work highlights the role of symbols in constructing public meaning and he defines “religion” as:

\begin{quote}
(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [sic] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of faculty that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.\(^\text{55}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{54}\) Richard A. Shweder and Byron Good, eds., *Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1.

The world’s religious traditions are known for the creative ways in which they utilize symbols to transmit meaning. They dwell in this territory of deeply held values and beliefs, which inspire powerful “moods and motivations” and religious communities have shown time and again just how effective their religious stories can be at guiding their collective action.

Peter L. Berger is likewise known as one of the most prominent sociologists of his time for his contributions to the development of the sociology of religion and for his theoretical contributions to social theory. The way in which he describes religion is particularly germane because his definition notes the special way in which religion acts to construct a kind of “cosmos” that offers a sense of order and meaning to the universe. He says:

Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established…[b]y sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man [sic] and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience.  

By way of several examples, Berger contends that certain uniformities can be observed cross-culturally regarding the way in which the sacred is attributed to anything from objects and animals to people, institutions, and even cosmic forces. In each of these instances, he argues that a person’s conceptualization of the sacred orients the individual

self within a stable cosmos of meaning (the opposite of a sacred cosmos, for Berger, is chaos). He continues:

The cosmos posited by religion thus both transcends and includes man [sic]. The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order.

The point is that humanity’s religious traditions are fundamentally geared to helping people make sense of their world. Their stories and symbols dynamically construct, implicitly and explicitly, those worldviews that orient the way many people will or will not engage the world or “cosmos” they think they are living in.

Charlene Spretnak refers to the valuable moral guidance inherent to these religious traditions as humanity’s “wisdom traditions.” Wisdom traditions offer tried and true narratives and symbols that have sustained religious faith communities with powerful moods and motivations for moral action, spanning generations. It is to be expected that the contemporary ecological and climate crises require new narratives and new symbols even as some older, more familiar ones are reclaimed or reimagined. Still, I am optimistic that the world’s religious traditions, including Christianity, can engage the challenges of the ecological crisis and the injustice of climate-induced displacement—that they can connect a new generation of the faithful to the wisdom of ages past and yet help us all to make sense of the world in a new way that preserves and sustains the Earth.

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57 According to Berger, on the deepest level of meaning, chaos is the opposite of a sacred cosmos, expressed in several cosmogenic myths. See Ibid., 26.

58 Ibid., 25-27.

The significance of this endeavor, of remembering and reimagining the world’s religious traditions in such a way as to inspire and motivate a social movement, is not without precedence. Mahatma Gandhi appealed to Hinduism, the predominant religion of his beloved homeland, in order to push forward India’s independence movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. appealed to the ancient Biblical story of the Exodus to help mobilize the civil rights movement in the United States.\(^60\) The climate and ecological crisis before us now is a problem so much larger than any of these other social problems because it is a challenge residing at the species level of existence.\(^61\) The crisis presents to the world’s great religious traditions an opportunity to update and renew their worldviews in closer alignment with what the best science of our day tells us about ourselves and the world around us. This may not only restore some religious appeal among those youth for whom the traditions sometimes seem increasingly ignorant, irrelevant, and outdated, but it may also help the world’s religions better address the groaning cries of a degraded planet. We would be foolish not to apply the best of everything we have to a problem of such magnitude.

**Christian Ethics, Responsibility, and the Ecological Crisis**

If Christian ethics is to responsibly engage the challenges of the ecological crisis, then Christian ethics itself must be done responsibly. To do Christian ethics responsibly, Christian ethics must be informed by critical self-reflection rooted in lived experience, 

\(^{60}\) It has been argued that the Exodus story of a people's liberation has become a prototypical narrative shaping the "cultural consciousness of the West." See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 7.

and it must be grounded in a preferential option for the poor and oppressed. The prominent 20th century theologian and Christian ethicist James M. Gustafson describes “[t]he proper stance of the Christian community in its ethical reflection [a]s self-criticism and repentance, not pride and aggrandizement.” According to Gustafson and to H. Richard Niebuhr, the point of Christian ethics is not the articulation of a prescribed moral code arising out of one religious tradition’s superiority over and against another’s. It is, rather, the Christian’s responsibility to seek out God’s activity in the world through “knowledge of ourselves in relation to our knowledge of God.”

Put differently, it is the Christian’s responsibility to reflect on, and respond to, whatever it is God is doing in the world. As Bernard Häring describes it, a central part of the Christian’s moral life is listening to “God’s call” and then responding accordingly. The process of becoming more responsible beings is a core goal of genuine ethical reflection. Summarizing Niebuhr’s agenda, Gustafson argues:

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64 Ibid., 14-16.

Ethics helps us to understand ourselves as responsible beings, our world as the place in which the responsible existence of the human community is exercised. Its practical utility is in its clarification, its interpretation, its provision of a pattern of meaning and understanding in the light of which human action can be more responsible.66

Niebuhr and Häring have both permanently influenced the trajectory of Christian ethics by shaping the emergence of “responsibility” as a significant category in the discipline. The former writes from a Protestant context, while the latter writes from a Roman Catholic context as a professional theologian and priest. Together their work argues for the importance of “responsibility” as a category in both Protestant and Roman Catholic Christian ethics. Their shared concern reflects how the role of responsibility in Christian ethics is not merely a denominational one but rather one that seems appropriate for all Christians.

Niebuhr and Häring have shaped the discipline and its description of the moral life in such a way as to highlight the importance of Christian ethicists attending to what is going on in the world so that the moral life can be understood as our response to those events, forces, and challenges needing discernment. Their contributions provide a foundation for an “ethic of responsibility” within Christian ethics that can be supported and clarified even further by succeeding Christian ethicists. Miguel De La Torres and Karen Lebacqz, for example, both emerge from the discipline of Christian ethics with contributions that clarify and expand the Christian ethic of responsibility by developing insights regarding an ethic of social responsibility.

But, as Hans Jonas argues, humanity’s impact on the planet has expanded so greatly that we now have to recognize the revolutionary way in which that impact, along with an expansion of human agency, has been broadened in the modern era. This requires that we now take ecological responsibility seriously—to become responsible ecological managers. It is no longer sufficient for individuals to become responsible members of society. Human society must learn to be a responsible species within the ecosystems in which we are embedded and upon which we depend. The ecological crisis is the event, force, and challenge demanding a response from responsible beings seeking to live responsible lives today. Sallie McFague and others continue the clarification and expansion of an ethic of responsibility by shifting focus away from Christianity’s relatively recent overemphasis on relations between the self and God or between human selves exclusively and toward a direct concern for the Earth.

What is going on in the world today now demands a transformation and expansion of our basic understanding of ourselves as human beings. Niebuhr challenged the prevailing notion of his day that the self could somehow be adequately conceptualized in isolation when he argued that the self is fundamentally social. He said that “[t]o be a self in the presence of other selves is not a derivative experience but primordial…[it is] the acknowledgement of my existence as the counterpart of another self.”

To understand ourselves in relation to others, places a claim on the individual


self that is responsible to other selves, but the human understanding of ourselves now needs to be expanded even further. As McFague argues:

\[G\]iven our present numbers and power, we have the ability to be either for or against the rest of nature. We are not the only ones who matter, but we are the ones who are increasingly responsible for the others in creation...We have arrived at this knowledge at the same time that we realize that we are not separate, static individuals who choose to be in relations with other life-forms when we feel like it. Rather, we now know that we belong, from the cells of our bodies to the finest creations of our minds, to the intricate, changing cosmos that gave us birth and sustains us...We are responsible, we can make choices, we can decide to live one way or another, but we are not just responsible for our individual selves. Rather, we now know that “who we are” is interconnected with all other living things...Suddenly we see ourselves differently: not as post-Enlightenment individuals who have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but as part of a vast network of interrelationships, and specifically as that “part” responsible for the rest, for other human beings and other life-forms.\(^69\)

McFague calls for a re-examination of our self-knowledge and of our description of the moral life that is rooted in both a serious reflection on, and response to, whatever it is God might be doing in the world today. As Niebuhr’s description of the self in relation to other selves placed a claim on the self that is responsible to other people, McFague describes the self in direct relation to the Earth, and that places a claim on the self that is responsible to the world in which we live and the Earth on which we depend.\(^70\)

This expansion and clarification of Niebuhr and Haring’s ethic of responsibility requires a right-sizing of human personhood in relation to our cosmic and ecological context. It, no doubt, requires the self-criticism and repentance, rather than pride and aggrandizement, that James Gustafson argues is the proper stance of the Christian


\(^70\) Ibid., 43-56.
As Christian ethicists begin to re-evaluate theological anthropology in light of our ecological anthropology, the pride of humanity’s historically collective aggrandizement within the Earth community is all too apparent. There is a need to critically reconsider the traditions in terms of their now ecologically inappropriate associations with anthropocentrism and dualistic, otherworldly focused cosmologies. Self-criticism, and repentance realized in terms of some reforms, may indeed help Christian communities in the re-evaluation of the human person as a being-in-relation to the rest of nature.

Lynn White has famously helped the Christian traditions to self-critique by pointing to the ways in which Christianity can be implicated in the ecological crisis. His fundamental critique, that Christianity “bears a huge burden of guilt” for contributing to the ecological crisis, rests on his argument that “Christianity…[especially in its Western form] not only established a dualism of man [sic] and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.” The first part of this argument, that Christianity asserts a false dualism between humanity and the ecosystems in which we are embedded, at least partly originates in a privileged reading of Genesis 1 over Genesis 2.

Genesis 1 proclaims human dominion over the Earth and humankind’s special creation in God’s own image—a vision of the human person tasked to subdue the Earth and everything in it. Genesis 2 offers a much more organic description of human

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creation, one in which the ecological embeddedness of the human person is much more clearly evident than the more anthropocentric telling found in Genesis 1.\textsuperscript{73} The Vatican has a tendency to reference Genesis 1, the more anthropocentric of the two creation stories, often completely ignoring Genesis 2.\textsuperscript{74} This kind of dualism has led quite naturally, so the argument goes, to Christianity’s permissive tolerance of human exploitation of the rest of nature.

It could be argued that the rhetoric of human dominance and supremacy over all creation, rather than embeddedness and participation in it, is now much more subdued than in years past. Some might be quick to accept White’s critique and then simply relegate those sins and oversights to the dustbin, alleging them to be merely a part of Christianity’s unfortunate past but not its evolved future. Others might argue, however, that anthropocentrism is so deeply entrenched in Christianity that all of Christianity is irredeemable. In either case, it is imperative that those within the Christian traditions do not short-change the still very great need for self-critique and repentance that criticisms such as Lynn White’s bring to light.

Pope Francis, in a speech to bishops on his first visit to Brazil as Pope, called for “respect and protection of the entire creation which God has entrusted to man [sic], not so


that it be indiscriminately exploited but rather made into a garden.”^75 While Pope Francis ought to be praised for the way in which his comments might hopefully contribute to the prevention of the wanton destruction of Amazonian ecosystems, others may cringe at the notion that a morally appropriate relationship between humanity and one of the largest intact tracts of wilderness, is for it to be turned into a “garden” for human use. Pope Francis and several popes before him have been steeped in a human-centered personalist philosophy and theology. For them, the Earth is not necessarily a place to be managed for the flourishing of all beings but for the flourishing of the human being; the Earth is a collection of objects to be refashioned for human use through human labor.

As Pope John Paul II wrote, “through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’”^76 As has already been demonstrated, however, this anthropocentric thread of Christianity that has been responsible for so much ecological exploitation and for which Christianity indeed bears a tremendous burden of guilt, is not all there is to the Christian traditions. Scholars like Elizabeth Johnson have tempered Lynn White’s critique by placing it within context of the overwhelming history and trajectory of Earth-affirming traditions inherent to Christianity.

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Elizabeth Johnson argues that Christianity has been creation-centered for the first 1500 years of its history and human-centered for only the last 500 years—a relatively recent turn in the arc of history.\footnote{Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition," in Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans, ed. Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Radford Reuther (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 4.} While the need is apparent to better understand the reasons for this turn and then redirect the course of modern western Christianity, arguments like this offer hope that the Christian traditions can indeed be brought into better alignment with the contemporary, scientific worldview. Such a worldview resolutely sees the human species as an embedded member of an ecosystem, albeit as a species with a newfound ability to tremendously transform its environment on a planetary scale. Without a clear self-critical re-evaluation of the Christian traditions, Christianity will not be able to fully and constructively participate in the kind of necessary transformation of human-Earth relations that leads to their mutual flourishing.

**Critical Self-Reflection Rooted in Lived Experience**

In order for this dissertation to help carry forward this intellectual tradition of Christian ethics and responsibility, I intend to ground it in a scientific and ecological worldview, as well as in my own critical self-reflection and lived experiences. Having spent years wallowing in international institutions like the United Nations, which consistently fail to create binding agreements to address the ecological and climatological challenges we face, here I drill down into one specific aspect of ecological concern, namely climate change and climate-induced displacement. For me, this drilling down into the ethical consequences of a specific issue that has emerged out of my own direct,
firsthand encounters with it as a climate advocate, is how I am able to respond to what I see going on in the world. Even with their rich traditions and solid foundations, Christian ethicists, religious leaders, and laity, together with all people of good will, are not yet satisfactorily addressing this ecological crisis. I hope, and think, that the Christian traditions of moral reasoning can be guided and supported by this ethic of responsibility and that is why I plan to apply it to the ecological crisis.

Put differently, and as Wendell Berry suggests, “we can take guidance from the knowledge we most authentically possess: from experience, from tradition, from the inward promptings of affection, conscience, decency, compassion, even inspiration.” 78 For a majority of the world’s people, religious traditions play an influential role in shaping the direction of one’s life experiences and even the very lens through which the individual or community decides what is right, wrong, or decent human behavior. There is a dialogical tension between the knowledge we believe we most authentically possess and the challenges we face daily. Not to reflect critically on those challenges, that tension, or the lens through which we see the world is a failure of an engaged, responsible Christian ethic.

People are meaning-makers who create societies in which moral assumptions stabilize and guide our everyday commitments, decisions and practices. We navigate a social world requiring us to make moral decisions every day. It demands we figure out how to resolve the basic moral situations we encounter on a daily basis. The ideas we

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privilege and the worldviews out of which we operate when making those decisions, however, largely go unexamined. They may be poorly understood, and form only an implicit part of our daily decision-making when sometimes they ought to form a much more explicit role. Critically examining those narratives, which help shape the way one makes decisions, is one way of making more responsible decisions.

We make ethically responsible decisions when we make explicit the implicit, examine the unexamined motivation behind our decisions, and reflect critically on aspects of our decision-making, their coherence as values, and their “fittingness” to the needs and challenges we face in life. Reflection on lived experiences, of both my own and of others, is my starting point for a process of structured ethical reflection. The social sciences offer a critical analysis of the lived experiences of others, providing valuable study and insight into the experiences of others whose life experiences might differ profoundly from one’s own. Also, the Christian traditions hold a wealth of experiential knowledge built up and preserved over generations in sacred texts, liturgies, stories, and the collective memories of faith-based communities. It is important to study and hold those experiences in careful tension with the individual’s own lived experiences.

As Charlene Spretnak reminds us, Christianity like the other great world religions, constitutes important “wisdom traditions” carrying important values and sensitivities across the generations.79 To be relevant, however, those memories and experiences about what is right or wrong may need to be engaged afresh, possibly embraced, corrected, or

transformed. Navigating this engagement responsibly is part of the delicate work of Christian ethicists, theologians, religious leaders and their living faith communities.

Doing Christian ethics responsibly requires the agent begin by seriously attending to his or her own lived experiences, as well as the experiences of others, because those experiences influence or color any interpretive lens. Christian ethicists are more responsible when they acknowledge, and attend to, those lived experiences relative to contexts of time and place. It is far worse to pretend that one is entirely objective than to acknowledge what one brings to the interpretation and how it might influence one’s analysis of a situation. Pertinent questions include: How might contemporary experience compare to, or differ from, those who came before? Personal and group experiences compare and differ across cultures, across socio/political-economic groups, genders, and racial groups. Can one acknowledge the lenses through which one intentionally or unintentionally interprets and analyzes their own experiences? How do worldviews influence both the questions one asks and the responses to those questions? Responsibly attending to what is really going on in any situation must be the first task of a Christian ethicist if the individual is to go about doing ethics responsibly.

This is important because the Christian traditions, like most of the world’s religions, are alive—not static or unchanging. They exist in living communities, cherished and renewed by a body of believers with each generation who act on, interpret, and breathe meaning into received traditions, doctrines, and texts. Christian ethics is not about enforcing strict adherence to certain dogma or about imposing obedience to one cannon of Scriptures, but rather it is a form of inquiry in which a people’s wrestling with
God is reflected upon and used to illuminate a path toward the common good. The dynamic nature of religious traditions in general, and the Christian traditions in particular, means that the critical thinker must continually struggle to understand their faith, wrestling to make sense of it in a world that regularly presents new challenges.

New challenges, or old challenges faced under new circumstances, sometimes present a hard test to received or preexisting convictions. Judith Butler describes individuals grappling with tough questions about their political convictions when she asks her readers to:

[i]magine the situation of reading a book and thinking, I cannot ask the questions that are posed here because to ask them is to introduce doubt into my political convictions, and to introduce doubt…could lead to the dissolution of those convictions. At such a moment, the fear of thinking, indeed, the fear of the question, becomes moralized as the defense of politics.\(^{80}\)

The possible loss and uncertainty that can accompany sincere, honest inquiry can pose such a profound threat to an individual’s convictions and identity that anti-intellectual dogmatism can feel safe and preferable to the fear elicited by even the questions themselves, much less the answers.

How does one critically examine something without fully opening oneself to the cogency of the critiques leveled against it? Tough questions about faith and religion, posed by thinkers like Sigmund Freud, can indeed feel downright scary if one is willing to embrace the outcome of the questioning. I have genuinely considered how religion might be nothing more than some sort of illusion, which the rationally minded person is

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obligated to leave behind upon realizing it is so.\textsuperscript{81} Marx’s challenge to religion is very similar in some ways, except that for him religion is like giving up an “opiate” addiction—something oppressed people use to self-medicate in order to tolerate their own oppression.\textsuperscript{82} Breaking free of the addiction is allegedly a liberating experience that empowers us to explore and demand freedom in other areas of our lives.

Paul Ricoeur, a noted Protestant French philosopher, famously refers to Freud and Marx, along with Nietzsche, as the “three masters of suspicion” or as the “three great ‘destroyers’” who “clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth….”\textsuperscript{83} While breaking free of an addiction might perceivably feel liberating and powerful eventually, it is at first very painful. According to Ricoeur, engaging in a “hermeneutics of suspicion” means that the immediacy of one’s beliefs is at first lost. It leaves one feeling disoriented, shattered, and scared if there is nothing to replace that, which has been lost. Therefore, Ricoeur balances a critical hermeneutics of suspicion with what he calls a “hermeneutics of recovery.”\textsuperscript{84}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Freud1975}

\bibitem{Marx1994}

\bibitem{Ricoeur1970}

\bibitem{Ricoeur1978}
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In describing what happens when our previous orienting symbols and religious understandings lie broken on the ground in the aftermath of an engaged hermeneutics of suspicion, Ricoeur acknowledges and posits that:

In every way, something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men [sic], aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism. In short, it is by interpreting that we can hear again. Thus it is in hermeneutics that the symbol’s gift of meaning and the endeavor to understand by deciphering are knotted together.  

Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of recovery as counterweight to a hermeneutics of suspicion does not necessarily condemn the kind of critique that Freud and Marx pose to religion, but instead pushes back with a challenge that through a “second naïveté,” the individual can still embrace their religious traditions even with critical eyes wide open. At second naïveté, it becomes no longer adequate to accept one’s faith merely on the terms in which it may have been received, but it is instead fully appropriate to re-engage or to critically recover it.

It has been both intellectually and emotionally difficult to critically engage my own religious beliefs in these ways—allowing myself to consider whether they may be an illusion or an opiate. But engage those questions I must, if I am to commit myself to the honest inquiry of academic theological reflection. As a theologian and Christian ethicist, critical self-reflection requires I acknowledge my pre-existing beliefs about who God is and what God may demand. I cannot help, and should not try to do otherwise, but ground those reflections in my own lived experience—constantly checking what I read and learn.

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from others through the traditions against what I sense to be true expressions of the best data available.  

From that reflection, I believe one thing to be true and it colors the lens through which I see the world and approach all moral problems: if there is a God, then God delights in this good Earth and any sense of God’s presence is diminished in Earth’s degradation. Human poverty is an especially cruel injustice, and the poor suffer disproportionately from environmental degradation. Implicit in my understanding of who God might be is a call to love and justice for all who are poor and oppressed.

A Preferential and Green Option for the Poor and Oppressed

Miguel A. De La Torre is a Roman Catholic, Cuban American “unapologetically grounded in a Latino/a social context.” He is a Christian ethicist who asserts, as part of his own ethical theory, the importance of critical self-reflection on social location.  

I share De La Torre’s belief that “the socio-historical context of any people profoundly contributes to the construction of their ethical system.”  

Furthermore, I appreciate his challenge to “the assumption that ethical deliberation can be understood apart from what the interpreter brings to the analysis.”  

In other words, ethical precepts do not emerge directly from religious teaching, in isolation from one’s identity and social location. Where one resides within the strata of one’s society and one’s access to full participation

86 In the Christian Biblical tradition, this could be affirmed as obedience to an exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 5:21, “but test everything; hold fast to what is good.”  


88 Ibid., 14.  

89 Ibid., 83.
in society (or lack thereof) both play a role in the ethical precepts an individual or community is willing to accept and consider a normative part of membership within that community.

According to De La Torre, the idea that individuals and communities operate with ethical precepts is mostly a given. After demonstrating how even hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan operate within their own set of ethical precepts, he argues:

The issue then is not so much whether humans should follow some set of ethical precepts, but rather, which ethical precepts. Moral relativism recognizes the variety of ethical beliefs existing between different racial and ethnic groups, economic classes, and gender preferences. But if ethics is simply relative, where no one group’s ethics is necessarily superior or inferior to another group’s then adhering to the ethics spouted by the Klan…should be as valid as any ethics coming from the marginalized spaces of society, or any other spaces for that matter. It appears as though a preferential option needs to be made for some set of ethical precepts. The question is: Whose?90

Certainly De La Torre is not arguing that the Klan’s ethical precepts are valid. He is instead arguing quite the opposite—that some ethical precepts can, and ought to, be treated as more or less adequate by clearly stating a privileging framework that outlines the preferential options used to assess diverse and/or competing ethical precepts. For De La Torre, we all rely on privileging frameworks to vet which ethical precepts we think are useful to us in our daily lives when deciding between right and wrong.

The problem, according to De La Torre, is not that we have these privileging frameworks to inform our ethical precepts. The problem is that members of dominant social groups tend to use them indiscriminately for their own (or their group’s own) continued privilege and power at the cost of continued oppression and marginalization of

90 Ibid., 4.
minority social groups. He goes on to argue that choosing “one ethical precept over
another justifies those who will eventually benefit from what is chosen.” Following this
logic, De La Torre argues that making a preferential option for the poor and oppressed is
a direct reflection of the core Christian moral commitment to love one’s neighbor.91 De
La Torre, however, is obviously not unique in his call for a preferential option for the
poor as this has been a central affirmation of most liberation theologians for the last half-
century.92

Emerging out of this rich tradition, and working as a Christian ethicist, De La
Torre grounds his arguments in an interpretation of the Christian scriptures that highlights
love and justice as prominent, recurring biblical themes in which a preferential option for
the poor acts as a working conception of love and justice. Accordingly, these themes
ought to rightly undergird and motivate a Christian’s privileging framework.93 A
privileging framework is demonstrably Christian when it expresses a preferential option
for the poor and oppressed and makes space in society for those otherwise residing at the
margins of society. In this way, ethics is kept from being reduced to a tool used by the

91 Ibid., 12, 14.


93 De La Torre, Miguel A., Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins, 8.
dominant members of a culture for the continued oppression and exploitation of their neighbors in society. The point here is that the ethical precepts advanced by society inevitably tend to reflect the preferential options of those in society with the power to safeguard their own continued self-interests. The Christian commitment to care for one’s neighbor demands more concern for the interests of the other and less exclusive safeguarding of one’s own self-interests, especially if one is in a position of relative comfort and power.

As De La Torre argues, Christian ethical precepts cannot responsibly be divorced from the Christian commitment to the needs of the poor and oppressed. Therefore, such precepts must necessarily make a preferential option for the poor and oppressed among us. I endeavor to do ethics at the margins by using a preferential option for the poor and oppressed, as one way to vet my ethical precepts. The question I return to time and again as I research and write is: “So what? How is any of this relevant to the needs and concerns of those who are poor and oppressed?” My concern in asking myself these questions is not because I doubt whether research matters, but it is because I want to make sure my research is aligned with my values. Care for the poor is more than a duty emerging from faith; it is the direction of faith. As Jorge V. Pixley and Clodovis Boff explain, it is how one must orient oneself with a belief in a God of love and justice who is the first to opt for the poor.⁹⁴

Critical self-reflection upon one’s own social location and upon the hermeneutical lens one brings to the ethical task is a prerequisite part of my process of structured ethical

reflection, and it is part of what I think it means to engage in responsible Christian ethics. In addition, that reflection should also be grounded by a preferential option for the poor and oppressed if it is to harmonize with the traditional Christian commitment to care for the poor. My personal assertions in this section say something of what shapes my interpretive lens as a Christian ethicist and demonstrate, I hope, the perspective I bring to the kinds of questions I ask as well as the motivation behind both my process for responding to those questions and the goals of my analysis.

**Methodology: Structured Ethical Reflection**

My process of structured ethical reflection formally begins after taking into account the prerequisite work of critical self-reflection. It consists of a four-part process reflected in De La Torre’s approach, and is consistent with an Ignatian pedagogical paradigm aiming to “foster attention to experience, reflective understanding beyond self-interest, and criteria for responsible action.” Sometimes referred to as the “see, judge, act” hermeneutical circle of ethical reflection, this approach to ethical theory and praxis has been embraced by liberation theologians and Christian ethicists like De La Torre, who describes this approach to ethics as one:

[...] motivated by a passion to establish justice-based relationships from which love can flow, begin[ing] with the lived experience of oppressive social situations and proceed[ing] by working out a theory and then a course of action that will dismantle the mechanisms that cause oppression.96

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96 De La Torre, Miguel A., *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, 58.
This approach to Christian ethics, consistently employed by the Society of Jesus as a method of moral discernment, has been modeled for me in the pedagogy of my Jesuit education and inspires my own formalized process of structured ethical reflection on moral issues generally, and ecological issues in particular. It grows out of a rich tradition of discourse in both Protestant and Roman Catholic Christian ethics of responsibility, as I have referenced in Niebuhr and Häring’s work. It also draws on Paul Tillich and David Tracy’s “method of correlation,” as I will soon show.

The following figure shows how I have integrated this approach so that I can apply it to ecological problems. It shows the parallels between the Jesuit model and De La Torre’s model, even as they harmonize with aspects of Niebuhr’s thinking in the Protestant tradition and Häring’s in the Roman Catholic tradition. The primary take-away from this table, as it applies to this section, is that the entire process of structured ethical reflection is grounded in a heavily nuanced “thick description” of what is really going on in a given situation. Especially relevant to environmental problems, this is one way in which ethical deliberation is responsibly grounded in a contemporary scientific worldview. Each step in this model corresponds to each of the proceeding chapters of this dissertation so that the kind of questions offered in this table are the kind of questions I grapple with going forward.

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98 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays, 6-7. See also Niebuhr, The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy, 63, 67-68, 169. He notes that the key question of ethics is not "What must I do?" but rather "What is going on?"
Figure 1. Process for Structured Ethical Reflection on Ecological Problems

| Deep or “Thick” Descriptions | What is going on in a particular situation? Can it be presented as a case study? What questions emerge from a specific moral problem or issue? |
| Ethical Deliberation | What is the larger context in which the problem resides? Will a social analysis help to better articulate what is happening? |
| Ethical Discernment | What are the worldviews and basic assumptions about being human, about the human place in the world, and understandings of the divine that undergird the moral problem under investigation? What are some countervailing perspectives about what it means to be human, about who God might be, and about moral obligations in society and to the Earth? |
| Decisive Moral Action | What aspects of the undergirding worldviews and perspectives are appropriate to the current context? What should be retrieved? What aspects may be inappropriate, given a fuller understanding of the context? What should be reconstructed or discarded? What vision can the moral imagination offer to inspire a way forward? What inspires hope? What specific, real-world action-steps can be taken to respond practically to the problem at hand? What can moral people do? |

The following subsections each explore the theoretical reasoning for including each of the steps in my process of ethical reflection, noted in the table above. Together, these steps form the theoretical foundations of a methodology for a kind of structured ethical reflection that can be applied to ecological issues and environmental problems.

Case Studies and Social Analysis for Breadth and Depth of Understanding

Experience plays a primary role in my process of ethical reflection on ecological issues and is critically incorporated through case studies and social analysis. That lived experience should rightly occupy such an important space in my work as a responsible
Christian ethicist is well supported by Catholic Social Teachings. I approach the specific issue of climate-induced displacement by drawing on Paul Tillich and David Tracy’s insights into the method of correlation in theology. This method is particularly helpful because it embodies how religious communities through history have sought to discern what their religious commitments require in the face of emerging moral and societal challenges.

This method, I argue, offers a helpful way of understanding the dual foci of theory and practice at root in Christian ethical reflection (and surely the ethical reflection of other moral and religious traditions). Tillich offers his “method of correlation” as a way for theology to engage contemporary problems. In his own life, Tillich worked in direct response to major historical events, forces, and challenges of the 20th century. For him, that meant discernment on forces such as world war, socialism, and existentialism. Though our issues today are different, his method nonetheless is still relevant in that it asks the Christian theologian and ethicist to rely on contemporary experience in order to describe the most pressing problems of the day—to use the hard and social sciences, if you will, in order to paint a more accurate picture of what is going on in a situation and to articulate questions that can then be posed to the theological moral traditions. Those moral traditions, in turn, can act as rich resources for helping individuals and

communities to reflect on, and mobilize, a broad range of possible responses to the challenges presented by the world.

Describing his “method of correlation” in his first volume of *Systematic Theology*, Tillich demonstrates just how completely effective he thinks theology can be at offering answers to humanity’s existential questions:

In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions.\(^{100}\)

In essence, Tillich’s “method of correlation” is one in which the present raises questions and the religious traditions answer those questions. David Tracy found this aspect of Tillich’s model overly simplistic and too privileging of the religious traditions.

David Tracy offers a critique of Tillich’s “method of correlation” and then revises it by offering his own method of “critical correlation.” Tracy maintains that theology is adequately carried out

[...] only by a method which develops critical criteria for correlating the questions and the answers found in both the “situation” and the “message.” Any method which attempts less than that cannot really be called a method of correlation. Tillich’s method does not actually correlate; it juxtaposes questions from the “situation” with answers from the “message”.\(^{101}\)

Tracy argues that a responsible method of correlation does not simply envision current experience as posing questions to the theological and moral traditions, which hold all the answers to every moral problem old and new. Rather, he maintains that contemporary


experience can present entirely new questions to religious traditions—questions with which those traditions have never previously had to grapple.

Indeed, contemporary experience can pose new insights to the religious traditions that in turn expose certain inadequacies within the traditions. With Tracy’s revisions to Tillich’s method, contemporary experience can consequently act as a resource for the religious traditions, offering new insights and perspectives that inform their engagement with these new problems. Following Tracy’s guidelines, I will not only mine the Christian traditions for resources as Tillich suggests, but also identify aspects of the traditions in need of revision or further development, based on insights from the hard and social sciences.

In addition to using a framework inspired by such influential theologians as Paul Tillich and David Tracy, my approach relies on a lens commonly employed by other Christian ethicists working on issues of social justice. Many major movements in Christian ethics across the last four decades have approached their reflection on moral issues by employing a critical hermeneutic of suspicion.\(^\text{102}\) As I turn toward the Christian traditions and consider the social consequences of environmental problems, my primary concern is in how those texts have been historically interpreted so as to preserve the status quo of those in power at the expense of those who are marginalized. Turning to the traditions with a critical hermeneutic of suspicion as a key part of my interpretive lens,

and aiming at a moral framework that gives a preferential option for the poor and oppressed, I link two different approaches in a way that reveals how ecological issues are problems that disproportionately impact society’s most vulnerable and then assert that those at the “bottom” ought not be those who shoulder the consequences of problems created by those primarily at the “top.” Nothing short of an internationally collaborative effort will be sufficient both to prevent what remains preventable with regard to climate change and to build resiliency for the changes we are already seeing and know we must expect. What ought not to be sacrificed in that pursuit is a moral responsibility to just, equitable human flourishing and ecologically sustainable development.

The international community ought to respond to the plight of those constrained by limited economic resources and the geopolitical boundaries keeping them from seeking basic life security and better opportunities. The number of those who are increasingly compelled to flee their homelands continues to grow because those homelands are no longer conducive to human habitation. In a less crowded world with the more fluid boundaries of ages past, human migration settled and populated the planet. As societies grew, borders cemented, and social problems displaced peoples, the international community has acted. The international community ought now to act on behalf of these displaced people by environmental and climate issues as it has acted on behalf of other populations displaced by war or dictatorial oppression. Livelihoods and human sustenance (and even more so human flourishing) are becoming impossible in some places around the world.
Sadly, the number of those places experiencing environmental degradation and the number of people experiencing displacement may begin to increase disastrously if adequate mitigation of climate change threats and adaptation planning does not take place. How can the UN set policy and encourage international collaboration that is both ecologically responsible and socially just from a responsible Christian ethical perspective? These are some of the foundational questions essential to better understanding the breadth and depth of the issue at hand. They are also the kind of questions chapter two begins to examine but subsequent chapters answer more thoroughly.

Deliberating on the Underlying Issues of a Problem

The first part of the method I am proposing begins with a case study of a specific moral problem, and then incorporates a social analysis of that case study. Its goal is to develop a critical, thick understanding of what is going on within the social and ecological context of that problem. The next step is to deliberate on what this description reveals about the context of the problem. Some of the questions I will wrestle with as a part of that deliberation, I present now but answer later: What underlying problems do the case study and social analysis suggest are at root in the situation that may not have been apparent in a more cursory review of the problem? What are the deeply held values and beliefs shaping and undergirding the situation’s social structures? What worldviews orient individuals, communities, and societies as they navigate challenges and solutions?

In this second part of my proposed method, I intend to identify and explore the dominant, operative worldview that I think the case study and social analysis exposes.
Certain people, communities, institutions, and social structures stand to benefit most from the continuation and maintenance of this dominant, operative worldview—a worldview that maintains and reaffirms a global socio/political/economic order by which business as usual benefits an elite few at the expense of nearly everyone and everything else. By extension, some perspectives or worldviews are reinforced while others are undermined, in the collective privileging of one set of values over another. My intent is to review the appropriateness of certain perspectives in relation to a preferential option for the poor and oppressed.

Therefore, I turn to those alternative and historically excluded perspectives in order to vet the appropriateness of the dominant perspective. The alternative perspectives I will explore originate in the margins of society. De La Torre builds on the arguments of the foremost Black liberation theologian, James Cone, and others when he says:

> Only from the margins of power and privilege can a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of the prevailing social structures be ascertained. Not because those on the margins are more astute, but rather because they know what it means to be a marginalized person attempting to survive within a social context designed to benefit the privileged few at their expense.\(^{103}\)

It is not enough for the Christian ethicist to point out what does not work; if we are to stand in solidarity with the concerns of the poor and oppressed, then we must be able to point toward ideas and solutions emerging from a context of firsthand experience with poverty and oppression. If reflection on moral problems inherent to a society’s dominant,

operative worldview is going to encourage a process of justice-making by inviting the margins into the center of moral decision-making, then it requires sustained reflection on those countervailing perspectives, originating at or near the margins. Including these marginalized perspectives about what it means to be human, about who God might be, and about our ethical obligations to all members of society and to the Earth itself is necessary to more adequately and responsibly expand the predominate, operative worldview.

For a process of structured ethical reflection inspired by a Christian commitment to the poor and oppressed, the very movement of previously marginalized perspectives inward toward the center of moral decision-making is itself an ethical act that begins the process of deconstructing the structures of marginalization and oppression. De La Torre continues:

The ethical task before both those who are oppressed and those who are privileged by the present institutionalized structures is not to reverse roles or to share the role of the privileged at the expense of some other group but, rather, to dismantle the very structures responsible for causing injustices along race, class, and gender lines, regardless of the attitudes bound to those structures…[e]thics is, and must remain, the dismantling of social mechanisms that benefit one group at the expense of another….¹⁰⁴

I would add that social justice and ecologically informed ethics is not just about the dismantling of oppressive social structures that benefit one group at the expense of another, but also includes the dismantling of social structures that degrade the planetary life-support systems needed by all species to thrive and flourish on this planet.

¹⁰⁴ De La Torre, Miguel A., Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins, 17, 21.
Christian ethics is realized through the dismantling of oppressive social structures, including those that exploit the planetary systems upon which the poorest of the poor are most dependent for their survival. Joining in solidarity with those at the frontlines of climate change and learning from what they have to say about the problem (and its solutions) is the only responsible way to evaluate and respond to the root causes and underlying issues of the problem.

Discerning which Worldviews and Religious Traditions Help or Hinder

Exploring the “background” of a situation better equips the investigator to address more responsibly and effectively those issues lying in the “foreground.” One cannot know if he or she is only superficially addressing an issue if he or she does not understand the full scope of a problem. This third step in my proposed process of structured ethical reflection turns toward those aspects of the Christian traditions that may help or hinder an ecologically appropriate theology, after having first explored some of the other underlying aspects of the ecological challenge. It endeavors to evaluate specific aspects of the dominant, operative worldview that may need reclaiming as well as countervailing perspectives on theological anthropology that may help to revise the problematic way in which too many individuals have come to perceive themselves in relation to other people, to God, and to the Earth. It is the part of my critical correlative method in which contemporary experience interrogates the religious traditions by posing new questions and offering new insights to the religious traditions.

As noted earlier, even Christian scholars like Elizabeth Johnson who argue that the Earth as God’s creation “was actively present as an intrinsic part of theological
reflection” for three-quarters of Christianity’s more than 2000 years of history, concedes that this has not been so for most of the last 500 years.\(^{105}\) She argues that the doctrine of creation, “got lost” in Christianity’s myopic turn toward the human subject. Though that turn is relatively recent and short, given Christianity’s long history, it has hard-wired an anthropocentric and sometimes dualistic, otherworldly bias into major streams of contemporary Christian thought.

This overly anthropocentric bias is pervasive within Christianity, maybe in part because of the way the tradition has emerged as one rooted in human history, stories about human history, and God’s action in those stories.\(^{106}\) Gustavo Gutiérrez has said, “[o]ther religions think in terms of cosmos and nature. Christianity, rooted in Biblical sources, thinks in terms of history.”\(^{107}\) At one time, the forces of nature played a more active role in the Christian narratives as Elizabeth Johnson points out, but in many dominant streams of contemporary Protestant and Roman Catholic thought, the Christian narrative has forgotten the Earth as a primary character and agent in the story of God’s work in the Cosmos as it has turned more recently toward an over-emphasis on the God-human relationship. The primary motivating ethical concern in modern times has developed into a discourse on shaping interpersonal relations, relations between the individual and society, and between people and God, even though Roman Catholic and


Orthodox Christian traditions have done a better job of preserving a significant role for the Earth in Christian narratives than has the Protestant traditions, generally speaking. How we ought to live in relation with other species and with the ecosystems in which we are embedded and on which we depend, has become a lost part of the Christian narrative that needs emphasis now more than ever.

This chapter is an effort to settle upon those aspects of the Christian traditions that help or hinder the international, collaborative effort to respond to the ecological crisis broadly, and the issue of climate-induced displacement specifically. It embarks upon the very difficult and messy task of identifying and articulating a set of values within the Christian traditions that respond more adequately to the challenging questions at hand: If we know who are the poor of our day, can existing values expand to reflect a preferential option for the poor and oppressed—one that includes “nature” among the poor and oppressed? Answering this question requires that some aspects of the Christian traditions be reclaimed in such a way that the Earth itself is brought back into the story as a primary figure. It will require a paradigm shift in the way we think of ourselves as human beings, in what it means to walk in solidarity with our suffering neighbors (human and otherwise), and in the very stories and metaphors we use to talk about God and the cosmos.

Moving Forward with Moral Imagination and Creative Action

The last part of this process also becomes the basis for future structured ethical reflection on moral problems. It both closes and begins the loop in a hermeneutical circle of mutually informing praxis and theory, theory and praxis, as noted in the graphic
below. The process starts with reflection on experiences emerging from “everyday lived experience,” or “lo cotidiano,” and continues with critical deliberation on moral aspects of a problem rooted in worldviews and resisted or exacerbated by the resources of our great moral and religious traditions. It includes careful discernment over which aspects of the traditions are helpful and relevant to lo cotidiano and which aspects of the traditions need to be informed, shaped, and adapted in order to become helpful and relevant, especially to the poor and oppressed. Note the figure that follows:

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But if the process is aborted here in the ethereal space of theoretical reflection, it then ceases to be of any real, practical value to *lo cotidiano*. Since ethics is not just about reflection but also about doing, this is where reflection endeavors to answer the question of “so what?” What is the point to all of this reflection if it is not of any use to those who are poor and oppressed? If it does not feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, treat the sick, or house the poor, then why do Christian ethics at all?109 In this step, the ethicist moves from theoretical reflection to practical application, and the moral imagination, compelled by a vision of what could be possible, inspires an action plan to

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109 This is a reference to Matthew 25.
start making the envisioned change a reality. It also moves the ethicist toward activities
of more relevant moral engagement, like moral education, moral exhortation, service, and
prophetic indictment. The ideals of love and justice engage the harsh realities and
limitations of lo cotidiano, charting a practical path forward where love and justice are
increasingly realized in the everyday, even if only as momentary, but promising bursts of
the better world many hope is possible.

Then, like the scientist who experiments continually until his or her research
either supports the hypothesis or proves it impossible, so Christian ethicists and
communities of faith continue through this process of seeing, judging, and acting—
learning from what does and does not work in lo cotidiano, refining moral theories and
practice along the way. Christian ethics is inspired by a rich and diverse tradition of
moral reasoning and ethical reflection on what it means to be human, about who God
might or might not be, and about what our responsibilities are to each other and to the
Earth in which we live and on which we depend. Responsible Christian ethics recognizes
the two-way dialogue between theory and practice and relies on new experiences to
shape, grow, and transform these rich and diverse traditions.

This is one of the most important ways for Christian ethicists to contribute to the
public discussions on climate change and its impacts: by affirming the significance of
humanity’s search for meaning and by lending a critical eye to the worldviews that
influence the decisions we make, individually and collectively, each day. At bottom,
Christian ethics can champion the kind of sustained call for Christian communities to
“save the Creation” as E.O. Wilson implores and believes is possible if all two billion
Christians come together to carry out the task. That task is the “great work” of this generation and of all people on Earth.

110 Wilson, The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth, 4.
CHAPTER TWO

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES: A CASE STUDY ON CLIMATE VULNERABILITY, POVERTY, AND POPULATION DISPLACEMENT

Al Gore opined in his influential documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* that climate change is the most significant moral issue of our time. As I have argued in the previous chapter, climate change is a moral issue partly because it is such a pressing social issue. It resides at the nexus of many disciplines, and Christian ethicists have a valuable service to offer the public because they and the religious leaders they train are well equipped to translate the ethical consequences of climate science into a language that “moves” others in the public square to take action. The consequences of climate change, beginning to be realized now, are acting and will continue to act as a powerful force pushing the world’s poorest communities toward greater vulnerability with an increased likelihood of

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displacement.\footnote{There is a serious lag time between cause and effect with regard to climate change. Research shows that even if greenhouse gas emissions were reduced to a level sufficient to keep the planet from warming more than 2 degrees Celsius, then it may take at least 25 to 30 years for the mitigation effect to be discernable where global temperatures are concerned. Since climate emissions have been ongoing for decades already, some changes are catching up with that lag time, and while the arctic is warming the fastest, other research shows that southeast Asia and much of sub-Saharan Africa, tropical regions adapted to some of the narrowest ranges of weather, are expected to see their local climate begin to depart from historic norms first. As many as 1 billion people could experience this departure by 2020, or up to 5.5 billion people could see it in 50 years if nothing is done to mitigate global emissions. See Claudia Tebaldi and Pierre Friedlingstein, "Delayed Detection of Climate Mitigation Benefits due to Climate Inertia and Variability," \textit{Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America} (published ahead of print October 2, 2013). See also Camilo Mora et al., "The Projected Timing of Climate Departure from Recent Variability," \textit{Nature} 502, no. 7470 (October 10, 2013), 183-187.}

It is because of climate change that some communities will continue losing their food crops to parched soil, while others will see their communities flooded and afflicted by increases in water-borne diseases. Some are already losing fresh water sources—some seeing them dry up and others seeing them contaminated by seawater infiltration or flooding that mixes sewage and drinking water. Some communities are seeing hotter summers and colder winters, some are seeing cooler summers and warmer winters, and some are seeing an increase in the frequency of more extreme weather events. In addition, even though some places are expecting to see agricultural productivity actually increase, many other areas, including those on the African continent, are beginning to see their agricultural productivity decline.

All of these changes do not affect everyone equally. Their consequences are borne most heavily by the already poorest and most vulnerable, and that is because our social structures and institutions do not yet adequately and equitably protect and
empower the world’s poor. This is what makes climate change not only a moral issue but also a social justice issue. Indeed, it is the most important social justice issue of our time. As such, it intensifies the vulnerability of society’s most climate-sensitive populations. It exposes already climate-sensitive populations to environmental risks that directly and disproportionately lead to their harm and displacement. The following sections explore the concepts of global poverty and climate vulnerability generally and explain how they work as drivers of population displacement among the world’s most vulnerable populations.

This chapter begins with a description of climate vulnerability and resiliency in terms of two well-established factors: a population’s general sensitivity to climate change in relation to the exposure risks those populations are forced to confront. The first section defines and describes these factors. Section two considers the particular sensitivities of the global poor by first noting the marginalizing role of poverty generally, across and within all societies. It then describes a working definition of global poverty, as well as its distribution across the globe. It offers terms and concepts relied upon in later chapters. Section three considers the particular sensitivities of poorer women as a demographic, noting the correlation between the survival rate of women in natural

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disasters relative to their survival in societies considered more or less gender-equitable.

The fourth section explores the sensitivity of other species and the ecosystems on which they depend, while noting the state of concern for their legal protections around the globe. That special consideration ought to be given to other species and the Earth itself, alongside humanity, represents the newly significant role that planetary and ecological well-being necessarily plays in a world in which human-Earth relations, survival, and flourishing are increasingly co-dependent. Non-human beings and ecosystems are becoming wholly subject to human decisions made by nations and regions and traditionally they have had little to no representation in those arenas. National and regional leaders show far less moral concern for them than they do for marginalized and vulnerable human populations, as scant as that may be. This section shows what more adequate consideration by the world’s societies for the needs of non-human beings and ecosystems as it is emerging in different ways across the globe.

The chapter concludes with an analysis in the fifth section of several important factors that increase the exposure risks of climate sensitive populations, namely the role of socio-economic disproportionality in climate change, changes in resource availability for ecosystem-dependent livelihoods, and ecological changes affecting biodiversity and ecosystem loss. It demonstrates how sensitivity and exposure risks to climate change are both unfairly burdened upon vulnerable communities because those communities have historically contributed the least to the climate problem. It then offers, in the sixth a final section, a description of how livelihood loss, disease transmission, and natural disasters act as especially devastating exposure risks upon climate-sensitive populations.
Climate Change Vulnerability, Resiliency, Sensitivity, and Exposure Risk

Social justice issues both emerge and are resolved through the institutions, organizations, and social structures of an increasingly globalized world. “Climate vulnerability” is one way to describe a population’s susceptibility to climate change, in terms of two factors: 1) “sensitivity” (those factors directly contributing to any given demographic population’s social vulnerability, such as gender in gender-biased societies, or poverty where great disparities exist) and 2) “exposure risks” (those environmental factors that directly impact a population’s ability to survive and thrive, such as natural disasters and natural resource depletion). “Climate resiliency” describes a population’s ability to withstand climate change—to survive and thrive in the face of it, because they are not vulnerable to it, either because their climate sensitivity is low, or their exposure risks are low, or some combination of both factors resulting in a population’s overarching resiliency. Climate vulnerability and climate resiliency among at-risk demographics is measured and calculated in a variety of ways.

One way is through indices of various data points that factor in social, political, and economic statistics, which help illuminate whether a certain population is more or less vulnerable to the challenges presented to it by climate change. Maplecroft is a United Kingdom-based consulting firm specializing in global risk assessments that consider such social, political, and economic factors as they affect various population sectors. Even though their findings are generally considered particularly germane to the concerns of the business community, their data is certainly useful to others beyond that
sector as well. One of their products is the annually published *Climate Change and Environmental Risk Atlas* that includes a Climate Change Vulnerability Index (CCVI) developed and intended to:

 [...] identify risks to populations, company operations, supply chains and investments in 197 countries down to a level of 25km$^2$. It evaluates exposure to climate related natural hazards; the sensitivity of populations; development; natural resources; agricultural dependency; research and development; government effectiveness and educational levels.

Maplecroft’s CCVI incorporates a broad swath of data to paint an ambitiously precise picture of climate vulnerability around the world—what it is, where it occurs, and whom it affects most acutely. Figure 3 visually displays the cartographical results of the CCVI while highlighting the ten cities it identifies as the globe’s most climate vulnerable cities:

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7 Maplecroft (Firm), *Climate Change and Environmental Risk Atlas*, 5th ed. (Bath, United Kingdom: Maplecroft, 2013).
Figure 3. Maplecroft’s Climate Change Vulnerability Index 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dhaka</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Manila</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yangon</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Djakarta</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ho Chi Minh</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Kolkata</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mumbai</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Chennai</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Lagos</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend

- Low Risk
- Extreme Risk
The collection of information presented by the CCVI is remarkable for both its breadth and depth. Furthermore, the visual display of that data is quite striking. However, it is not the only resource like it, and there are other data-driven indices, such as the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index (ND-GAIN) Index, which produces similar maps with conclusions drawn at the national level. While the ND-GAIN Index’s data does not report climate variability at such an impressively local level as the CCVI, its data is open-source rather than proprietary. The ND-GAIN index also considers a community’s readiness to improve resilience, while the CCVI considers factors such as environmental regulations and other factors that may affect supply chains and business operations around the world.

Slight differences in how each index calculates and weighs factors in what it considers most influential as it pertains to vulnerability partly explain why the CCVI finds more of its ten most vulnerable cities in South and Southeast Asia, while the ND-GAIN Index identifies more of its ten most vulnerable countries on the African continent. Still, taken together, the data from both indices indicate that Africa and South/Southeast Asia are overwhelmingly some of the most climate-vulnerable, least climate-resilient regions on Earth. Figure 4 shows the cartographical results of the ND-GAIN Index:
Figure 4. ND-GAIN Index (Index.Gain.Org.)
Both the CCVI and the ND-GAIN Index offer accessible, data-driven, broad descriptions of climate vulnerability. The ND-GAIN Index, like the CCVI, offers its map as a visual summary of their data sets, which considers a nation’s exposure risk to climate hazards and a given population’s sensitivity to those hazards, as well as a country’s perceived ability to increase climate resiliency. Presumably, those most vulnerable cities and locales identified by the CCVI data sets have more or less overall vulnerability depending on whether they are in more or less climate vulnerable countries, like those identified by the ND-GAIN Index.

For example, many Eastern U.S. cities have a relatively great exposure risk to climate-induced natural disasters, but their location in the U.S. privileges them with access to a greater array of national resources that greatly reduces their sensitivity and increases their resiliency to a level beyond what such cities (and U.S. states) may be capable of on their own. Comparing and contrasting multiple data sets, like those summarized by the CCVI and the ND-GAIN Index maps, offers data-driven insight into the complex nature of climate vulnerability while also revealing some obvious conclusions as to the social and geographical distribution of climate-vulnerable populations.

Case studies rooted in context-specific scenarios of climate-induced displacement also reveal something about lo cotidiano, the everyday lived experiences, of climate vulnerable populations. They supplement the breadth and depth that data-driven indices provide. They give names and faces to the people dwelling in those communities most sensitive to climate change exposure risks. They round out the study of climate
vulnerability and resiliency by including snapshots of real people confronting real
problems. They lend a human element to what might otherwise remain an abstract
collection of data points on a map.

While research continues to develop on this topic, at least one notable report that
lends a human element to the problem of climate vulnerability and displacement has been
presented to the delegates of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate
Change (UNFCCC). The United Nations FCCC, which acts as a kind of constitution or
founding charter for all international climate negotiations, was adopted in 1992 and
entered into force in 1994 with annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) convened every
year since then to accomplish the UNFCCC’s objective. That objective is stated in
Article 2 of the FCCC, with 195 parties, or states, all acknowledging it. It reads as
follows:

The ultimate objective of this Convention and any related legal instruments that
the Conference of the Parties may adopt is to achieve, in accordance with the
relevant provisions of the Convention, stabilization of greenhouse gas
concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous
anthropogenic interference with the climate system. Such a level should be
achieved within a time frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to
climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable

8 Koko Warner et al., In Search of Shelter: Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on
Human Migration and Displacement (Bonn, Germany: CARE Deutschland-Luxemburg,
May 2009). For another report with case studies and a helpful overview of both internal
and cross-border displacement under international law, see The Norwegian Refugee
Council, Climate Changed: People Displaced (Norway: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign
Affairs, 2009).

9 See Daniel Bodansky and Lavanya Rajamani, "The Evolution and Governance
Architecture of the Climate Change Regime," in International Relations and Global
Climate Change, ed. Detlef Sprinz and Urs Luterbacher, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT
economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.\textsuperscript{10}

As an observer delegate at the 16\textsuperscript{th}, 17\textsuperscript{th}, and 18\textsuperscript{th} COPs (Cancun, Mexico; Durban, South Africa; and Doha, Qatar), my goal at these COPs was to follow the official party negotiations and, when appropriate, encourage U.S. parties to negotiate as effectively as possible toward the accomplishment of the UNFCCC objective noted above. Of course, I participated as a member of a larger delegation, in my case the Sierra Club, and in consultation with other environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) acting on what is understood to be the best hard and social science available.

Koko Warner and her colleagues have conducted years of interdisciplinary research, rooted in hard and social science, and presented it in a distilled format at UNFCCC COPs for both party delegates and observer delegates alike. One specific report drills down into the specifics of various challenges confronted by climate-vulnerable populations around the world.\textsuperscript{11} It is collaboratively published by organizations such as the United Nations University, headquartered in Japan, but with institutes and offices around the world. Other organizations include the United Nations Refugee Agency or the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and CARE International. It is funded partly by the World Bank. It relies on empirical evidence from a first-time, multi-continent survey of environmental change and


\textsuperscript{11} Warner et al., \textit{In Search of Shelter: Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement}. 
migration to present a series of case studies that serve as snapshots of the broader aspects of climate change, as well as its impact on displacement and migration.\textsuperscript{12}

One of the report’s key findings highlights a central problem this chapter seeks to clarify: while climate change and the larger ecological crisis from which it emerges is a challenge to the flourishing of the entire human species and to all life on Earth, sensitivity and exposure to the most severe and immediate risks of climate change is not borne equally by all populations. The report concludes that:

The breakdown of ecosystem-dependent livelihoods is likely to remain the premier driver of long-term migration during the next two to three decades. Climate change will exacerbate this situation unless vulnerable populations, especially the poorest, are assisted in building climate-resilient livelihoods.\textsuperscript{13}

This means that certain populations bear a disproportionate amount of vulnerability because they are both disproportionately sensitive and disproportionately exposed to climate change risks. Populations with ecosystem-dependent livelihoods are vulnerable because their lives and livelihoods are generally at such a great risk of loss due to environmental fluctuations. They are also vulnerable because ecosystem-dependent livelihoods tend to be some of the poorest occupations available to people, meaning those engaged in those populations tend to be highly climate sensitive. People with ecosystem-dependent livelihoods in geographical regions with increased exposure risks to climate change have both a high exposure risk and increased sensitivity.

The reverse works as well. For example, relatively wealthy populations are generally employed in non-ecosystem-dependent livelihoods, and they have either the

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., iv.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., iv.
financial means to adapt to environmental fluctuations or access to other resources, which may soften the blow of any sort of environment-induced disruption. When a population or community is relatively wealthy, they may be considered not as climate-sensitive since socio-economic standing is a major indicator of an individual or community’s overall climate sensitivity. These same communities, even if they have a high exposure risk to climate and environmental disasters, such as drought and sea-level rise or hurricanes and superstorms, may still be significantly less vulnerable overall to climate change because their climate sensitivity is so low.

Even middle- and working-class families in wealthier locations generally have access to social support systems or have the means to continue on relatively unscathed after environmental disasters.\textsuperscript{14} When superstorm Sandy hit the Eastern U.S. shoreline, the impact on U.S. homeowners was significant. Data show that “59,971 owners’ primary residences sustained some amount of physical damage. Of this number, 40,466 homes sustained severe or major damage.”\textsuperscript{15} Some parts of the U.S. are considered to be at a high exposure risk to some aspects of climate change, but the overall resilience of the U.S. is considered high because of the relative wealth of its citizenry and because of the institutional, infrastructural, and social services available to many U.S. communities. In some communities experiencing damage caused by superstorm Sandy, up to 80% of the housing stock was purportedly composed of second homes owned by middle-class

\textsuperscript{14} For a general class analysis in the U.S., see Alan Thein Durning, \textit{How Much is enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth} (New York: Norton, 1992).

citizens for whom their beach house was either inherited or considered their retirement savings.\textsuperscript{16} While allegedly inadequate, significant government subsidies and subsidized insurance monies helped to soften the economic impact of the storm on homeowners and communities. A massive inflow of donated resources and volunteer labor from the rest of the country also contributed to clearing and rebuilding efforts. And while I do not intend to discount the personal hardship experienced by scores of U.S. citizens in the face of environmental catastrophes like Superstorm Sandy, many more people around the world are considerably more vulnerable to climate change than those in the U.S. because their climate sensitivity is so high in combination with exposure risks that are also high, or at least higher than in places like the U.S. where more resources exist to manage such risks.

\textbf{A Special Concern for the Poor: Structural Poverty and Climate Change}

Responsible discussion about the “global poor” and even of “global poverty” more generally requires careful qualification. Terms like these often imply certain assumptions to questions like “Who are the poor?” and “What is poverty?” People of varying socio-economic and national backgrounds quite naturally define poverty differently in everyday parlance because poverty is a contextual experience and concept. It is much simpler to describe issues of inter- and intra-city poverty in contemporary U.S. cities than it is to compare poverty in U.S. cities to that of cities that do not share a social and economic context similar to that of the U.S. For example, economically impoverished neighborhoods within the city of Chicago, when considered relative to Chicago’s more affluent neighborhoods, can be more easily identified, compared, and

contrasted. Urban poverty in Chicago may also be compared and contrasted with urban poverty in other U.S. cities, such as Detroit, because the cultural and socioeconomic contexts within which wealth and poverty are described are so similar.

The difficulty comes in describing or comparing/contrasting the poverty of Kenya’s urban slums of Kibera and Mithare relative to the apparent “wealth” of even Chicago or Detroit’s poorest neighborhoods. Poverty in the United States can look very different from poverty in places like Africa or South Asia, but poverty exists in every country in the world. It is no fairer to minimize the very real and troubling expressions of poverty found in the U.S., as in some of Chicago’s neighborhoods and in cities like Detroit, than it is to ignore the divergence between more and less acute forms of poverty found around the world. Some places in the world have a disproportionately higher number of people suffering from some of the most severe forms of abject poverty.

Jeffrey D. Sachs is an economist and director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, who writes influentially on poverty issues. He distinguishes between three degrees of poverty to acknowledge differences in context.17 Those degrees of poverty include extreme poverty, moderate poverty, and relative poverty, and he describes them as follows:

Extreme poverty means that households cannot meet basic needs for survival. They are chronically hungry, unable to access health care, lack the amenities of safe drinking water and sanitation, cannot afford education for some or all of the children, and perhaps lack rudimentary shelter…. Moderate poverty generally refers to conditions of life in which basic needs are met, but just barely. Relative poverty is generally construed as a household income level below a given proportion of average national income. The relatively poor, in high-income

countries, lack access to cultural goods, entertainment, recreation, and to quality health care, education, and other perquisites for upward social mobility.\footnote{Ibid., 20.}

My own effort to describe poverty and explain what I mean by “global poverty” also acknowledges the contextual nature of poverty. I aim for a practical way to describe a problem observed in all societies around the world, albeit in more widespread and acute forms in some places than in others.\footnote{For a brief summary of the extent of world poverty and global inequality in terms of various statistics, see Thomas Pogge, \textit{World Poverty and Human Rights}, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 102-106.} There are various measurements and data points that are traditionally relied upon to depict global poverty.

One conventionally used measure describes economic poverty as an income at or below $1 a day. The following map in figure 6 inflates geographical locations where more people in a country live on $1 a day or less and shrinks those locations where fewer people live at or below the $1/day economic marker:
Figure 6. Inflated Countries with People Living on $1/Day or Less. Source: www.worldmapper.org © 2006 by the SASI Group (University of Sheffield) and Mark Newman (University of Michigan).

The map clearly shows that, if the traditional economic marker of $1 a day is used to define poverty, then the majority of the global poor live primarily in South Asia and Africa. Since poverty, however, exists in a variety of forms, a more complete description of poverty and the global poor ought to include more than just its economic expression found by comparing income levels. It ought also to include access to at least some of society’s other basic resources—resources, such as basic health care and education, to which an increased income facilitates access.

Dr. Vidyasagar at the University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center offers one description of poverty that includes access to some of society’s basic resources. It is a more holistic description than the traditional $1/day description of poverty and includes consideration of several of the necessities included in Sachs’ degrees of poverty but highlights the structural pervasiveness of poverty:
[Poverty] is a situation that places human beings in a state of hunger, sickness and powerlessness. Poverty is living one day at a time, with no access to basic daily needs of food, clean water, education and health care. Poverty is present in all countries, rich and poor; only the proportions differ.\(^\text{20}\)

This definition of poverty is nuanced in such a way that it includes factors beyond income or lack of income. It includes consideration for the goods that an individual or a family’s income is often used to purchase: food, medical care, basic security, food, and clean water.

In a position paper issued by the World Health Organization’s Regional Office for Africa, a Zimbabwean woman was asked how she would define poverty, and she replied:

You want to know how I define poverty. How can you ask that question when you yourself can see that I live in poverty? The definition of poverty is already in front of you. Look at me, I stay alone, I do not have enough food, I have no decent clothes or accommodation, I have no clean water to drink nearby. Look at my swollen leg. I cannot get to the clinic as it is far for me to walk. So, what kind of definition of poverty do you expect me to give you, which is better than what you have seen with your naked eyes?\(^\text{21}\)

Both Vidyasagar and the Zimbabwean woman offer definitions of poverty that extend beyond income level and similarly include a lack of access to a variety of other social resources such as medical care, clean drinking water, and food. They offer more holistic definitions that put a human face on poverty and move the description of poverty beyond easier-to-ignore numbers and statistics. Both definitions necessarily complicate any given definition of poverty and yet simplify it conceptually at the same time.


something more than just facts and statistics; it is also something that is plain to the “naked eye,” as the Zimbabwean woman asserts.

The difficulty with Vidyasagar’s and the Zimbabwean woman’s descriptions of poverty, when used as the basis for finding and counting the global poor, is that they define poverty as a multifaceted social condition that is very hard to quantitatively measure, and this makes the global poor a hard population to count. If, however, poverty really is something that is apparent and obvious to the naked eye, then it can be described quantitatively, qualitatively, or, better yet, by some combination of the two. Efforts have been made to quantify those aspects of poverty, which would otherwise become apparent only in a more qualitative study of poverty. The United Nations has developed the Human Poverty Index (HPI-1) in an effort to create a measurement of poverty that considers desirable social dimensions such as a long, healthy life, the ability to pursue basic knowledge, and the ability to obtain decent standards of living that “developed” and “developing” countries have in varying degrees. 22

The HPI-1 attempts to quantify the otherwise qualitative dimensions of what some consider basic aspects of a relatively successful society by counting indicators for each of those dimensions for which statistics are readily available. The HPI-1 measures the probability at birth of an individual not surviving until age 40 in an attempt to

22 While the UN has no established convention for the terms "developed" and "developing" countries, the terms and their meaning here are broadly used to distinguish between generally more affluent countries such as the U.S. and those in Western Europe and poorer countries such as many across Africa and some Asian countries like Bangladesh. See "Composition of Macro Geographical (Continental) Regions, Geographical Sub-Regions, and Selected Economic and Other Groupings (Footnote C)." United Nations Statistic Division, http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/m49/m49regin.htm#ftnc (accessed June 5, 2013).
measure an individual’s chance at a long, healthy life. It looks at adult literacy rates in an effort to measure the pursuit of basic knowledge. It considers the percentage of a population not using improved water sources and the percentage of children who are underweight for their age. The index presumes that each of these statistics reflects something of a country’s potential to offer a decent standard of living for its citizens via clean drinking water and food availability.23

The UN uses these numbers to calculate and measure human poverty in developed and developing countries and as a more adequate way to describe poverty than comparisons of income levels alone. Certainly, one’s chances of surviving until age 40 cannot be the sole indicator of whether or not an individual is leading a long and healthy life. It does, however, offer a readily and widely available (and therefore easily comparable) measurement that can be used to place countries alongside one another for comparative purposes. Together, these measurements and the indicators they endeavor to describe begin to offer something of a more holistic depiction of poverty and of poverty’s geographical distribution. The following map in figure 7 was created in the same way as the former but uses the UN’s HPI-1 to expand countries according to poverty and shrink them according to their affluence, as measured by the UN’s HPI-1:

Looking closely at the two maps, one notices that some countries are smaller and some are larger. Most noticeably, though, is the obvious similarity between the map in figure 6 and the map in figure 7: both the African continent and South Asia are distractingly bloated, while the rest of the world appears relatively lean. Another cartographical display of poverty, expressed in terms of undernourishment’s occurrence around the globe, is equally revealing. Using the same mapping techniques as the prior two cartographs, global undernourishment rates cartographically depict a distinct yet more or less similar geographical distribution of poverty as those shown in the previous two maps:
Of the three measurements depicted in these maps, the most comprehensive set of indicators is displayed by the HPI-1, though it could be argued that the map in figure 8 on undernourishment reflects some of the most dire, acute expressions of poverty since it could be argued that food is one of the most basic resources that a functioning society must be able to produce for its population. Either way, the HPI-1 was the premier multi-factor poverty measure until the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), launched in July 2010, supplanted it.\textsuperscript{24} Though published data is lacking for a number of nations (since data for each indicator are not nearly as readily available as data for the indicators in the HPI-1), the components of the MPI are significantly more expansive in that they take into account ten indicators (as opposed to the handful of indicators in the HPI-1) for those

countries in which data do exist. Those indicators are noted in figure 9 below:

![Figure 9. Components of the Multidimensional Poverty Index. Source: http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/mpi/ (last accessed 27 November 2012).](image)

Regarding the regional distribution of people living in poverty, as described by the UN’s MPI, more than half (51%) of the world’s poor live in South Asia and over a quarter (28%) live somewhere on the African continent.25 This newer and more systematic international measurement of poverty relies on a less complete collection of individual data points because some of these data points do not yet exist in several countries. Still, it offers a more holistic way of describing poverty for those where the data do exist, and it confirms what all the other descriptions broadly assert regarding the geographical distribution of poverty around the globe.

That assertion is this: whether one uses the traditional $1/day income level, the
UN’s traditional HPI-1 measure of life expectancy, basic undernourishment rates, or the
UN’s newer MPI, the geographic distribution of the global poor is clear and evident. The
global poor—those experiencing some of the most acute forms of poverty, reside
overwhelmingly and disproportionately on the African continent and in South Asian
countries such as India and Bangladesh. This fact makes these populations some of the
world’s most sensitive populations to risks of any kind. How that sensitivity is
exacerbated by exposure risks associated with climate changes will be explored in this
chapter’s fifth section alongside the risks particular to poorer women. For now, I
conclude with the Zimbabwean woman’s astute claim that poverty is indeed something
that is clear to the “naked eye.” Structural poverty may be rightly considered a sign of
the times, demanding a moral response from all people of good will, especially those who
are purportedly members of the world’s great religious traditions.

A Special Concern for Women: Gender Disparity and Climate Change

As global climate change continues to intensify, another population carries
increased sensitivity to the exposure risks of climate change and, with that sensitivity,
increased vulnerability to displacement. Increasing levels of greenhouse gases in the
atmosphere have been linked to more intense precipitation extremes. The scientific
community has also demonstrated that anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are

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26 Gore, An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and what
we can do about It, 112, 114-115; See also Bill McKibben, Eaarth: Making a Life on a
Tough New Planet (New York: Times Books, 2010), 155; Seung-Ki Min et al., "Human
directly increasing the risk of flood occurrences in several places around the world.\footnote{Gore, \textit{An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and what we can do about It}, 102, 105-107, 112; See also McKibben, \textit{Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet}, 41, 64, 69; Pardeep Pall et al., "Anthropogenic Greenhouse Gas Contribution to Flood Risk in England and Wales in Autumn 2000," \textit{Nature} 470, no. 7334 (2011), 382-385.} As the climate changes, some places in the world are experiencing more droughts or more flooding as rain patterns shift and mountain glaciers melt. These are exposure risks that are borne disproportionately among sensitive populations, such as the poor described in the previous section. However, women as a gender group in unequal societies and especially poorer women in poorer, less equitable societies, are another particularly climate-sensitive population whose unequal social status in certain contexts makes them disproportionately vulnerable to climate change.

Poorer women in less equal societies are particularly vulnerable to any kind of additional risk, including and especially climate risks, because their climate sensitivity is so high. It is high because their lives embody so many social inequalities. Poorer women living among the world’s most economically impoverished communities occupy some of the most marginalized social spaces within those communities and within the larger, increasingly globalized world community. They are likely to shoulder more of the burdens of climate change than their male counterparts because of both their increased climate sensitivity and the higher exposure risks of their homelands since the poorest women tend to live in the same climate vulnerable locales as the global poor at large. While these exposure risks will be examined in subsequent sections, the particular role of
gender disparity and its contribution to poorer women’s climate sensitivity, and thus their overall vulnerability to climate change, is explored in this section.

Gender disparity leads to an increased level of climate sensitivity that, even when women are exposed to the same climate risks as men, makes women more vulnerable to climate change than men. Gender inequality begets climate inequality. Women in gender-biased societies and most especially poorer women in such societies have a socially reduced capacity to adapt to natural disasters, including disasters unrelated to climate change. This combination of higher climate sensitivity and exposure to climate risks creates a correspondingly higher climate vulnerability and lower adaptive capacity to those natural disasters that are expected to increase and intensify under various climate change scenarios simply because of a woman’s social context.28 There are two factors directly at play here: secondary vulnerability that emerges from poverty as a result of a woman’s generally reduced standing in their society and vulnerability that emerges directly from a woman’s reduced social standing as women living in gender-biased communities.

Regarding the first, a 2009 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report states that the “case studies associated with a devastating 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, the 2003 European heat wave, and the 2004 Asian tsunami … affirm the greater

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vulnerability of women” when considered along with sampling data from 141 countries between 1981 and 2002 showing that women die in higher numbers and at earlier ages than men in natural disasters. More significantly, the UNFPA report also found that the “[l]ow socio-economic status of women correlates with larger differences in death rates” such that:

[T]he more severe the disaster and the lower the socio-economic status of the population affected, the greater the gap between women’s and men’s death rates in such disasters as cyclones, earthquakes and tsunamis.

This data conclusively shows that lower socio-economic status as a product of gender inequality in less equitable societies directly corresponds to women’s increased climate sensitivity and contributes to their overall climate vulnerability, especially when exposure risks to climate change are high as well. Gender disparity is not a small or insignificant factor in many women’s lived experiences. For too many women around the world, their gender is one of the most important factors in determining the unfairly poorer odds of their basic survival.

Regarding the second factor, the report notes, by way of example, that the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh killed five times more women than men. Though the authors of the study acknowledge that general biological differences between men and women may be partially responsible (i.e. pregnancy increases physical vulnerability, and upper body strength could arguably lead to some advantages in a flood disaster), they attribute the


30 Ibid., 35, 45.

31 Ibid., 35.
high numbers of female deaths relative to male deaths to social context within contemporary Bangladeshi culture (i.e. generally, more women could have been trapped inside their homes when the flood hit, girls are not generally taught to swim, nor do they learn to climb trees like their brothers, a wet sari weighs more than a wet lungi and could interfere with swimming, etc.).\textsuperscript{32} While it is acknowledged that biological differences between men and women may play some part in survival or death rates during natural disasters, it is concluded that any part it does play is small relative to the significant role played by social factors.

Biology does not appear to make any significant difference in whether or not a man or a woman is likely to survive a natural disaster, and while economic status is generally significant, it is not the most significant factor for women. How equal or unequal any given society is for the women who live in it is the single most important factor in determining whether men and women share equal odds of survival or whether women will have their lives taken from them in far greater numbers than men. It reasonably follows that more equitable societies create wealth more equally among men and women, so gender disparity and structural poverty are closely knit together with respect to women and climate change. However, the roles that women fulfill in a given society, the skills they learn or do not learn in that society, and the type of livelihood available to them may be an even more important indicator of their climate vulnerability than their income alone.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
For example, there are several ways in which poorer women become increasingly climate-sensitive. The 2009 UNFPA report identifies three general factors that drive poor women’s particular social and economic sensitivity, arguing that women around the world generally: 1) work less often for pay and receive less pay for comparable work, 2) experience “secondary poverty” as a result of marriage relationships with men who spend too much of a poorer family’s limited income on items such as alcohol, drugs, and gambling, and 3) are more likely than men to support and head single-parent households.33 Still, the role that poverty plays in women’s disparity cannot be ignored. Another report cites the Asian Development Bank to point out that, in Bangladesh, “as many as three in 10 households are headed by females, and 95 per cent of these female-headed households are below the poverty line.”34

Anecdotal evidence and first-hand observations from my own travel and work in Bangladesh support this data and compel me to point out an important nuance regarding one aspect of the third factor just noted. It is not necessarily the case that young men, at least in the Bangladeshi context, leave their wives because of some personal or relational failure between Bangladeshi men and women. Larger, global issues and trends come intimately into play here, including the push and pull factors associated with the mass

33 Ibid., 45.

movement of people into urban megacities. Many young men leave their family villages behind and their wives as heads-of-household, primarily to look for work in larger cities, like Bangladesh’s capital city of Dhaka.

They are driven by the pursuit of a reprieve from crushing rural poverty and pulled by the promises of urban prosperity—an arguably noble and reasonable desire to improve their families’ quality of life and the belief that urban work is the only opportunity to improve their economic outlook. My point here is that poorer women in the developing world are not always left alone because of deadbeat husbands. In an increasingly globalized world, there are social, political, and economic currents at play that greatly influence mass population movements. They deeply complicate otherwise personal, family decisions (made by men and women, boys and girls) regarding how and where families believe they can best weather and take advantage of the dizzying storm of changes happening all around them.

Still, while poor families and the men and women within those families may equally share some of the burdens and distress of crushing poverty when families and communities break apart under economic pressure, women get the short end of the stick too often. Social and economic gender inequality intensifies and becomes more apparent,

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more problematic, when natural disasters strike. Women’s impressive resilience, social creativity, and willingness to do just about anything to survive, thrive, and care for dependents reaches a breaking point when a natural disaster makes it impossible for them to use those attributes for their continued survival and care of dependents. Whatever resources poorer women skillfully commandeer during times of incredible hardship, a breaking point is reached when their disproportionate climate sensitivity confronts an overwhelming set of exposure risks. Women’s climate sensitivity is, in fact, directly increased due to their unfair exposure to environmental and climate risks.

“Secondary poverty” forces women to make do with a reduced and inadequate household income. Secondary poverty is a kind of poverty in which a family’s income might be sufficient for the family to get by on a daily basis, but because a spouse spends the family’s income on things like alcohol and gambling instead of the necessities required by the family, their standard of living is less than it otherwise could be and women tend to seek out alternative ways to make up the difference.37 Since women in many societies, the globe’s poorest women in particular, generally work less often for pay outside the home, the world’s poorest women tend to work disproportionately in subsistence farming, natural-resource management and water collection in developing countries, [and are thus] more likely to be affected than men by the effects of soil erosion, desertification, droughts, water shortages, floods and other environmental changes.38

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Furthermore, “women, children and the elderly are usually the ones who stay behind [in disaster prone areas], while younger male members [up to 90% in some areas] are more likely to leave home,” leaving women “to shoulder the burden of caring for the household while having access to fewer income-earning opportunities.”

Many of these men who leave may not find the work they seek and are unable to send money home as expected, so women are left with the sole responsibility for feeding and caring for the daily needs of their family. Even when remittances are sent home, such urban-to-rural remittances do not always contribute significantly to rural economic development. Families face extreme hardship when they are supported by women forced to eke out a living in societies in which their labor does not earn pay equivalent to men’s labor or in which many or most jobs are simply unavailable to women in their particular social contexts.

The UNFPA report draws serious and clear conclusions about why the globe’s poorest women carry a disproportionate sensitivity to climate-related challenges. Their reduced capacity to adapt to and survive such challenges stems from their social and

39 Ibid., 35.

40 See Henry Rempel and Richard A. Lobdell, "The Role of Urban-to-rural Remittances in Rural Development," *Journal of Development Studies* 14, no. 3 (1978), 324-341. This is, however, not always the case and in some places, like Bangladesh, remittances from abroad can reach sums greater than the country's entire export earnings or all foreign aid coming into the country. See Saunders, *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History is Reshaping our World*, 29-30.

economic inequality as a gender group within their societies. It is unjust and morally reprehensible that the globe’s poorest women shoulder some of the greatest burdens of climate change simply because they are women and live in societies that fail to recognize their equal value and the worth of their contributions toward building better societies. Enduring forms of social and economic marginalization made manifest through gender disparity only compound the challenges of structural poverty that poorer women are forced to encounter. The role played by exposure risks to climate change concerning women’s vulnerability will be explored shortly, but it is clear that their climate sensitivity contributes directly to their overall climate vulnerability and it is a serious concern warranting a social justice response.

**A Special Concern for the Earth: Ecological Degradation and Climate Change**

This chapter offers a case study on climate change vulnerability, with a focus on poverty and social inequality, in which population displacement is one of the most dire effects of climate change on the global poor. I would be remiss, however, if I did not at least briefly discuss the devastating effects of climate change on other species and the ecosystems in which both humans and those other species live and depend. While I do not intend to take a primarily ecocentric approach to climate change, I do not desire to take an anthropocentric approach, either, and neglecting any consideration of other species and the Earth can appear to present an implicitly anthropocentric approach.42 My

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aim, instead, is an approach rooted more in practicality than in demarcated philosophical debates but no less focused on seeking out answers to the tough questions about what it means to be human and how we ought to live alongside one another and the billions of other species that share our planet.43

This dissertation’s focus on the issues of social justice and ecological responsibility surrounding the issues of poverty, social inequality, and climate-induced displacement limits the scope of my argument at this juncture to one grounded primarily in human concerns decided upon by nations and societies. It is not my intention to weigh down the argument with theoretical concerns regarding the intrinsic value of non-human life at this juncture, as important as those concerns may be. That effort remains beyond the scope of this part of my project, partly because the argument for human concern is strong enough on its own to merit a call to social justice and ecological responsibility as a response to climate-induced displacement and partly because that call envelops and includes care for other species and for ecological systems. In addition, arguments in later chapters will engage the issue more directly.

Social and ecological issues are so thoroughly interconnected that many of today’s social issues are inherently ecological issues and vice versa. The IPCC Fourth


Assessment Report shows the complex, interconnected relations between human and Earth systems in a graphically compelling way.\footnote{R. K. Pachauri and A. Reisinger, eds., \textit{Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change} (Geneva, Switzerland: IPCC, 2007), 26.} The following figure depicts these connections:

![Figure 10. Schematic Framework of Anthropogenic Climate Change Drivers, Impacts, and Responses. Source: IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, 2007.](image)

Rarely can issues arising in human systems, such as food security and human health, be treated adequately without addressing issues arising in Earth systems, like precipitation change and extreme events, and vice versa. If a case can be made for an ethic of
responsibility that sees to the concerns of human survival, welfare, and vitality, then the case for environmental concern is already made since the present human condition now requires intentional care and attention for the Earth and the Earth’s ecosystems at a level never before required in human history. This does not mean, of course, that conflicts cannot continue to arise between the sometimes conflicting needs of poorer communities to develop and the need to preserve habitat to both help mitigate climate exposure risks for humans and protect endangered species.

For example, the critical need for additional electrical power in Bangladesh has allowed the government to pursue construction of a coal-fired power plant in the country’s primary forest and mangrove preserve, the Sundarbans—habitat for the endangered Bengal tiger.\textsuperscript{45} Degradation of Sundarbans ecosystems through deforestation, increased air and water pollution, and barge traffic directly conflicts with the need to conserve these ecosystems and the various species they support. Even though the fate of human welfare is tied inseparably to the fate of our planetary well-being, generally, conflicts between the pressing needs of particular communities and the other species with which they share a habitat exist aplenty. Sometimes the immediate needs of people do conflict with the needs of other species, and sometimes, entire ecosystems. Our species however, cannot survive and thrive if we do not find a way to foster the survival and flourishing of other species and the ecosystems in which we (all species) live and depend.

Therefore, any separation I employ now regarding the particular sensitivity of other species and biological ecosystems is, admittedly, somewhat artificial. Just as concern for poorer women cannot be fully separated and divorced from concern for the global poor, broadly speaking, neither can concern for people be divorced from concern for the Earth as a whole, broadly speaking. Concern for the whole requires concern for its parts, and concern for its parts reflects the interconnectivity and interdependency of the parts with each other and in relation to the whole. The distinctions I make between three vulnerable populations aim to demonstrate more clearly the particular connections between climate change and vulnerability. I have pointed toward various aspects of economic, social, and ecological factors shared between two key demographics or populations that are particularly climate vulnerable. As such, I have until now focused predominantly on issues directly affecting the poorest of the global poor and women. These two groups of people are some of the most climate-sensitive demographics in each of their respective societies and are some of the most climate-vulnerable human populations on Earth.

Other species and their ecosystems, however, are directly vulnerable to climate change as well, but any discussion of species extinction and ecological degradation has been presented within one implicit metaphor of the human–environment relationship—that of direct human reliance upon the “services” provided by ecosystems and the way in which human welfare is directly or indirectly reliant upon the ecological life-support
systems in which people live and work. While I have not, in my analysis, endeavored to place an economic or monetary value on those services, as others have done, I have noted the irreplaceable importance and role played by these “ecosystem services” in both human survival and flourishing. What I have sought to do in these previous two sections is draw practical connections between human survival and flourishing on the one hand, especially for the poor and poorer women, with the need to preserve and sustain ecological systems and their flourishing on the other.

It has not been my primary goal to argue, as others have, from the perspective or position of enlightened self-interest, though I do think that the case I make is compatible with such a perspective. This chapter does not endeavor to discern the appropriate role of anthropocentric versus ecocentric perspectives within ethical discourse. The connections I draw now certainly lend themselves comfortably to an anthropocentric perspective since human self-interest is wrapped up inseparably with ecological vitality, and the success of the human enterprise is now utterly dependent upon our ability to keep

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our species from destroying the Earth. I hope, however, that my description of the climate problem lends itself to an ecocentric perspective as well because I think that concerns for both people and planet can no longer be divorced one from the other in the present era and do, in fact, share a requirement for adequate attention if either concern is to be realized. This chapter’s purpose is the grounded exploration of what is happening at the intersection of structural poverty, gender disparity, ecological degradation, and climate-induced displacement. It creates parameters around tangible issues so that I can later engage in a more theory-based ethical reflection and discern between countervailing perspectives.

While I do think that other species and ecosystems have intrinsic value, their instrumental value to human civilization is an undeniable scientific fact. The acute vulnerability that other species and ecosystems face within the context of human-induced climate change is, therefore, a matter of concern for both those who see their intrinsic value and those who only recognize their instrumental value. Many of the world’s diversity of species, including wild and domesticated animals and breeds raised for human sustenance, face a level of sensitivity to human-induced climate change, including sensitivity to the point of total extinction.

The vulnerability of other species to the human presence on this planet is already so great that extinction is now occurring at a rate exceeded only a handful of times in the

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totality of Earth’s history. Many of the five great extinction events of the past are attributed to rapid, large-scale geological and atmospheric changes such as meteorite clusters, asteroid impacts, and major volcanic events. The current “sixth extinction event” may be happening now due to the human presence on Earth—meaning that for the first time in Earth’s history, one species has now become so destructive to the rest of life on Earth that humanity has become a force akin to whatever it was that killed the dinosaurs. This is a ruthlessly unnecessary loss of life and biological diversity that, as far as we can tell at present, may not exist anywhere else in the universe. All planetary life on Earth is increasingly dependent upon those decisions made by the human species through our national governments, commercial-industrial establishments, and by supranational and multinational agencies, institutions, and organizations.

Kevin J. O’Brien notes the interconnected nature of environmental degradation and species loss at the hands of human social systems, as a mutually sustaining or mutually destructive force, when he observes:

[E]nvironmental degradation is a problem for human beings: the ways we treat our planet, its ecosystems, and its species degrade human lives, and the distribution of that degradation occurs within oppressive and inequitable social

Humanity’s social systems are arbiters of justice not only for people but also increasingly for all life on Earth. Those systems include all those “fundamental establishments that control the human realm” as Thomas Berry notes: governmental institutions and political structures, cultural institutions and intellectual academic structures, religious institutions and structures, and perhaps most influentially, the corporate and industrial institutions and economic structures that have demonstrated their particularly influential ability to define human-environment relations.

These social systems and structures are responsible for the continued marginalization of both vulnerable people and of other vulnerable species and biological systems, in so far as they act as conduits for systemic oppression, subjugation, and domination. There are streams of injustice connecting the systemic exploitation of the world’s most vulnerable populations—both human and otherwise—that run between our present path of ecological crisis and the future possibility of ecological responsibility that I hope can emerge through responsible social justice work around the globe. Justice lies in the transformation of these institutions and structures, especially the transformation of prevailing economic institutions and corporate enterprise. I will explore this further in the next chapter.

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For now, the very fact that other species and ecosystems have minimal to no representation within those social systems, institutions and structures that determine their very existence speaks volumes about the particular sensitivity of this non-human group. When those advocates who endeavor to speak on this group’s behalf express their concerns in a public capacity, these concerns are almost always framed and asserted according to their relevance to the human community. More equitable societies, for example, no longer consider the needs and concerns of women in relation to the needs and concerns of the men (husbands, fathers, and brothers) who supposedly represented women in social and public forums before the women’s suffrage movement. The same is true for racial minorities in the U.S. before the civil rights movement. More equitable societies create a space for all people so that they have a seat at the table as autonomous decision-makers whose direct needs their peers may consider.

With few exceptions, however, almost no space is set aside for the particular needs and concerns of those other species and ecosystems upon which we all depend and are a part. There are fair questions regarding what such a space might or could look like. If such a space within the public square were to exist for other species, it would certainly require human advocates who speak on their behalf, and/or it would require legal jurisprudence affording other species a level of protection from any decisions considered within the public square. In my final chapter I offer a vision of what this might look like as nations around the world begin to debate the idea of assigning personhood to non-
human beings.\textsuperscript{54} For now, it suffices to note that affording marginalized persons a voice and all due consideration of their right and need to share a healthy, environmentally intact planet, makes a solid argument in its own right for addressing those systems and institutions that also degrade and despoil planetary and ecological flourishing. Extending a special concern for the needs of the poor, and for poorer women, necessarily includes a special concern for the integrity of Earth.

\textbf{Climate Culpability: Blame, Innocence, and Basic Fairness}

If it can be concluded that vast segments of the human population, as well as many other species and the ecosystems on which the most vulnerable especially depend, are susceptible to climate change exposure risks, then what should be done? Who is to blame, and do those who are blameworthy have a moral responsibility to shoulder more of the burden than others? Even beginning to answer questions such as these, questions answered in more detail in later chapters, requires a look at the origin of the problem and consideration for how the effects of climate change disproportionately affect the world’s most vulnerable even though they are the least responsible for the problem.

This is a more difficult task than it might at first appear because we are in the midst of an unprecedented global phenomenon whose worst effects are probably yet to come. Scientific studies continue to develop and refine even the best hypotheses. Some around the globe misunderstand and mistrust the highly nuanced language of the scientific community. In addition, there is still a reasonable amount of uncertainty

regarding some variables and the various connections between human-induced climate change and the shifting weather patterns that are being observed around the world.

For example, one important study shows that tropical cyclones in the North Atlantic Ocean basin have increasingly become more powerful, but this increase in intensity has not been observed in other basins.\textsuperscript{55} Another study considers the impact of greenhouse gases on Northern Hemisphere summer cyclones but notes the inconsistency between predictions regarding future increases or decreases in the frequency of tropical cyclones.\textsuperscript{56} It is important to note that the scientific community makes a great effort not to conflate correlation and causation, though environmental advocacy communities have often not been as careful, sometimes contributing to the confusion on climate change causation and effects. Sweeping generalizations about climate change in public forums is sometimes perilous because of the still-evolving nature of human knowledge around climate change.

Still, while correlation and causation are not the same and researchers are still studying some of the details regarding demonstrable connections between specific phenomena, there is nonetheless a widespread consensus among the international scientific community that climate changes are indeed occurring and that it is reasonable to interpret from the data a solid, demonstrable link between observed changes and

\textsuperscript{55} Iris Grossmann and M. Granger Morgan, "Tropical Cyclones, Climate Change, and Scientific Uncertainty: What do we Know, what does it Mean, and what should be done?" \textit{Climatic Change} 108, no. 3 (2011).

anthropogenic greenhouse gas, climate change emissions.\textsuperscript{57} Regardless of outstanding technical uncertainties in some very specific phenomena, there is still an overwhelming amount of data to suggest conclusively that the speed and intensity of the climate changes occurring now are human-caused and that they greatly exacerbate social inequality. Furthermore, climate culpability plays a significant role in determining who benefits and who is disadvantaged by climate change. Unsurprisingly, those getting the “short end of the stick” are least culpable when it comes to causing climate change and yet they are the communities already beginning to experience its most severe impacts and consequences. The world’s most climate sensitive populations, experiencing some of the highest exposure risks to climate change, will also experience accelerating social inequality under business-as-usual climate scenarios.\textsuperscript{58}

Social inequalities escalate in the face of resource competition and the natural disasters that accompany climate change. Climate change exacerbates social inequalities. The individuals, communities, demographics, and populations with the most resiliency, the greatest access to natural, social, and financial resources will be able to either leave the areas that are most severely devastated and/or they will recover from the disasters that affect their communities, businesses, and livelihoods more quickly and more sufficiently.


\textsuperscript{58} Schneider et al., 2007: \textit{Assessing Key Vulnerabilities and the Risk from Climate Change}, 779-810.
Those that are most vulnerable and least responsible for causing the problems of climate change will not be as able to avoid or adapt to its consequences. Communities with the least access to resources (having the greatest climate sensitivity) have the least ability to adapt to climate changes, and those with the most access (having the greatest climate resiliency) have the best chances of surviving and thriving under a new climate paradigm. These are the key claims of this section.

Similarly, the communities around the world with the greatest climate sensitivity and least capacity to adapt to the challenges of climate change are, as already noted, those that are presently some of the economically poorest places: the African continent and much of South Asia. One helpful way to talk about this is in terms of a nation’s “adaptive capacity.” In a report on climate vulnerability and adaptation, Nick Brooks and other contributors describe a nation’s adaptive capacity as one element of their overall vulnerability to climate-related mortality, whether through normal climate events and variability or those attributed to climate change.59 A nation’s adaptive capacity in the face of climate change is associated with factors such as a nation’s ability to govern effectively and their citizenry’s literacy and political rights.60 The greater a nation’s capacity to adapt to climate changes, the lower is their vulnerability to climate-related mortality—and not simply because of geographical good fortune but because of socio-


60 Ibid.
political stability.\textsuperscript{61} Education, equality, and good governance help protect against climate-related mortality.

It is argued that the holistic improvement of a community’s overall adaptive capacity is critical for successful community-based natural resource management projects because of the group’s ability to learn and innovate in response to complex social and ecological problems.\textsuperscript{62} The globe’s poorest people living primarily in Africa and South Asia will bear the brunt of climate change’s most devastating effects not only because of their greater climate sensitivity and reduced adaptive capacity to climate change exposure risks but also because present and ongoing social inequality and instability intensifies when confronted with increased exposure risks.

The poorest populations, relative to more affluent populations, disproportionately shoulder the disease, loss of life, and loss of livelihood that accompany climate change. They shoulder this burden through very little fault of their own if the fault originates with a society’s contribution to the increased levels of climate emissions, especially carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions, that trigger and speed up global climate change. The Human Development Report Office of the United Nations has observed that:

People in the rich world are increasingly concerned about emissions of greenhouse gases from developing countries. They tend to be less aware of their own place in the global distribution of CO2 emissions.... The distribution of current emissions points to an inverse relationship between climate change risk and responsibility. The world’s poorest people walk the Earth with a very light carbon footprint. We estimate the carbon footprint of the poorest 1 billion people on the planet at around 3 percent of the world’s total footprint. Living in

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.

vulnerable rural areas and urban slums, the poorest billion people are highly exposed to climate change threats for which they carry negligible responsibility.\textsuperscript{63}

The same report publishes a cartogram that bloats nations responsible for a larger share of CO2 emissions relative to nations that contribute a lesser share of global warming emissions (see figure 11).\textsuperscript{64}

![Figure 11. Mapping the Global Variation in CO2 Emissions. Source: UNDP, Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World.](image)

Comparing and contrasting this map with the previous maps showing various expressions of global poverty, one sees how clear the disproportionality is between nations that contribute to the climate problem and those that are most affected by its worst effects. This map shows a bloated United States, Europe, and Japan while leaving the entire continent of Africa nearly invisible because nations on that continent have such low

\textsuperscript{63} UNDP, Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World, 43.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 42.
energy-related CO2 emissions relative to the rest of the world’s nations.

According to the International Energy Agency, more than 1.3 billion people are without access to electricity, the production of which contributes greatly to many nations’ climate emissions. Most of the people who do not contribute to global emissions are unable to produce their own electricity, and more than 95% reside in sub-Saharan Africa or developing Asian countries. The connection between relative global wealth or the “electricity haves” and their blameworthiness for human-induced climate change is as apparent as the geographical distribution of the “electricity have-nots” who suffer around the globe because of their poverty.

It is unfortunate and unfair that many of the most significant challenges accompanying climate change disproportionately affect the global poorest. Nicholas Stern, chair of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics, boldly asserts:

No region would be left untouched by [climate changes on the order of magnitude expected if nothing is done], though developing countries would be affected especially adversely. This applies particularly to the poorest people within the large populations of both sub-Saharan African and South Asia. By 2100, in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, up to 145–220 million additional people could fall below the $2-a-day poverty line, and every year an additional 165,000–250,000 children could die compared with a world without climate change.

The global poor are already experiencing tremendous suffering and hardship, and the dire

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66 Friedman, Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why we Need a Green Revolution-- and how it can Renew America, 63.

nature of their situation will only worsen if nothing is done to prepare for the *additional* problems and challenges they will face if human-induced climate change continues unabated. The injustice experienced by the poor now is only intensified under anticipated climate change scenarios since they will shoulder the bulk of its consequences even though they are least responsible for causing the problem.

As described in earlier sections, regardless of how global poverty is expressed or defined, its most acute expressions occur in much of the African continent and South/Southeast Asia. The problems associated with poverty are exacerbated when nothing is done to mitigate a demographic population’s climate sensitivity or their exposure risks. As the most disastrous effects of climate change continue to intensify, the social and economic vulnerability of the world’s poorest communities will also tragically intensify. Those social institutions, organizations, and structures of our increasingly integrated global society responsible for this injustice are, for better or worse, also those that will be responsible for bringing justice or withholding it under a new climate paradigm. Global climate change is undoubtedly the largest moral issue and the largest social justice issue of our time, partly because it presents so many risks to the world’s most vulnerable populations—to those who are not even participating in those decisions made by struggling governments and international organizations on their behalf. 68

Climate change is a social justice issue because the decisions made in the public square are generally made by and for the most privileged in society, and those decisions make life and livelihood disproportionately difficult for the already poor and marginalized.

This does not have to be the case, however. Governments, international organizations, and institutions can make decisions that do not so disproportionately prey upon the particular climate sensitivities and exposure risks that constitute the vulnerability of society’s most marginalized members. I have already attended to several of the particular sensitivities of climate vulnerable populations, and I will now attend to some of the particular exposure risks that are expected to increase and intensify with climate change. Most notably, these exposure risks disproportionately and directly affect the livelihoods, health and wellbeing, and chances of survival that sensitive populations can expect now and in the years ahead.

**Drivers of Poverty and Displacement: Livelihood Loss, Disease Transmission, and Natural Disaster Risks**

The IPCC asserts: “Africa is one of the most vulnerable continents to climate variability and change because of multiple stresses and low adaptive capacity.”69 The global poor residing in Africa and South Asia are particularly vulnerable primarily because they are already such climate sensitive populations and because climate change affects their geographical regions so disruptively that their exposure risk also increases. The regional and continental climates of Africa and South Asia are already experiencing observed ecological changes resulting from climate change. The scientific community expects these changes to continue apace, dramatically in many cases, relative to every

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degree of planetary warming under various, well-accepted climate scenarios. Drought and desertification are expected to become increasingly more common and more severe across much of Africa due to rising temperatures and depleted water sources. Flooding and waterborne disease organisms are expected to increase across much of South Asia due to melting snow and ice in the Himalayas. Loss of consistent glacial ice cover due to melting will eventually mean lower river levels late in the dry season when water is needed most.

Rising temperatures, causing drought in some places of the world and flooding in other places, will continue to occur globally as a result of climate change regardless of specific mitigation efforts undertaken in the places most likely to experience shifting weather patterns and ecological change. Unlike point-source pollution, where degradation tends to occur at the immediate point of discharge or at least remain mostly limited to a relatively close proximity to the point of discharge and the downstream/downwind area, climate-causing emissions discharged at current levels have a truly global effect. Climate change emissions have a fundamentally planetary effect


71 "Point-source pollution" is an industry- and government-defined term used to describe pollution discharged from a single, identifiable point. While many climate-causing emissions (such as carbon dioxide) originate as point-source pollutants and tend to accompany other pollutants (such as ash and soot) with immediate effects on the local environment and its inhabitants, carbon dioxide has a particularly global and far-flung impact when emitted in the quantities observed since the Industrial Revolution began. For several example definitions, see U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Glossary--Total Maximum Daily Loads," U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, http://water.epa.gov/lawsregs/lawsguidance/cwa/tmdl/glossary.cfm (accessed December 18, 2012); U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Waste and Cleanup Risk Assessment
on communities around the globe, making it a wholly new kind of pollution as far as the scope of its disruption to all planetary life systems is concerned. The changing geographical, climatological, and ecological landscape, in turn, creates a whole new host of social, economic, and political challenges that human communities have yet to confront as they work to sustain themselves in light of such global changes.

The level of cooperation and collaboration required by a diversity of societies operating from distinct social, historical, and cultural perspectives is almost unfathomable. Add to the mix the reality that much of the world’s resources are disproportionately shared among such a great diversity of societies, some with ample ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change and others with vastly more limited access to resources, and it becomes nearly impossible to imagine how such a diverse collection of societies will ever muster the ambition to act as one human community facing a shared threat (albeit a threat not borne equally by all). Communities currently living in extreme poverty will have the least resources available to mitigate and adapt to anticipated challenges. The cartograms shared earlier illustrate the severe poverty already existing on the African continent and in South Asia, and they show that these communities lack access to the resources that allow collective human flourishing for many of their people today, much less the resources to adapt to impending ecological disasters accompanying climate change.

One example of the profound effect of expected climatological and ecological

changes on social and economic systems across the African continent is related to food production. The IPCC’s report on Pan-African agriculture grimly predicts:

Agricultural production, including access to food, in many African countries and regions is projected to be severely compromised by climate variability and change. The area suitable for agriculture, the length of growing seasons and yield potential, particularly along the margins of semi-arid and arid areas, are expected to decrease. This would further adversely affect food security and exacerbate malnutrition across the continent, making a bad situation even worse. In some countries, yields from rain-fed agriculture could be reduced by up to 50% by 2020.72

Now look again at the cartogram showing undernourishment on a global scale. Notice, again, how bloated the African continent is and how great the disparity in world hunger is in this part of the world. A reduction in several of these African nations’ ability to grow food, by up to 50% by 2020, is a serious, persisting social–structural problem rooted in a newly emerging global–ecological problem. The social injustice of hunger and undernourishment will become even more difficult to confront when it becomes that much more difficult for people to feed themselves because of climate change.73

The impending economic disaster projects a grim outlook for whole communities that depend on agricultural investment as the base of their social stability. It is hard enough when the vegetable crop in the family garden fails, leaving a family malnourished or unable to eat enough to sustain their health and their children’s proper development. It is a larger social problem when the local grain farmer’s crop begins to fail year after year, leaving his or her family with no income, no livelihood, and no future. The missing


73 See Brown, Plan B 4.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization, 9-13.
money that those farmers would have otherwise used from the profits on their crops to purchase goods in the community will not be available to support and nourish local economies.

This ecological impact of drought on agriculture is and will continue to be dramatic. It is dramatic not just for farmers and their families but also for the extended communities and the economies in which the farming household’s money plays a role. The effect cannot help but ripple through the local economies that these farmers support, snowballing out of control and devastating entire communities and even entire nations in its path, adding to the problems of “failing states.”\(^\text{74}\) Failing agricultural systems in areas wholly dependent upon ecosystem-based livelihoods is a climate effect with the potential to grow into a larger problem that quickly ripples through other facets of a community. Once agriculture fails, it sets into motion a cascade of failures in an accompanying array of sectors and creates additional social problems that eventually devastate a community’s entire potential to survive and thrive.\(^\text{75}\) Schools, hospitals, clinics, and family businesses all depend on the success or failure of agriculture in ecosystem-based livelihood communities.

Water shortages are another concern, and estimates on that front predict that between 75 million and 250 million people living on the African continent will be

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 18-22.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 4-9.
“exposed to increased water stress due to climate change” by 2020.\textsuperscript{76} When water is already a precious commodity for many communities across the continent, what will this mean for a family whose mother has to spend two or more hours of her day walking to the nearest water source? What will she do when that water source dries up and the next nearest source is a four-hour walk away? Will she be forced to keep one of her daughters at home from school to help carry water? Will she have access to enough water for washing and cooking and drinking for her family? How will she be forced to choose what precious little water will be used where and when and what daily household tasks will and will not get done because she has to spend that much more of her day walking to the nearest water source? One problem begets another, and their solutions are less easily attainable in resource-strapped communities.

Disease transmission is another challenge. The IPCC predicts shifts in the “range and transmission potential of malaria” across the African continent.\textsuperscript{77} Malaria is a disease familiar to too many people living in Africa. An increase in diseases and disease vectors will significantly disrupt the family life and already fragile local economies as it ripples through the local political and social systems of many African nations in much the same way as food and water shortages contribute to livelihood loss. As the climate changes and the transmission potential of malaria shifts around the continent, moving in and out of communities across the African continent, its devastation is expected to

\textsuperscript{76} Parry et al., \textit{Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change}, 2007, 13; See also Brown, \textit{Plan B 4.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization}, 38-48.

\textsuperscript{77} Parry et al., \textit{Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change}, 2007, 12.
intensify in both severity and scope.\textsuperscript{78}

Many of the effects of such changes in disease transmission are not yet even predictable. Which diseases will emerge, and which might subside? How disastrous might the disease become for a community when it begins afflicting populations not currently prepared to prevent the disease—those not accustomed to sleeping under mosquito nets, not able to purchase those nets, and not equipped with hospitals and medical professionals to treat the disease? These are questions with unknown answers at present. What is known is that, regardless of the degree of change, the prospects of survival among the least advantaged and most climate-sensitive populations will likely be reduced with increasing exposure risks on the horizon.

Another region confronting changes in disease transmission is South Asia. Remember that many living in extreme poverty live in South Asia and that the effects of climate change will play a significant role in the ecosystems and climatology of that region of the world as well. The IPCC expects that “endemic morbidity and mortality due to diarrheal disease primarily associated with floods and droughts are expected to rise in East, South and South-East Asia due to projected changes in the hydrological cycle.”\textsuperscript{79} Cholera is a diarrheal disease that causes great physical suffering for its victims. Many communities in South Asia are too familiar with the disease, as outbreaks are already

\textsuperscript{78} For analysis on the changes in disease transmission of Malaria, see John Luke Gallup and Jeffrey D. Sachs, \textit{The Economic Burden of Malaria} (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Development at Harvard University, 2000), 1-22. See also Piya Abeygunawardena et al., \textit{Poverty and Climate Change: Reducing the Vulnerability of the Poor through Adaptation} (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2009), 1-56.

\textsuperscript{79} Parry et al., \textit{Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change}, 2007, 11.
beginning to both increase and intensify, as anticipated by prevailing climate change models. An outbreak in the eastern Indian state of Orissa in 2007 killed at least 115 people and hospitalized more than 2,000.\textsuperscript{80} The causes of an outbreak of cholera are complex and usually related primarily to a lack of adequate infrastructure for both transporting and protecting potable water from sewage. However, flooding is also a major cause of cholera outbreaks because it disrupts whatever infrastructure may be in place for the separation of potable water from sewage water.

Flooding not only compounds the cholera problem but also drastically affects agricultural production and the availability of potable fresh water sources, especially when seawater is the source of floodwater contamination. According to one scenario presented by the World Bank, flooding from sea-level rise could inundate half the rice-growing land in Bangladesh—home to 160 million people.\textsuperscript{81} Delta regions are often home to large population centers, as with Bangladesh, and those regions are incredibly vulnerable. They are vulnerable mostly “due to large populations [with] high exposure [risks] to sea level rise, storm surges and river flooding,” which result in seawater contamination of critical fresh water sources used for drinking and food production.\textsuperscript{82} Salt-water contamination forces some to turn away from sources of water traditionally

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{80} Orissa Bhubaneswar and Jana Sanjaya, "Cholera Death Toll in India Rises," \textit{BBC News}, August 29, 2007.
\item\textsuperscript{82} Parry et al., \textit{Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change}, 2007, 9.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
considered safe because they are newly contaminated by salt. This necessitates a turn toward alternative water sources that may not be salty but are possibly contaminated by dangerous organisms and diseases, such as cholera. An individual without any access to water purification or testing technology can determine quickly and easily when water is salty. The presence of other dangerous contaminants is much more difficult to discern in many contexts without appropriate technology.

An increase in the intensity and scope of flooding in large populations centers is directly correlated with human-induced climate change. Cholera, meanwhile, is often considered merely a development problem, and critics sometimes argue that proper infrastructure and sanitation is all that is necessary to keep cholera at bay. While this may be mostly true, it is an oversimplification. Intense climate-induced flooding quickly overwhelms what even the most prepared communities may have developed under more stable conditions. Climate-induced natural disasters act as curve balls to development, exacerbating poverty.\textsuperscript{83} Whenever safeguards are put into place that make it appear as though progress has been attained, unanticipated disasters come through at such a frequency and intensity that progress becomes short-lived if it comes at all. The trend toward development is quickly impeded by too many fits and starts.

For example, one study on cholera and climate change in Bangladesh’s megacity capital of Dhaka reports that

\[ \text{there is a climate-sensitive urban core that acts to propagate risk to the rest of the city. The modeling framework presented here should be applicable to cholera in other cities, as well as to other infectious diseases in urban settings and other} \]

\textsuperscript{83} See Andrew Shepherd et al., \textit{The Geography of Poverty, Disasters and Climate Extremes in 2030} (London, UK: Overseas Development Institute, 2013).
biological systems with spatiotemporal interactions.84

The study does not purport to argue that climate change causes cholera outbreaks. Instead, it demonstrates how very localized areas of climate-sensitive populations can act as incubators or as starting points for a disease to later spread and grow into an outbreak when natural disasters hit or other climate-based exposure risks intensify. Even when neighboring communities have managed to attain certain safeguards, natural disasters act as such significant “game-changers” that even relatively “protected” communities can quickly find that they are just as vulnerable as those neighboring communities they are believed to have surpassed on the path toward development.

As the data continue to demonstrate, areas of present social and economic vulnerability have a tremendous impact on a population’s present and future climate vulnerability. The social justice significance of this fact cannot and should not be ignored by people of good will seeking to make the world a better place for the most vulnerable, the poorest, and the least considered among us. Mitigating our collective contributions to climate change, equipping the world’s most vulnerable populations with the tools necessary to adapt to those changes already beginning to occur, and creating the social structures and national, international, and supranational mechanisms for future

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adaption are both a moral imperative and a matter of prudence for the common good.\(^{85}\)

The most important and pressing dilemma in the public square ought to be the question of how we mitigate and adapt to the most devastating aspects of climate change and the ecological crisis as an increasingly connected and globalized civilization dependent upon Earth’s continued viability. The threat to the survival and flourishing of both humanity and all life on Earth is at stake, mostly because we are so poorly united in the effort and so poorly prepared to confront the challenge head-on. Since climate sensitivity and exposure to the most severe and immediate risks of climate change are not borne equally among all populations, this is also an issue of basic fairness and social equity. Some are more vulnerable than others because they are disproportionately climate-sensitive and disproportionately exposed to the risks of climate change. The injustice emerging from the intersection of structural poverty, gender disparity, ecological degradation, and climate-induced displacement has become a sign of our time, which requires nothing less than the full attention and compassionate response of all people of good will.

During a press conference at the (now infamous) 2009 UNFCCC COP15 in Copenhagen, when much of the world expected a binding international agreement on climate change, then UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, warned that climate change would become the biggest driver of population displacements, both

inside and across national borders. No agreement was reached at COP15 in 2009, nor was one reached at the succeeding UNFCCC COPs 16, 17, and 18—each of which I attended as an official UN Observer Delegate with the Sierra Club International Team. While hope prevails that a new international agreement can be reached by 2015 and expanded by 2020, partly by way of U.S. presidential leadership, the prospects are nonetheless dim that those agreements will happen quickly and adequately enough to prepare properly for climate change and population displacements. Population displacement as a direct result of climate vulnerability is a threat that grows more serious every year that the international community fails to adopt a responsible plan for it.

This chapter has described how poverty and climate vulnerability contribute to population displacement by analyzing its component parts: climate sensitivity among three populations of special concern and exposure risks likely to be exacerbated for those populations. It offers a description for poverty and shows how it is measured and where it persists most acutely. It shows how structural poverty and gender disparity are connected drivers of climate sensitivity and how ecological degradation and climate change create exposure risks that exacerbate the overarching vulnerability of climate-sensitive populations. It argues that, since those most vulnerable to climate change are the least culpable, the whole problem of climate vulnerability and climate-induced displacement is systematically unfair and unjust.


This chapter directly engages the technical aspects of climate change vulnerability. Its purpose is to act as bedrock for the kind of responsible ethical reflection of the next two chapters, which will in turn inspire a vision of social justice and a call to collaborative, international action on the part of climate-displaced populations in the concluding chapter. The next chapter will explore the underlying predominant perspectives and worldviews—intermeshed with the emergence of economic institutions and corporate enterprise in the West—that are used to justify and encourage the unsustainable practices undergirding the social, ecological, and climate crisis described in this chapter. Chapter four will then turn to the Christian traditions in particular to uncover what perils and promises they may hold for an ethic of responsibility more appropriate to the immense moral challenges at hand.
CHAPTER THREE
MODERN CHRISTIANITY’S ANTHROPOCENTRIC BIAS AND
HISTORICAL SOURCES FOR CREATION-CENTERED THEOLOGY

On the most basic level, climate change is a technical problem arising from unprecedented levels of global deforestation and the production and consumption of energy from fossil fuels—the consumption of which powers and sustains most of the world’s economies. When fossil fuels are consumed in such large quantities as they have been over the last century, they release enough carbon dioxide (CO2) and other climate-polluting gases into the atmosphere that disruptions to relatively stable ecological systems, climate patterns, and sea levels occur.¹ In addition to increased emissions of CO2 and climate-polluting gases into the atmosphere through fossil fuel consumption, widespread deforestation has severely constrained Earth’s natural ability to absorb these carbon emissions through biological sequestration into plant material. The larger problem of climate change is compounded by the twin problems of excessive fossil fuel

consumption on the one hand and pervasive annihilation of ecosystems, especially through deforestation, on the other.

Curtailing the production and consumption of fossil fuels while also conserving and preserving the world’s temperate and tropical forests may sound like relatively simple solutions to an otherwise overtly technical problem, though they are not. If they were simple, the world’s peoples surely would have addressed the problem of climate change by now. They have not done so, however, and do not really appear to be making any significant headway in the collective effort to reduce total planetary emissions of climate pollution in any way that might meaningfully impact its whole-scale mitigation.\(^2\)

We have already failed at the task of complete mitigation since some impacts of climate change have already begun impacting ecological and human communities around the globe.\(^3\) What may yet be possible is a partial mitigation of the worst effects of anticipated climate change under business-as-usual scenarios, along with adaptation strategies for those changes already set in motion. Moreover, while the practical (or

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\(^3\) Despite the important commitments made by President Barack Obama during his administration's second term, and despite the significant commitments of Chinese and U.S. collaborative action on the part of reducing climate emissions, the overall climate outlook remains grim. These are certainly positive steps in a hopeful direction, but much more needs to be done and should have been done sooner. See, The White House, *The President's Climate Action Plan* (Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, June 2013); and The White House, *U.S.-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change* (Washington, DC: The Executive Office of the President, November 2014).
policy) solutions to climate change are not as simple as they might otherwise appear, other aspects are even more complex and require due attention as well. 

The moral and social justice aspects of this issue, of humanity’s collective failure to act and of the need for future action, require all due attention as has been noted in previous chapters. A core problem, I think, lies in the general inadequacy of prominent streams of twentieth century theological anthropology, which so tightly fixate attention and concern to the God-human relationship that God’s and humanity’s relationships to the rest of the nonhuman natural world are ignored. Christianity once had a vibrant role for the doctrine of creation to provide a frame of understanding about human life, our nature and our relationship to the rest of the natural order. Put differently, Christian theology once was enriched and broadened by a functional worldview or cosmology. In this dissertation I join others like Thomas Berry who argue that today ecology needs to be our new cosmology. 

In the first section of this chapter, I lay out this argument within its larger context. In the second section I engage Lynn White’s critique that Christian tradition has been consistently anthropocentric from its earliest beginnings down to our present day. I examine also the view of Elizabeth Johnson and others that in fact for three quarters of its history, the Christian heritage has been relatively creation-centered in its thinking.4 In the third section, I trace examples of creation-centered perspectives prevailing in streams

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of pre-modern Christian accounts of theological anthropology and cosmology. In the fourth section, I juxtapose the rise of modern theology alongside the rise of modern science, the Industrial Revolution, prominent streams of Protestant thought emergent alongside the rise of capitalism, and what I think consequently came to dominate streams of thought in the Christian traditions—an overly pervasive and persistent stream of anthropocentric ethics and anthropomorphized theology. I conclude by calling for a shift in the trajectory of Christian theological ethics that critically recovers aspects of its pre-modern heritage, but in a way that roots it robustly in the life of living faith traditions and in dialogue with the contemporary ecological and evolutionary sciences.

**Uncovering Core Aspects of the Problem**

The purpose of this chapter is to attend to the problem of a flawed account of theological anthropology and the loss of creation as a prominent theme in streams of modern Christian theological ethics. In other words, I argue that a larger problem revealed by the ecological and climate crisis is not so much a matter of figuring out novel scientific and technical solutions to concrete problems, though that would certainly go a long way in alleviating much great suffering and poverty. It is not even so much a matter of mobilizing popular will and political ambition in the search for, and application of, more sustainable practices as important as that very well may be also. Rather, the larger problem confronting the human species at this particular moment in the larger sweep of our evolutionary and cultural developments has to do with the worldviews we rely on to shape and filter perceptions regarding the fundamental way individuals and communities imagine themselves in relation to others and the world around them.
Put simply, the ecological crisis and the climate challenge at hand have proven so formidable because they are not merely problems that scientific and technical approaches alone can solve. One coordinating lead author for the 2007 IPCC Fourth Assessment Report acknowledges forthrightly that, while “[s]cience may be able to inform policy by forecasting how severe climate change will be, given different greenhouse gas levels...experience teaches that science alone is never enough” and “will never be sufficient to tell humanity what to do.”5 I have already argued in chapter one that this is partly because human beings are, as Max Oelschlaeger puts it, “storytelling culture-dwellers,” who are more effectively motivated by powerfully moving stories and deeply ingrained cultural narratives than by the data in graphs and pie charts.6 Meaningful stories and cultural narratives, including those that are religious in tenor, I think, are incredibly powerful forces that can potentially shape the worldviews and perspectives that inspire and direct both individual action and collective decision-making on broad social issues, such as climate change.7 The ecological crisis generally, and climate change concerns in particular, emerge out of a kind of collective decision-making rooted in perspectives that usually go unnamed in general society even though they wield


significant influence operating in the background or collective consciousness of civil societies.\(^8\)

The ecological and social aspects of the contemporary context require a reconsideration of the kinds of “theological anthropology,” or those accounts of characteristics regarding what it means to be human in relation to God and the world around us, which undergird prominent streams of thought that are broadly operative in societies.\(^9\) There is a legacy, pertaining to certain accounts of theological anthropology and cosmology emergent from and shaped for another time and social context, that I argue permeates the actions and collective decision-making processes that can either help to inform and inspire people and their communities to take action on the part of the planet or to work against ecological responsibility. A new context requires a critically reclaimed, ecologically informed, and socially responsible account of theological anthropology and cosmology that is more sensitive to both the needs of the global poorest and the challenges facing the Earth’s ecosystems.\(^10\) Before I point in the next chapter to

\(^8\) By "civil society" I do not mean voluntary organizations as the term is generally construed in the U.S. but rather, as Peter Berger defines the term, I refer to the decisions made in, by, and for the "ensemble of institutions that stand in between the private sphere…and the macro-institutions of the state and the economy" aiming to "mitigate conflict and foster social peace." See Peter Berger, "Religion and Global Civil Society," in Religion in Global Civil Society, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 12-13.


\(^10\) For an example of an ecologically informed theological anthropology, see Sallie McFague, The Body of God: An Ecological Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press,
some specific ways for Christian faith communities to symbolically realize such accounts
of theological anthropology and cosmology in the life of their contemporary faith
communities—those accounts that are more sensitive to the needs of the poor and the
Earth—I offer an account in this chapter of that legacy which has helped shape major
streams of Roman Catholic and Protestant theological ethics over the ages.

Some argue rightly that two significant developments have arisen since the
Industrial Revolution and during the modern era that stand to challenge the
appropriateness of the overly anthropocentric and overly transcendent accounts of
theological anthropology and cosmology that came to dominate major streams of popular
thought in much of the West during the Twentieth and early decades of the Twenty-First
centuries especially. As William French puts it:

Surely humanity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has entered into a
fundamentally new condition: our increased numbers and immensely expanded
powers are enabling us to reshape the planet—its ecosystems and climate patterns,
even ourselves as a species. The scale and tempo of planetwide ecological
transformation and disruption are as remarkable as the burgeoning bioengineering
capabilities that now allow the blending of genetic materials across species lines.
Both developments appear to undermine the traditional understanding of nature’s
stability and permanence, a vast given order standing firm against the vicissitudes,
fragility, and brevity of individual human lives.\(^{11}\)

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1993), 99-129. For a defense of Christianity's inherent potential and authentic capacity to
inspire such ecological models, see Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of
Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and
Jürgen Moltmann* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995). For helpful summaries on a
diversity of ecologically responsive anthropologies and cosmologies, see also Stephen B.
Scharper, *Redeeming the Time: A Political Theology of the Environment* (New York:

\(^{11}\) William C. French, "With Radical Amazement: Ecology and the Recovery of
Creation," in *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology*, ed. David Albertson and
Cabell King (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 54.
This presents a new context for our species and is of such significance that it carries both cultural and planetary implications. The sizable and greatly increased human population, combined with the kind of unprecedented technological ability and collective production and consumptive power that have marked an era so powerfully shaped by the Industrial Revolution and the spread of the global economy, have arguably made our species the single-most transformative force on the planet since algae evolved and altered Earth’s atmosphere to make it hospitable for the kind of mammalian life now so widespread across the planet.

Humanity’s sizable population and newfound sense of a collective kind of planet-transforming power, demand that we reflect on fundamental questions regarding what it means to be human and in relation to other life forms in the world. For the vast expanse of human and planetary history, human population has been relatively small and human life has been vulnerable before a seemingly vast, resilient and sometimes threatening natural world. As French describes:

Five hundred years ago human numbers were small, our technological, industrial, and agricultural powers relatively weak, and the natural order of the planet seemed vast and relatively stable compared to the vulnerability and brief life span of individual humans. Down through the millennium, the natural order seemed solid and incapable of being fundamentally altered or damaged. The order of nature seemed to be a given, something whose existence and ongoing presence could be comfortably assumed, a solid stage upon which human lives danced in our brief course. It is understandable, given this view of the apparent sturdiness of nature, how in Western Europe and elsewhere, religious and ethical views came to concentrate attention on human life, human value, and human vulnerability.¹²

¹² Ibid., 55.
This pre-modern context, while different from the contemporary context in the sense that non-human “nature” was legitimately conceived of as “vast and relatively stable” or resilient in the face of human presence, nonetheless saw prominent accounts of the human person as framed within a broader order of God’s good creation, at least within prominent streams of thought in the prevailing Christian traditions of the time.

There is a rich Western Christian theological heritage that offers powerful resources for orienting our sense of the human person as existing within the larger framework of God’s good creation, as I will show in future sections of this chapter. Those traditions of creation-centered thinking in the Christian heritage can contribute to helpful frames of understanding for today’s Christian communities now confronted with emerging ecological and climate change threats. Thus a critical integration between some of the pre-modern Christian creation emphases with insights from the contemporary ecological and evolutionary sciences may prove helpful in charting a path toward more equitable human–human relations and more responsible human–Earth relations. The contemporary context is one in which the human species in general is experiencing a surge of collective agency, even as many groups remain marginalized. It is also one in which streams of overly anthropocentric theologies and ethics persist despite the need for a greater concern for the Earth amidst declining ecological and planetary resiliency.

Together these combined concerns present a new challenge to the Christian traditions

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13 I am sensitive to Santmire's warning for theologians to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of more than "two millennia of theological reflection about nature" and his call to both "critical appropriation" and "constructive exploration" concerning new ways to consider "nature" in theology. See Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*, 7-8.
that, when placed in dialogue with ecological and evolutionary sciences, should be able to grapple with and help inspire Christian faith communities to work toward meaningful change both in their own communities and beyond them, too.

The Earth and its significance within a matrix of God–human–Earth relations once factored as a most prominent theme in major streams of pre-modern Christian theology and ethics. Pushed out of that pre-modern frame by the rise of modern science in Western Europe and the subsequent philosophical and theological turn to the subject, the doctrine of Creation came to play a greatly lessened role in modern Protestant and Catholic theological and ethical reflection in the late 19th and 20th Centuries.14 Some pre-modern accounts of Christian theologies may have understandably revolved around a narrowed concern for the human condition, but that condition could be regarded as having been inherently a humbler, more communitarian and sacramental condition than exists for many (though certainly not all) in the modern era. Some of the more prominent accounts of modern theological anthropologies frame the human person primarily within the dynamism of history and in relation to God but set apart as distinct and separate from the rest of the world.15 Some modern accounts of theological anthropology expose a departure from those pre-modern depictions of the human person that more prominently framed the person within the broader order of God’s good creation.


Where Lynn White holds that Christianity from its early centuries was distinctively human-centered, I agree with Elizabeth Johnson and others that the Christian traditions have been subject to, and unduly influenced by, a relatively recent “turn” that has taken place over the course of modern history. It included a shift in accounts of Christian theological anthropologies and cosmologies away from some of those pre-modern accounts that more prominently framed the human person within the larger order of creation. It reflects the way modern accounts moved toward a more dualistic metaphysical worldview in which theological focus came to rest almost exclusively on concern for the God–human relationship, human concerns, and value before God while nearly all matters pertaining to the Earth were ceded to the sciences (see figure 12). It is possible such a turn would not have been so important to matters of planetary wellbeing if it were not for humanity’s increased numbers and subsequent surge in technological, production, and consumption capacities, but that has become the case.
Figure 12. The Modern Turn and a Dualistic Metaphysics
The peril and promise associated with the Christian traditions and their appropriateness within this new context remains contested. It is sometimes argued that the Christian traditions are inherently dualistic and anthropocentric and thus innately ecologically exploitive.\textsuperscript{16} Efforts to make them less so are sometimes considered a radical departure from tradition, if it is even possible at all as some argue.\textsuperscript{17} Lynn White’s thesis, excellently summarized by Roger Gottlieb, argues that there was a “Jewish and Christian ‘desacralization’ of the Earth [that] paved the way for the modern domination of nature.”\textsuperscript{18} While White’s critique overreaches and oversimplifies, it nonetheless expresses key insights about how Christian traditions are at least partly complicit in the problem today.

In what follows I engage what is generally regarded as one of the most noteworthy and enduring critiques against the Christian traditions and place it within the

\textsuperscript{16} This argument is not without at least some empirical evidence. For example, one study shows that in the U.S., "religiosity relates positively to pro-environmental behaviors but not to pro-environmental attitudes or beliefs." See John M. Clements, Aaron M. McCright, and Chenyang Xiao, "Green Christians? an Empirical Examination of Environmental Concern within the U.S. General Public," \textit{Organization & Environment} 27, no. 1 (2014), 85-102.

\textsuperscript{17} In terms of competing worldviews, in which biblical accounts of the human in relation to Earth are often discussed in contrast to evolutionary-ecological worldviews, see for example, J. Baird Callicott, "The Worldview Concept and Aldo Leopold's Project of 'World View' Remediation," \textit{Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture} 5, no. 4 (2011), 510-528. For an argument from a political-evangelical Christian perspective regarding environmentalism in the U.S., see for example, James Wanliss, \textit{Resisting the Green Dragon: Dominion, Not Death} (Burke, VA: Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, 2010).

broader intellectual context of Christian theological scholarship that has originated partly in response to that critique.\(^{19}\)

**Is Christianity the Most Dualistic and Anthropocentric Religion in the World?**

Lynn White, a medieval historian with a PhD from Harvard University who taught at Princeton and Stanford universities during his career, provoked robust dialogue among those working at the nexus of ecology and religion when he made the following claim published in the journal *Science* in 1967:

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the 2\(^{nd}\) century both Tertullian and St. Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendance of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.\(^{20}\)

To be fair, White’s thesis gets a few things quite right even if the sweeping nature of his claims against “Christianity” are problematic.

James Nash, for example, while holding that White’s thesis “pathetically” oversimplifies the emergence of the contemporary ecological crisis, cannot help but acknowledge that “much of the complaint [against Christianity] is essentially true.”\(^{21}\)

Nash concedes that:

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\(^{20}\) White Jr., *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*, 1205.

Ecological concerns have rarely been a prominent, let alone a dominant, feature in Christian theory and practice. That is true in both the so-called Eastern and Western churches, though less so in the former. In the mainstream traditions in the West, Protestant and Catholic, the ecosphere has generally been perceived as theologically and ethically trivial, if even relevant. The biophysical world has been treated either as the scenery or stage for the divine-human drama, which usually alone has redemptive significance, or as a composite of “things,” which have no significant meaning or value beyond their utility for human interests—esthetic, scientific, recreational, but mostly economic interests, particularly human production and consumption. [...] For most theologians—Augustine to Luther, Aquinas to Barth, and the bulk of others in between and before and after—the theological focus has been on sin and salvation, the fall and redemption, the divine-human relationship over against the biophysical world as a whole. The focus has been overwhelmingly on human history to the neglect of natural history, even to the point of forgetting the profound influences that natural history exercises on human history. This focus has often been associated with significant dichotomies in Christian attitudes toward the “world”: body and soul, material and spiritual, nature and supernature, nature and humanity, secular and sacred, creation and redemption, even female and male—the latter usually being the superior, and the interdependencies poorly understood.  

For Nash, this account adds up to a kind of “confession of sin” for which many Christian faith communities are rightly held accountable, and this confession serves as an acknowledgement of that part of White’s argument which is, at least generally speaking, correct. Christian churches have both contributed to, and have been overly slow to respond to, the problems of the ecological and climate crisis because they have for too long been rooted in a reading and interpretation of their scriptures and traditions that overly focus on those streams of thought prioritizing human value and concerns.

White’s thesis overreaches, however, in the sense that he presumes an anthropocentric and dualistic focus has always been a dominant or primary, even exclusive, framework through which the Christian traditions and their intellectual
heritage have positioned the human person in terms of the world (even if he does point to
the ecological promise associated with Saint Francis of Assisi as an exception to the
larger frame he describes). The diversity of Christian accounts of theological
anthropology and cosmology are significantly more varied than Lynn White’s thesis
acknowledges, and so Nash appropriately concludes that White’s thesis is overly
simplistic and somewhat reductionist. Still, as Nash also points out and as I have noted,
there is a complicit culpability in the way the Christian traditions have been relied upon
to construct a modern worldview that has been detrimental to the contemporary state of
affairs regarding human–Earth relations.

That culpability can be found within the predominating stories, narratives, and
prominent streams of thought undergirding contemporary U.S. society developed during
a very particular time in the development of religious consciousnesses in the West, and
those stories undergird both parts of the “double problem” before us: the degradation of
the planet and our collective inability to both recognize the seriousness of the threat at
hand and to motivate ourselves to do something about it. As French describes it, the

23 White Jr., The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis, 1206-1207.

24 It can be argued that the rise and development of capitalist enterprise and economic
systems in the U.S. have had an unduly influential role in the development of prominent
streams of Christian thought in the West, and vice versa. See, for example, Kathryn
Tanner, "Is Capitalism a Belief System?" Anglican Theological Review 92, no. 4 (2010),
617-635; J. Barkley Rosser, "Belief: Its Role in Economic Thought and Action,"
American Journal of Economics and Sociology 52, no. 3 (1993), 355-358; William E.
Connolly, Capitalism and Christianity, American Style (Durham, NC: Duke University
Press, 2008). For a clarification and modification of Connolly's original positions, see
William E. Connolly, "Capitalism, Christianity, America: Rethinking the Issues,"
Political Theology 12, no. 2 (April, 2011), 226-236.
second part of this double problem, and the inability of society to fully recognize the seriousness of climate change in particular, emerges primarily because society lacks a robust story, or an ecologically informed theological anthropology and worldview or cosmology, that is more adequately “fitting” for the contemporary ecological context.25

A new story ought to include, and be responsive to, the particular needs of the global poor who are residing primarily in South Asia and on the African continent are experiencing dramatic environmental changes with corresponding economic challenges and consequences. An increase in the frequency and intensity of droughts on farming communities tends toward increasing hunger risk and poverty. An increase in the frequency and intensity of flooding along rivers and encroachment of seawater along deltas tend toward increased risks of waterborne diseases and contamination of freshwater sources. The global poor suffer disproportionately from such ecological disruptions while economic development is simultaneously stymied and the risks of climate-induced displacement climb.

Still, all people regardless of socio-economic status share this one planet as members of one species operating within an increasingly connected, globalized society even if we do not all share in the goods of society equally.26 As the world grows

25 French references Aristotle's argument that in ethics it is necessary to attend to "ultimate particulars" that are "fitting" to a given context. See William C. French, "On Knowing Oneself in an Age of Ecological Concern," in Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives, ed. Jame Schaefer (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2011), 162, 165. See also Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), 157, 160.

26 Here I refer to globalization in the broadest sense, but with regard to economic globalization specifically, I refer to the kind of "increasing assimilation of economies
progressively “hot, flat, and crowded,” climate change becomes a challenge increasingly necessitating the attention and response of the international community’s economic, social, and religious institutions.\(^{27}\) The problem is one that threatens the survival and potential flourishing of current and future generations of our species, and it requires a response that is as grand in scope and scale as the problem itself. This is why, at a deeper level, the scope and scale of the problem and our collective inability to adequately address it, requires attention to, and a re-evaluation of, those underlying worldviews and perspectives that accompany us to this problem and leave us ill-prepared to solve it.

The double problem of the ecological and climate crisis that French describes is a double problem in another sense as well. It is the problem of two disciplines that are often held far apart even though they share a common problem. Leonard Boff says it well:

Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common: they stem from two wounds that are bleeding. The first, the wound of poverty and wretchedness, tears the social fabric of millions and millions of poor people the world over. The second, systematic aggression against the earth, destroys the equilibrium of the planet, threatened…by a type of development undertaken by contemporary societies, now spread throughout the world…. It is time to try and bring the two disciplines together.\(^{28}\)

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If society at large is to recognize the seriousness of the global problem before us, and realistically endeavor to heal these two wounds, then it is necessary to revisit the adequacy of contemporary, dominating stories and to do so in a way that is more comprehensive and integrative than reductionist. Those stories can be reworked, in part by critically reclaiming aspects of pre-modern streams of cosmocentric thought and Earth-based frames of thinking, and by informing those pre-modern streams of thought with new knowledge gleaned from the contemporary evolutionary, ecological, and social sciences. This, I think, may be one of the more helpful ways for the Christian traditions to offer a new narrative that might in turn help individuals and their communities to find a viable way to see themselves in ways that empower them to work together toward responsible action on the part of both the Earth and of the world’s poorest and most marginalized people.

That includes an evaluation of such fundamental assumptions about what it means to be human in light of humanity’s newfound collective power. It also includes an evaluation of assumptions about what morally appropriate and responsible use of that power means in an increasingly globalized world where so many of the most disenfranchised among us are forced to confront the worst effects of the ecological and climate crisis.29 In other words, my goal is partly the identification and description of inherited worldviews acting as the foundation of a cultural legacy in need of some

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deconstruction before it can be replaced by, or evolved into, a more ecologically appropriate and socially responsible milieu.\textsuperscript{30} My goal is to point toward ways in which worldviews can be reimagined, at the very least, to disenfranchise far fewer people and act as a force for economic, ecological, and social empowerment of the world’s poorest and most marginalized communities.\textsuperscript{31} Ecologically appropriate God–human–Earth relations can act as bedrock for such worldviews.

Elizabeth Johnson’s insights offer an invaluable interpretive roadmap for reaching some of these goals. Regarding the contemporary ecological crisis and the Christian traditions, Johnson argues:

In [the] context of Earth’s distress and human awakening to our critical responsibility, it can prove instructive to trace how the theme of the natural world, called “creation” when it is viewed in relation to God, got lost in Christian reflection. It is with deliberation that I say “got lost,” because for the last five hundred years the religious value of the earth has not been a subject of theology, preaching, or religious education. Should today’s Christian scholars consult their own experiences, they will most likely remember that the natural world was largely ignored as a subject in their religious formation and education, whether catechetical or scholarly. This silence has been true, until very recently, of both Catholic and Protestant branches of Western Christianity. […] Looking back over


\textsuperscript{31} During a conference on “U.S. Energy and Climate Change: Science, Ethics, & Public Policies” at Loyola University Chicago from November 14-15, 2013 and in response to a question after his presentation, “The Role of Ethics for the Changes We Need,” Larry Rasmussen surmised that at root in climate denial might very well be a fear that a serious response to climate change requires so many changes to capitalism that the resistance to climate change is in fact a kind of preliminary resistance to those requisite changes required by capitalism for the climate problem to be addressed. While I cannot adequately address the issue at this juncture, I am compelled to at least acknowledge the important role economic disparity plays in the lives of many of the world’s people and note its close connection to issues of environmental sustainability.
the whole two thousand years of Christian tradition, however, leads to a surprise, namely, that such amnesia about the cosmic world has not always been the case. In fact, for three-quarters of this history, creation was actively present as an intrinsic part of theological reflection. This is not to say that thought about creation led our ancestors to a highly developed ecological consciousness such as is needed today. Present wonder and protest at wasting the world reflect a genuinely new moment in history; our scientific knowledge, technology, and means of imaging and communication are genuinely different. But such theology kept alive the sense that creation had a certain religious value and was deserving of a modicum of respect when subject to human action.\footnote{Johnson, \textit{Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition}, 4.}

At root, Johnson’s argument is a critique of Lynn White’s thesis that the Christian traditions have been monolithically and innately anthropocentric and dualistic since their beginning. She argues against White’s thesis by pushing forward her claim that for the first three-quarters of Christian history, various accounts of anthropology and cosmology tended to revolve around a different set of orientations than are prominent today. She points to streams of thought in the Jewish tradition and the Christian scriptures regarding the incarnation and Eucharist especially, as well as the contributions of theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, in order to highlight aspects of the Christian traditions that construct an “all-embracing view of the world.”\footnote{Ibid., 6.} Her argument holds that White’s thesis, while not wholly untrue in substance, actually reflects a relatively recent turn in prominent streams of thought regarding Christian accounts of theological anthropology and cosmology that only came to dominate the traditions during the last 500 years.

Carolyn Merchant provides a most helpful description of the way in which the general flow of ideas across cultures and over time, while hard to nail down...
comprehensively, can be relied upon generally to understand broad social and cultural transformations in the West and of the type described by Johnson. Regarding the role of worldviews as they pertain to the way various accounts of anthropology and cosmology both influence society and are influenced by society, Merchant notes that:

By examining the transition from the organism to the machine as the dominant metaphor binding together the cosmos, society, and the self into a single cultural reality—a world view—I place less emphasis on the development of the internal content of science than on the social and intellectual factors involved in the transformation. Of course, such external factors do not cause intellectuals to invent a science or a metaphysics for the conscious purpose of fitting a social context. Rather, an array of ideas exists, available to a given age; some of these for unarticulated or even unconscious reasons seem plausible to individuals or social groups; others do not. Some ideas spread; others temporarily die out. But the direction and cumulation of social changes begin to differentiate among the spectrum of possibilities so that some ideas assume a more central role in the array, while others move to the periphery. Out of this differential appeal of ideas that seem most plausible under particular social conditions, cultural transformations develop.\(^{34}\)

And specifically regarding the development of prominent streams of thought over the course of the last 500 years, Merchant argues that certain pre-modern streams of thought “may be worthy of transformation and reintegration into today’s and tomorrow’s society” when critically re-examined through the contemporary lens of ecology and the perspective of women.\(^ {35}\) While White’s thesis argues that the modern scientific revolution begun in Western Europe initially arose specifically because of the anthropocentrism and dualistic influence of Christian culture, Merchant’s work refutes that as an oversimplification in White’s thesis, and she does so by charting the broader


\(^ {35}\) Ibid., xxiii.
historical impact of factors like the rise of market systems and of the Scientific Revolution in Western Europe.\textsuperscript{36}

For example, in Merchant’s description of some of the market factors ushering in a shift from predominating organic conceptions of the cosmos between 1500 and 1700 toward a more mechanistic model, she argues that:

As trade quickened throughout western Europe, stimulated by the European discovery and exploitation of the Americas, production for subsistence began to be replaced by more specialized production for the market. The spreading use of money provided not only a uniform medium of exchange but also a reliable store of value, facilitating open-ended accumulation. Inflation generated by the growth of population and the flood of American gold accelerated the transition from traditional economic modes to rationally maximizing modes of economic organization. Many landlords whose land rents had been fixed at preinflationary rates were now faced with declining income and rising expenses. In addition, the growth of cities as centers of trade and handicraft production created a new class of bourgeois entrepreneurs who supplied ambitious monarchs with the funds and expertise to build strong national states, undercutting the power of the regionally based landowning nobility.\textsuperscript{37}

Additionally, Merchant identifies the influence of the Scientific Revolution and its philosophical underpinnings on the shift toward mechanistic frameworks as perhaps even more noteworthy.

She specifically points to the “machine” metaphor developed by early modern scientists like Bacon and Newton and philosophers like Descartes, who used it to frame

\textsuperscript{36} With reference to Merchant's argument, Jame Schaefer also correlates the emergence of such dualisms with the onset of modern science and notes that in Christian traditions, "reflection on the sacramental character of the physical world waned and the world was reduced to an object for human investigation and exploitation." See Jame Schaefer, \textit{Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic & Medieval Concepts} (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 86.

their approach to the natural world. Merchant explains how such metaphors offered a new understanding of order and power that was used as a foundational philosophical framework for approaching the world. She describes the metaphor’s influence when she says:

In the mechanical world, order was redefined [emphasis added] to mean the predictable behavior of each part within a rationally determined system of laws, while power derived from active and immediate intervention in a secularized world. Order and power together constituted control. Rational control over nature, society, and the self was achieved by redefining reality itself through the new machine metaphor.

This account and the account of market systems that Merchant offers, together paint a broad picture of some of the more significant social and cultural transformations that took place in the development of the West that complicate White’s otherwise overly simplistic account of Christianity’s historical role and influence. While Lynn White holds that the modern sciences arise as a counter to Christianity’s innately anthropocentric accounts of

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38 Larry Rasmussen also notes connections between Descartes's philosophy, the nature as machine metaphor, and the development of factors that facilitate the rise of modern market systems. See Larry L. Rasmussen, Earth Community Earth Ethics (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 119. For more on Descartes's enduring legacy on modern thought, see also Larry L. Rasmussen, Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 295-300.


40 The significance and validity of Merchant's argument as a complication to White's thesis is well described by James Nash, who references Merchant's argument and adds that "[t]he major factors in the emergence of antiecological attitudes and actions were not Christian axioms, but rather population pressures, the development of expansionistic capitalism in the forms of commercialism and industrialization (particularly shipbuilding, glassworks, iron and copper smelting), the triumph of Cartesian mechanism in the science...and the triumph of Francis Bacon's notions of dominion as mastery over nature." See Nash, Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility, 75.
theological anthropology, Carolyn Merchant argues that the rise of the modern sciences nurtures a fundamentally new and overly reductionist understanding of the natural world that cleaves the study of the physical world from theology and hands it to the emerging sciences.41 This, in turn, coincides with the rise of modern market systems and facilitates the exploitation of natural resources for profit. Modern theology, at least according to predominating streams of Catholic and Protestant thought, retreats to a focus on human value and the relationship between God and human persons.

Elizabeth Johnson, avoiding an analysis of the historical circumstances that gave rise to the modern sciences, instead simply acknowledges that the sciences did in fact rise. She pivots her argument around her analysis of the way major streams of thought in theological reflection reacted to the rise of the sciences with a major shift away from creation-framed worldviews toward those framed within the context of a Cartesian and Baconian model of the natural world. The consequences of that turn caused a revolution in prominent frames of understanding human life and the world around us. In the following section, I follow the threads of creation-centered perspectives prevailing in streams of pre-modern accounts of theological anthropology and cosmology that are found in the Hebrew Scriptures, wind their way into Augustine’s thought, and lead into the contributions of Thomas Aquinas. In broadly tracing these ideas from pre-Christian thought to Thomas Aquinas and beyond, I lay a foundation for how they may be

41 Roger Gottlieb shares Merchant's appraisal when he argues that the overly reductionist view of the natural world that developed as Merchant describes, "is an element of the environmental crisis itself." See Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and our Planet's Future* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72.
informed by contemporary ecological and evolutionary sciences, critically reclaimed and used to help Christian faith communities build more appropriate and responsible frames of understanding for a more equitable and ecologically responsible future.

**Creation-Centered Perspectives in Streams of Pre-Modern Christian Accounts of Theological Anthropology and Cosmology**

The primary thrust of Elizabeth Johnson’s argument as I have engaged it in this chapter is that there are major streams of thought across the Christian traditions that have predominately framed the human person within a world created and loved by God. If Johnson’s argument is correct, and I think it is, then the Christian traditions have within them rich and various accounts of theological anthropology and cosmology to which Christian faith communities can draw upon to authentically establish ecologically informed accounts of theological anthropology and worldviews in contrast to those overly anthropocentric and more dualistic themes named in the traditions by people like Lynn White. As James Nash points out and as I have acknowledged, the overly anthropocentric and dualistic themes identified by scholars like Lynn White do indeed exist as prominent themes within modern Christian theology and ethics.

I argue in this section, however, that there also exists a set of themes within the Christian traditions that frame the human person in a much more humble, communitarian, and solidly sacramental understanding of the human person and the world in relation to each other. Those themes are present in the traditions that reach back into pre-Christianity’s earlier Jewish roots. They can be found in the work of the most influential Patristic fathers like Augustine and in the work of medieval philosophers and theologians.
like Thomas Aquinas. In the next chapter I show how such themes move forward in the work of Sallie McFague and Fr. Thomas Berry. I now turn, however, to various accounts within the traditions that offer contrasting images of the human person and the human person’s relationship to a broader sense of God’s good creation.

Hebrew and Old Testament Scriptures and a Grounded Sense of Humility

Theodore Hiebert is an influential biblical scholar and expert in classical Hebrew language as well as Hebrew Scriptures. In his broader analysis of nature and religion in early Israel, Hiebert carefully examines some of the oldest narrative sections of Genesis and specifically those sections generally attributed to what is called the “Yahwist” or “J” writer, and he holds those Yahwist accounts in tension with what are called the “Priestly” accounts of creation in Genesis.\(^{42}\) He argues, in a contribution to an edited volume on Christianity and ecology, that these two accounts offer contrasting images of human

\(^{42}\) Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15. While the authorship of Genesis is debated, there is significant scholarly consensus concerning the text's development over time and authorship by multiple authors. It is argued, for example, that "[a]s a result of hundreds of years of scholarly analysis, we now know that the book was written over centuries by multiple authors, and we have a relatively specific and assured picture of the final stages of its composition (the combination of P with non-Priestly materials). These findings highlight the way Genesis is not limited to just one situation or set of perspectives. Instead, it is a chorale of different voices, a distillate of ancient Israel's experiences with God over the centuries, written in the form of continually adapted stories about beginnings." See David M. Carr, "Genesis," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, Online ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Expanded ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), 14-17.
vocation in biblical thought. Implicit in his argument is the way social context is demonstrated in those two accounts recorded in the formation of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and how a careful consideration for some of those social factors might help Christian faith communities reclaim more ecologically appropriate images of the human person rather than accounts rooted in factors no longer considered relevant in today’s context.

Regarding the priestly account of Genesis 1, in which humanity is commissioned to “fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth [Genesis 1:28],” Hiebert surmises that human–Earth relations are depicted in a way that is conceivably quite expected for the historical social context in which it was written. Hiebert notes that:

> The priestly families of ancient Israel, as chief administrators of its religious shrines and institutions, held positions of authority and power in Israelite society. They were closely allied with the monarchy and played a primary role in the establishment and maintenance of the state. [...] The particular harshness of the term [“subdue” or kābaš] for the human-earth relationship in Genesis 1 may be best understood in the context of the particular harshness of subsistence agriculture in the Mediterranean highlands that provided the livelihood of the priests’ constituency. Economic survival could thus be viewed, as does the priestly writer in Genesis 1, in adversarial terms as overpowering the intractable ground and subjugating the earth. The verbs that describe the human vocation in

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Genesis 1 thus grant humanity the same authority and power in creation that the priesthood exercised in ancient Israelite society. [...] The human vocation in Genesis 1 is one of impressive authority and control. It is based on a hierarchical view of nature and society in which the human being, like the priest, was assigned special status and power. It is a view of the human vocation—and this must be kept in mind in discussions of the legacy of this concept—reflecting the self-understanding and particular social location of the ancient Israelite priesthood.  

While this biblical view of human–Earth relations is introduced in the priestly account of Genesis 1, that account is certainly not the only biblical iteration of human–Earth relations, though it is reinforced in other places in the text such as in Psalm 8. More importantly for the task at hand, however, is the fact that there is yet another account of human–Earth relations that is every much as authentically biblical as the Genesis 1 account.  

Genesis 2-3 offers a very different account of human–Earth relations that, rather than rooted in the ancient priestly perspective of hierarchal power and authority, Hiebert argues it is instead grounded in the life experiences of the “subsistence farmer in the Mediterranean highlands.” While this account of creation is surely not without its own set of deficits, it nonetheless sheds light on an account often overlooked in the Christian traditions. Its language around humanity’s commissioning to work or “to till [‘ābad]” and keep the Earth in Genesis 2:15, is particularly interesting, as Hiebert notes:

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46 Ibid., 139. See also Newsom and Ringe, The Women's Bible Commentary, 16.

47 See, for example, Rasmussen, Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key, 52.
The verb employed by the Yahwist for cultivation is not *kābaš*, “subdue,” used by the priestly writer in Genesis 1, but *ʿābad*, “serve.” In the Hebrew scriptures, *ʿābad* is the customary term to express servitude, of slave to master (Gen. 12:6), of one people to another (Exod. 5:9), and of Israel’s service to God in its life and worship (Exod. 4:23). This verb may have acquired a technical sense in the context of farming somewhat removed from its root meaning, just as the English “cultivation” does not necessarily call to mind its relation to “cult” and “culture.” Yet its use for cultivation must stem from a sense of the vital power of the land over its creatures and of human submission to this power in the act of farming. This way of speaking of agriculture views the human as the servant, not the master, of the land. It emphasizes human dependence on, rather than dominion over, the earth.\(^\text{48}\)

Hiebert’s analysis reveals another account of creation that has been long overshadowed by the priestly account of creation, which emphasizes human dominion and Earth’s subjugation.\(^\text{49}\) This account, much like Psalm 104 and the book of Job as Hiebert points to both, orients the human person in a framework of humility and continuity amidst the larger grandeur of God’s other works.\(^\text{50}\)


\(^{49}\) It should be noted that there is a tradition of interpreting the "dominion" passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, Christologically. As Larry Rasmussen points out, this theme plays out strongly in some Christian stewardship models of creation care, since one perspective is that "[i]f Jesus is dominus (Lord), then the human exercise of power should be patterned on his kind of lordship--a servant stance in which the last are made first, the weak are made strong, and even the sparrow is cherished." See Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*, 231. As per Rasmussen, see also Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (Grand Rapids, MI; New York: W.B. Eerdmans; Friendship Press, 1990); and Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

There are other aspects to the Yahwist account that betray a significantly more humble view of the human person in relation to the world.\textsuperscript{51} Those include an analysis of the etymology of the Hebrew words for human beings (\textit{\'adām}) as made from and for the land (\textit{\'adāmā}), or as Hiebert posits, they might more appropriately be translated as a “farmer” made from and for “farmland.”\textsuperscript{52} Regarding human continuity with all other life, Hiebert observes that in the Yahwist account of creation, both plants and animals are made out of the same arable soil from which the first human was made.\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, he points out that only one Hebrew phrase is used in Genesis 2:7 and 19 in reference to


\textsuperscript{51} Regarding these passages and the way in which they highlight themes of humanity's humility before God and the world, see Michael Lerner, \textit{Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation} (New York, NY: Putnam, 1995), 416.

\textsuperscript{52} Hiebert, \textit{The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel}, 34-36. Here I refer to \textit{\'adām} as "human beings" instead of as "man" since I think it is reasonable to use the more inclusive term within the context of my statement, which does not require a gender distinction. As Hiebert notes, however, there is not yet consensus as to whether "the first person created in this account is male, sexually undifferentiated, or androgynous." See Hiebert, \textit{The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions}, 139, 152. See also Dennis T. Olson, "Untying the Knot? Masculinity, Violence, and the Creation-Fall Story of Genesis 2-4," in \textit{Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld}, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 73-88, especially 76-78.

\textsuperscript{53} Hiebert, \textit{The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions}, 139.
both “human beings” and “animals” (that is, nepeš ġâyyâ) who have received and share the breath of life as “living beings” or “animated beings.”

In summary, Hiebert’s argument shows that contrasting images of human vocation in biblical thought demonstrate some of the incredibly rich assortment of perspectives embedded in the earliest roots of the Christian traditions. Those perspectives that have come to dominate major streams of modern thought within the Christian traditions do not rightly hold an exclusive claim as the only authentic biblical perspectives on human–Earth relations. As Hiebert concludes:

[T]hese two views of the human vocation in the natural world are almost inverse images of one another. The priestly writer views the human, created alone in God’s image, as distinct from other forms of life, while the Yahwist views the human, made like the animals from the arable soil, as related to other forms of life. The priestly writer views the human as master of the earth, while the Yahwist views the human as its servant. For the priestly writer, the human vocation is one of dominion and supervision. For the Yahwist, the human vocation is one of dependence and service. Thus, at their origins, traditions of the human vocation within Christian thought are greatly varied. In addition to the familiar image of dominion that has been nearly equated with the Christian perspective stands a much more modest understanding of the human role in the world.

The Yahwist account of creation in the book of Genesis is one promising thread to follow, of a biblically grounded theological anthropology that stands in stark contrast to those images of human–Earth relations in which human dominion and Earth’s subjugation are prominent themes. It highlights the important role social context can play

54 Ibid., 139. See also Hiebert, The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel, 63; and Bernhard W. Anderson, From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 157.

in the interpretive process and in the way certain aspects of a tradition can become emphasized or at times minimized, diminished, and flatly ignored.

Saint Augustine and the Inherent Goodness of God’s Creation

Augustine of Hippo, born the year 354 in North Africa (modern day Algeria) and dead from fever in the midst of a city under siege in the year 430, is one among few others who have played such a significant role in the shaping of Christian theology during the formation and development of the early Church in the Patristic Era. Augustine’s written body of work is substantial and wide-ranging with regard to both its breadth and depth of topics pertaining to Christian theology and philosophy. While I do not have the time and the space to even begin outlining the more significant contributions of his work to the development of major streams of Christian thought in particular and Western thought more broadly, certain aspects of his views on creation require at least brief mention here and, specifically, the way his social context influenced his work to affirm an account of the inherent goodness of God’s creation for Christian theology.

Earlier in his life, Augustine was briefly attracted to the open-mindedness of Manichaean thought relative to what he perceived to be the legalism and dogmatism of Donatism, which was popular during his time, but he became disillusioned by Manichaeism around 383 and left for Rome to study other philosophies and eventually

was baptized in Christian faith in 387. Later ordained a priest and then bishop of Hippo in 395, Augustine “spent the rest of his life, presiding, arbitrating, conferring, debating, preaching, writing, and above all, attacking the Christian deviations of Donatism, Manichaeism, Arianism, and especially, Pelegianism.” Augustine’s disillusionment with, and later his life-long resistance to, Manichaeism is particularly noteworthy because Manichaeism was a widely popular form of Gnosticism that competed against Christianity for adherents during the development of the early Christian church.

What was for Augustine a Manichean problem was arguably a part of the larger “Gnostic problem” for the early Christian church, or rather the early church’s “contact and conflict” with Gnosticism during the second to fifth centuries, and the important theological dispute it reveals and in which Saint Augustine was directly engaged. That early dispute had a direct bearing on aspects of metaphysical dualisms, including specifically the way the material world should or should not be viewed across various

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streams of Christian thought pertaining to God and humanity’s relations with the world.  

According to Gnosticism:

[P]eople live in the world, but at least some of them are not of it. For while human bodies are made of the same substance as the world, there is, or may be, hidden within each one a spark of the divine life. Salvation is then the rescuing of the divine spark from its imprisonment in the material world, and specifically in the flesh. The first and essential step is the recognition that one is not at home in this world, that one’s essential being is related to the divine world and can find its way home. [...] The world-denying character of Gnosticism, with the sharp division (or dualism) between God (the divine) above and the world (the carnal or physical) below, certainly existed prior to Jesus and the rise of Christianity, and contributed in diverse ways to the development and theology of that religion.

Augustine’s writing is replete with arguments in which he believes he is defending Christian thinking against such a view that matter, or the material world (including human bodies), is intrinsically evil in the way he perceived Manichean thinking to have argued the case. While Augustine’s writing does maintain some Platonic dualisms between body and soul, even though he rejects the Platonic theory of body and soul out rightly in *City of God*, he is very clear in the lattermost developments of his thoughts that

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61 G. R. Evans notes in his introduction that such dualisms also regarded the Manichaeist and Gnostic idea that "there are two powers in the universe, two 'first principles', good and evil, eternally at war" which he argues is "ultimately incompatible with the Christian belief in one God, who is omnipotent and wholly good...." See Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2003), xxiv.


any notions of matter and body as intrinsically evil are out rightly incompatible with his understanding that God created, and that God created all things to be naturally good.\textsuperscript{64} This, unfortunately, is not Augustine’s major theological legacy. This emphasis of his has been eclipsed by an enduring focus on his anti-Pelagian writings regarding Original Sin, as well as those Platonic and Neo-Platonic dualisms that continue to predominate in many Christian theologies.

As Jame Schaefer points out in her analysis on patristic and medieval texts, Augustine was quite expansive in the way he described God as the creator of all natural beings, each of which had an inherent goodness that he believed accompanied all animate and inanimate beings in their dependence on God for their existence.\textsuperscript{65} Among the several examples to which she points in Augustine’s writing that demonstrate this, the following is perhaps one of his most poetic and moving. Augustine says:

\begin{quote}
The earth is good by the height of its mountains, the moderate elevation of its hills, and the evenness of its fields; and good is the farm that is pleasant and fertile; and good is the house that is arranged throughout in symmetrical proportions and is spacious and bright; and good are the animals, animate bodies; and good is the mild and salubrious air; and good is the food that is pleasant and conducive to health; and good is health without pains and weariness; and good is the countenance of man with regular features, a cheerful expression, and a glowing color; and good is the soul of a friend with the sweetness of concord and the fidelity of love; and good is the just man; and good are riches because they readily assist us; and good is the heaven with its own sun, moon, and stars.\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{64} Regarding Augustine's eventual rejection of this aspect of Platonic theory, see especially XIV.5 (554-555) in Augustine, \textit{Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans}.


For Augustine, the very act of being or existing was akin to, even interchangeable with, the way he conceived of goodness—nothing that exists can be contrary to God because he believed all things were created good and declared as such by a good God. 67

Augustine’s thinking does allow that the material world and human bodies can be corrupted through the evils of sin. 68 For Augustine, when God created God intended everything to be overflowing with goodness and goodness is interchangeable with that which exists, while evil is the lack of goodness—it is the void of emptiness which existence does not fill, and so suffering is the realization of this deprivation of goodness.

In other words, Augustine came to see everything that God created as inherently good by virtue of its coming into existence at the hand of a good creator. Things and bodies only become corrupt, then, when our desire for things other than the goodness of God creates a void in that space where God intended for only goodness to reside.

In other words, sin is not something Augustine sees as originating in the beings of this world or in human bodies, but instead he believed it is something that corrupts those things when people turn away from the activity of seeking God. When Augustine reflects that his sin consisted in his seeking “pleasure, sublimity, and truth not in God but in his


68 Regarding corruptibility of the body, see Augustine, Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans, XIV.2-3 (548-552).
creatures, in [himself] and other created beings,” Augustine’s focus is on the turn away from God rather than in any inherent kind of corrupting evil in the things themselves that God created.69

On the importance of this “turning” activity in Augustine’s thought, Charles Taylor offers a helpful analysis when he observes that:

Augustine takes our focus off the objects reason knows, the field of the Ideas, and directs it onto the activity of striving to know which each of us carries on; and he makes us aware of this in a first-person perspective. At the end of this road we see that God’s is the power sustaining and directing this activity.70

For Augustine, God created a good and ordered universe, and within Augustine’s social context “good and ordered” was perceived in terms of an exacting hierarchy with all things submitting to those above and with ultimate submission to God the creator of all things. The ecological sciences now tell us that a “web” or a “bush” as opposed to some “Great Chain of Being” or other pyramidal hierarchies are more helpful metaphors to describe the complex, evolutionary interrelationships of life on Earth, and democratic forms of government act more as pervasive forms of government informing the interpretive lens of people in the liberal West than that of monarchies and empires as in ages past.71 Still, while Augustine’s sense of hierarchy may not be appropriate for the


contemporary context, his directional focus on the activity of seeking God and God’s
goodness may be helpful.

Augustine’s focus on the right ordering of one’s inclinations in seeking God, or
thinking of God as the “vivifying” power sustaining the human pursuit of goodness, need
not be considered fundamentally antithetical to an ecologically informed, social justice
perspective if reconstructed within a context more relevant to contemporary experience.\textsuperscript{72}

Primarily, however, Augustine’s recalcitrance on the matter of the inherent goodness of
all natural beings acts as a countervailing thread that leads into the thought of Thomas
Aquinas—one that demonstrates something of the various ways in which the Christian
traditions cannot accurately be portrayed in the monolithic ways sometimes used to
condemn the traditions as innately unhelpful for any world-affirming perspectives now
required by the ecological and climate crisis. From the earliest days in the Christian
church, Saint Augustine’s theological reflections vehemently resisted the popular
philosophical notion so widespread in Gnostic and Manichean arguments that matter is
evil and that it corrupts the spirit. He argued instead that everything God created is good
by the very fact of its existence, which he believed was originated from and also
dependent upon a good God—a concept Saint Thomas Aquinas affirmed, rehabilitated,
and expanded nearly a thousand years later.\textsuperscript{73} I now will highlight some Thomistic
contributions.

\textsuperscript{72} Taylor, \textit{Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity}, 136.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Social Nature of the Individual, and the Common Good

Perhaps no other theologian or philosopher is regarded with an enduring accord of greater respect, at least and especially in the Roman Catholic Christian traditions, than Thomas Aquinas. Born in 1225 and admitted into the faculty of theology at the University of Paris in 1257 at a time when “theology” was considered “queen of the faculties,” Aquinas had an intellectually productive career before his death in 1274.74 He studied and wrote during the high Middle Ages—a relatively prosperous time across parts of Europe sandwiched between the population declines and social turbulence of the early Middle Ages ushered in by the fall of the Western Roman Empire but preceding the calamitous Black Death so characteristic of the late Middle Ages.75 The shift from traditions of empire and rulership to codified laws on property and rights was part of the Thomistic social context.


75 Summarizing some of the consequences of the medieval social context and their influence on intellectual thought, Santmire notes themes of "pervasive alienation from nature [characterizing] the early Middle Ages, and then the remarkable rebirth of interest in, and appreciation for, nature in the twelfth century." He argues this played a role in the development of a "theological naturalism" in Thomistic thought. See Santmire, The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology, 76, 75-95.
Thomas Aquinas offers an inherently social account of theological anthropology that grounds his perspectives on the way property should be properly used for the common good. His thought is highly relevant to the contemporary ecological and climate problem at hand because a core part of that problem as I have identified it so far is the modern turn that over-emphasizes a theological anthropocentrism which ignores the complex web of interconnected relationships described by the ecological sciences.\footnote{While Thomistic theology is sometimes perceived as anthropocentric in the sense that Aquinas saw non-human beings as being created for the good of human beings, it is also important to point out that Aquinas also recognized intrinsic value in "nature" and that he held an overarching organic worldview in which humans existed for the good and perfection of the larger universe. For a helpful explication of this argument, see Jill LeBlanc, "Eco-Thomism," \textit{Environmental Ethics} 21, no. 3 (1999), 293-306. See also Willis Jenkins, \textit{Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology} (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 118-121.}

Concern for other people, the modification of one’s environment, and the responsible use of property is not so much the core challenge to ecological thought as is a concern for people that irresponsibly ignores ecological embeddedness and environmental dependency in their social and ecological contexts. That, along with the use of property—of land and biosphere—which disregards any sense of their inherent value beyond their monetary net-worth, is the problem. In effect, the social nature of the human person and all such consequences pertaining to what it means to be a creature in relation with others is denied.

William T. Cavanaugh contends that the Christian traditions have within them a rich stream of teachings that emphasize “detachment from material goods…\textit{as a means to a greater end} [emphasis added], and the greater end is greater attachment to God and to
our fellow human beings.” With regard to Thomas Aquinas in particular, his argument on the ownership of property highlights the very social nature of his thinking. For Aquinas, property is always to be used for the advancement of the common good and to be used in a way that recognizes the inherently social nature of the individual. Regarding private property and its proper use, Thomas Aquinas says:

[I]t is legitimate for a man [sic] to possess private property; indeed it is necessary for human life for three reasons. First, everyone is more concerned to take care of something that belongs only to him than of something that belongs to everyone or to many people…. Secondly, human affairs are more efficiently organized if the proper care of each thing is an individual responsibility…. Third, peace is better preserved among men if each one is content with his property…. In regard to this a man should not possess external things as his alone but for the community, so that he is ready to share them with others in cases of necessity. Thus the Apostle Paul says in I Timothy, “Command the rich of this world to be ready to share and to give.”

Aquinas’ argument is that the human person is intrinsically social and as such is obliged in the use of one’s property to make sure it acknowledges that inherently social nature by advancing and contributing to the common good of society. The individual cannot be fully separated from society in Aquinas’ understanding of the human person, and the implications of this have serious consequences for the way in which it can be considered morally appropriate to own property and to produce and consume goods—all of which are directly relevant to core aspects of the ecological and climate crisis.


Susanne M. DeCrane describes this particularly well when she notes that for Aquinas, the way we ought to live and act in the world flows from a basic understanding of what it means to be human. She observes:

The central importance of the common good in Aquinas’s moral thought flows naturally from his anthropology. As intrinsically social beings, we exist and flourish only within the context of a community. Therefore, Aquinas writes that because of our social nature, we are obligated to do “whatever is necessary for the preservation of human society.” The issue is not merely the preservation of the sheer existence of the group, but of its flourishing as a necessary, life-promoting reality for all members of the society. While God is the ultimate common good of all creation [for Aquinas], the common good is also understood by Aquinas as being connected to the practical exigencies of living in society. How we live in society, how we shape our societies and our relationships within societies, is related to the pursuit of God as the highest good.\textsuperscript{79}

In a very real sense, such an understanding of the human person intimately ties up the flourishing of the individual with the flourishing of all members of society. Owning property and producing and consuming goods can be opportunities for the individual to participate in and recognize the value of her or his relationships with the rest of society and one’s connectedness to others when property and goods are utilized in ways that support the common good.

The common good is so important to Thomas Aquinas’ theology that Jean Porter argues:

Aquinas insists, as strongly as any Marxist, that the common good takes precedence over the good of the individual, just as the good of the universe as a whole is a greater good than the good of any one creature, however exalted [that creature] (II-II.47.10; II-II.58.12; II-II.64.2). And yet, Aquinas is not in fact the one-sided communalist that these remarks, taken alone, would suggest.  

Though Porter does parallel this particular thought of Aquinas to Karl Marx, DeCrane does continue in her text to nuance Porter’s statement by noting that a key difference between Marx and Aquinas is that, for Aquinas, “the common good in itself is privileged for the sake of promoting and producing the circumstances that will aid the members of the community to grow in their individual goodness and happiness.”

For Aquinas, the common good takes precedence for the good of the individual and not in order to dismantle private property or to cease the production of goods or the individual’s consumption of goods. Rather, Aquinas considers private property and the production and consumption of goods from within a context in which the individual is accountable to a concern for the common good. This is partly because it is central to his view of the human person as a being that is inherently social in nature, partly because he sees service to the common good as service to God, and partly because Aquinas thoroughly embeds the human person within a broader sphere of cosmic participation—in a universe that is, much as Augustine argued, inherently good and created so by a good and loving God.

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81 Ibid., 74.
Thomas Aquinas, writing on God and the diversity found among God’s good creation, in which both human and non-human beings are participants in the cosmic narrative, argues:

And because [God’s] goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, [God] produced many and diverse creatures, so that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any given single creature.\(^8^2\)

He also suggests, “all existing things, in so far as they exist, are good” because “the love of God infuses and creates goodness in things.”\(^8^3\) Aquinas, like Augustine, argues vigorously for a framework of understanding the human person that recognizes not only human value before God but God’s concern for and love of non-human beings as well.

Thomistic theology is certainly hierarchical and anthropocentric in orientation, but the highly social nature and cosmic framework Aquinas relies on to contextualize his theological anthropology is a way to read his work in a manner that is less antagonistic to an ecologically informed understanding of the human person. William French articulates this clearly when he observes that:

Thomas supports a robust anthropocentrism that concentrates attention on humanity’s unique creation as a rational being in the embodied world and it is this capacity for rationality, this distinctive intellectual soul, which humanity shares only with angels, that sharply demarcates humans as separate from and categorically superior to the rest of the embodied created world. Humans are at the top of the great scale of embodied being and thus are said by Thomas to be at


\(^8^3\) Ibid., I.20.2
the top of the corresponding scale of value. […] But while Thomas develops a vigorous anthropocentric value scheme that celebrates the superiority of the human, he locates an understanding of the human within a cosmological frame that highlights that humanity is a participant in the broader community of the universe. […] This is perhaps his most distinctive contribution for our reflection today. Where dominant streams of modern Protestant and Catholic theology, and indeed modern Western philosophy, have concentrated on an understanding of history as the dynamic frame for understanding human life, Aquinas balances an appreciation for the distinctiveness and worth of human reason, freedom, and agency with an appreciation for our embodied participation in the vast sphere of creation.84

Daniel P. Scheid, while also noting the anthropocentric focus found in Thomistic thought, nonetheless posits that there is much about Thomistic theology that can be helpful in correlating the human common good with the planetary common good, when he argues:

Thomas Aquinas, though he certainly affirms humanity’s dominion over non-human creation and its privileged position over all other Earthly creatures, he also envisions a cosmos in which all creatures, including human beings, contribute to a glorious cosmic end centered on God.85

Scheid argues that Thomistic thought offers, rightly understood in light of any historical/contextual limitations, a cosmic frame in which to embed the human person. That frame emphasizes how “the whole universe surpasses in excellence any individual creature,” including human beings, and how “the order and diversity of creatures is in fact the best aspect of creation.”86 So while the hierarchical and anthropocentric focus of

86 Ibid., 127, 134.
Thomistic theology unsurprisingly reflects the social context of his day, Thomistic thought may nonetheless hold potential for today, especially if Thomistic theology is informed by contemporary accounts of ecology and evolutionary biology.\footnote{I am thinking specifically, here, of the hard and precise cleavage between human beings and the rest of the world that is present in Thomistic accounts of the human person and the world that often encourages and sustains a perspective about nature that voids a healthy sense of its moral worth. While I do not think that the distinctions Aquinas makes between people and other creatures create an insurmountable challenge for those seeking to reclaim the creation-centered framework of his theology in environmentally responsible ways, particularly as French and Scheid note, I do think that such a bifurcation makes it hard to "square the circle" with regard to what can be learned from ecological and evolutionary biology. Francisco Benzoni engages in such a project. See Francisco J. Benzoni, Ecological Ethics and the Human Soul: Aquinas, Whitehead, and the Metaphysics of Value (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 4-5. Also, using the best science of the day to inform theology is a central part of Thomistic theology, as French argues and as I soon note.}

As I have argued previously with regard to other aspects of the Christian traditions, the modern “turn” that took place in prominent streams of Western thought tends to highlight and emphasize those aspects of the Thomistic tradition that are hierarchical and that place humanity above nature as master over it, that point to humanity as distinct and unique, and that point to an eschatological vision in which only rational souls survive the cleansing fires of the second coming.\footnote{With regard to key passages highlighting hierarchy and human dominion, see Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, I.78.1, I.18.2. With regard to human intellect as distinguishing humanity from all other animals, see ST I.76.1. Regarding eschatological visions, see Supplements 74.1, 91.1 and 97.2.} Those aspects of the Thomistic tradition that highlight and emphasize a view of the human person as a participant in a cosmic symphony of life, in which all of creation both \textit{exists as} inherently good and \textit{exists for} the common good, well, that unfortunately “gets lost” from the
dominating streams of thought in Christian theology during the modern turn. Contemporary ecological and climate sciences now show how the ability for human societies to flourish and thrive is increasingly dependent upon the ability of ecosystems to function and maintain a planetary stability that is amenable to the support of life. Serving the greatest common good now requires a reappraisal of the way we consider right use of property and of the practices of production and consumption that emerged during the Industrial Revolution.

Perhaps it is most in keeping with the true spirit of Thomistic theology if contemporary Christians pull forward prominent streams of pre-modern Christian thought, like the Thomistic view of the human person as intrinsically social and therefore morally bound by a responsibility to serve the common good, while doing so in a way that is held accountable to contemporary scientific insights. As French asserts:

One of the most impressive features of Thomas’s work was his concern to correlate his received theological tradition and its sets of affirmations and perspectives with the best available science and understanding of the universe of his day. In his day, this was found in the newly available translations displaying the power and sweep of the Aristotelian world-picture. But to keep faith with Thomas’s spirit and historical example, it seems best not to reify his assertions that are grounded in the 13th century’s science and metaphysics, but rather to follow in his open engagement with the best of today’s science to discern how creation, providence, and redemption might best be understood in light of the challenges and knowledge of the 21st century.

89 Johnson, Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition.

90 For Aquinas, the greatest common good is the good of the universe. See, for example, I.22.4, I.47.1, and I.103.2 in Aquinas, Summa Theologiae.

91 French, Grace is Everywhere: Thomas Aquinas on Creation and Salvation, 164.
Contemporary Christian faith communities might find it more fruitful and more responsible to engage the writings of Thomas Aquinas in a way that is responsive to contemporary needs, specifically in this regard, in a way that privileges a socially equitable and ecologically informed view of the human person that is dependent upon the flourishing of planetary systems for the common good.

Factors in the Development of Modern Anthropocentric Theologies and Dualistic Cosmologies

Significance changes came to the field of Christian theology at the end of the medieval period and the beginning of the modern period around the 1500s in the West. N. Max Wildiers describes some of these changes well when he says:

In the course of time the separation of science and religion appeared to signify emancipation on both sides. Cosmology freed itself from the grip of theology, while theology was compelled—initially with some reluctance—to wrest itself from the power of an obliterated world picture. Owing to this division, cosmology could find its own method of applying itself to the study of its object as an autonomous science, and theology in turn could purify itself of foreign elements that had nothing to do with the original message of the Gospel. Despite the obvious and by no means insignificant gain on both sides, there were undoubtedly also certain disadvantages, which in the short term did not always appear to counterbalance the advantages. Through this separation of cosmology and theology Christians found themselves in a division of consciousness that necessarily gave rise to unbearable tensions: The Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture, which were once seen to proclaim the same wisdom, now appeared to speak a different language and could in any case not readily be reconciled with each other.\footnote{N. Max Wildiers, \textit{The Theologian and His Universe: Theology and Cosmology from the Middle Ages to the Present} (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 81.}

The rise of the modern sciences, propelled by the Baconian (Francis Bacon 1461-1626) emphasis on technological appropriation of nature for human use and the Cartesian (René
Descartes 1596-1650) machine metaphor as a way to understand non-human animality, accompanied the new philosophies emerging in the modern era.\(^93\)

Whereas “nature” may have been perceived in some streams of thought as inherently good by virtue of it being created and loved by a good God, the cleaving of the world of “nature” from the field of theology along with the rise of overly reductionist modern scientific philosophies offered instead a view of the world as mere objects or machines with no rights or value beyond their utilitarian services.\(^94\) Furthermore, the modern era experienced a surge of diverse streams of thought emphasizing human agency. For example, the Protestant Reformation’s focus on the individual’s personal relationship to God through Christ or Luther’s (Martin Luther 1483-1546) theology of the person justified by faith alone stressed the individual and human community standing before God. While Calvin (John Calvin 1509-1564) and others maintained an emphasis on the doctrine of creation, by and large main Protestant traditions in the 18th and 19th centuries place the theological stress on the God-human relationship. The Kantian (Immanuel Kant 1724-1804) turn to the human subject as the locus of rational thought further entrenched this stress on the human person. Each of these streams of thought


represents a major shift in modern theology and Western philosophy. That shift is escorted by the rise of free enterprise and joined eventually by the Industrial Revolution. Consequently, shifts to new forms of labor occur along with shifts in the way labor is perceived and moralized as Protestantism continued its rise and development in the West, even as unprecedented wealth generation allowed for population, production, and consumption levels to soar.95

Regarding the rise of free enterprise, economic systems, and religion in the West (especially Protestantism), Max Weber’s account of the rise and development of capitalism notes some interesting convergences.96 Weber identifies a number of factors that he argues contributed to the rise and success of early capitalism. First, Weber makes reference to Adam Smith’s argument that the division of labor is an important element of advanced capitalism.97 Second, he stresses that the generation of wealth plays a huge


96 Weber's account has been challenged and one economic historian who has done so is Gregory Clark. For his alternative argument on the rise of capitalism, see Gregory Clark, *A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). As Larry Rasmussen notes, however, there are important similarities between Clark's own conclusions and Weber's and Rasmussen points out aspects of Clark's theory that do not address important aspects included in Weber's analysis. For Rasmussen's succinct summary of divergence and convergence in Clark and Weber's arguments, see Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*, 400-401.

role. Weber notes that John Wesley, an Anglican cleric who founded Methodism, grappled with the moral consequences of the spirit of “industry and frugality” that generates the excess wealth he thinks results from the emerging Protestant religious milieu of his time.\textsuperscript{98} Weber saw a noteworthy economic consequence arising from prominent streams of thought in the dominant Protestant theologies of the day, which in holding labor and frugality as morally good, gave rise to a broadly influential view that wealth could be seen as an outward sign of God’s favor. Whether Weber’s account of causation is correct is not so important here as is the way in which his account paints a picture of Wesley’s social context and understanding of the spiritual aspects of wealth and work.

John Wesley conceived of wealth as a kind of coin with two sides. Wesley’s selection written in 1786, to which Weber refers in part, is here in its larger context:

I fear, wherever riches have increased (exceeding few are the exceptions) the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality. And these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. How then is it possible that Methodism, that is the religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay-tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence they proportionally [sic] increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. Is there no way to prevent this? This continual declension of pure religion? We ought not to forbid people to be diligent and frugal. We must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can—that is, in effect to grow rich! What way then (I ask again) can we take that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who gain all they can, and save

all they can, will likewise give all they can, then the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven.\textsuperscript{99}

This passage makes clear Wesley’s thinking with regard to both the dangers and virtues of wealth, as he believes it to be the natural consequence of industry and frugality. He describes leisure time as dangerous because it risks idleness, while human industry and productive labor he clearly perceived as virtuous. Love of the world and of worldly desires are also dangerous, so frugality—or the kind of prudent spending that facilitates the creation of saved and invested capital—is a virtue. The wealth believed to result from the practice of these two virtues can also be perceived as both recognition of one’s faithfulness but also as dangerous in so far as one becomes overly proud of the wealth one has accumulated. Wesley’s solution is essentially that wealth accumulation is to be exhorted as long as it does not act as a source of pride and is used also in service to good works on Earth.\textsuperscript{100}

As many have argued, it would seem that the rise and development of major streams of thought in the various Christian theologies that came to predominate the Christian traditions during the rise and development of capitalistic free enterprise systems in the early modern era had both a detrimental and a positive influence on society’s views on labor, production, and consumption. For example, Max Oelschlaeger well describes some of the negatives consequences of the Protestant Reformation, in tension with the Roman Catholic medieval mindset regarding labor, when he says:


\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
By proclaiming the central place of the individual in the realization of grace, rather than sacramental ritual administered by the priesthood, Protestantism affected all elements (political, economical, intellectual) of the medieval world, however unclear the exact lines of influence. And worldly success, rather than being prohibited by holy sanction, was now religiously reinforced. The Protestant believer saw no surer indication that one was chosen (predestined for salvation) than the accumulation of wealth: economic success was a sign of God’s favor. Today, of course, the economic sphere is largely separated from religion; but the spiritual justification for the pursuit of wealth was perhaps an initial necessity.\textsuperscript{101}

The kind of theological anthropology emphasized in those streams of modern Protestant thought that arose during a broader social context in which individuality and free-enterprise also became dominant frames of thought, tends to be overly individualistic and fails to acknowledge the inherently social nature of the human person as it is, for example, so posited by the Thomistic framework. Also, if wealth is perceived as a sign of God’s favor or even more generally as simply a good and desirable thing but the moral exhortation to place excess wealth in service to the common good is lost, then wealth risks becoming a tool that facilitates the kind of unrestrained production and consumption that has fueled the various contemporary ecological crises.\textsuperscript{102} It reinforces the kind of consumer-driven wastefulness that has become so emblematic of the world’s wealthiest


\textsuperscript{102} See, for example, Alan Thein Durning, \textit{How Much is enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth} (New York: Norton, 1992), 30-36. He argues that "mass consumption came of age" in the United States shortly after the end of World War II and since then, "conspicuous consumption" has spread across much of the world without regard for some of the negative consequences of the "consumer life-style" upon traditional cultural values of frugality and with regard to environmental harm.
societies despite the intense and immense forms of poverty that continue to crisscross the globe.  

Larry Rasmussen interestingly argues that some early Protestant attitudes toward work might be reclaimed in a way that is helpful to an ecological context and that they need not be considered as wholly unhelpful. His concern is not necessarily with religious attitudes toward work as a vocation but rather the loss of a theological framework for conceiving of work in such a way that any kind of moral check on consumer wastefulness and the careless squandering of important limited resources is lost. For example, he contemplates such consequences when he asks:

What happens when a capitalist order truly takes hold and daily striving is severed from religious and ethical meaning and from a sense of religious calling and moral duty? …That is, what happens when people who, with religious zeal and vocation worked hard and saved but led frugal lives, no longer live a simple life? …With the spirit of asceticism and its ethic of awe, humility, self-control and restrain gone from capitalism, we may, like pushers and users, have grown dependent upon a destructive way of life we know not how to escape.  

In other words, some early Protestant attitudes toward one’s labor may be as helpful for some aspects of the ecological crisis as are some aspects of the medieval perspective, or at least those perspectives that arose in medieval monasteries and considered work as an inherently holy mode of prayer and as a service to God. The activity of industrious labor and frugality is not the core problem. Rather the problem centers in the view of work as

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103 Consumerism is so emblematic of free-market societies that some consider it akin to a powerful "global religion." See, for example, David R. Loy, "The Religion of the Market," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 65, no. 2 (1997), 275-290. See also Christopher A. Porter, "The Religion of Consumption and Christian Neighbor Love" (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2013).

a way to create wealth for the sole purpose of producing and consuming as an end in itself without any accountability to the common good. The problem is not theology in this case, but a lack of theological and moral checks on how excess wealth could and should be used to make the world a better place.  

Conclusion

Moving beyond these specific examples to that of the larger ecological and climate crisis, the same conclusion holds. When it comes to some of the core aspects of the problem, it is not necessarily a deep and historic flaw inherent to the Christian traditions that make them overly anthropocentric and utterly antithetical to a new paradigm of human–Earth relations in which people live more equitably and sustainably on the planet. As I have shown, there are prominent streams of thought embedded within the earliest roots of the Christian traditions out of which living faith communities—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—can nurture a more ecologically informed framework for understanding the human person in relation to God and the world. Those streams of thought wind their way through some of Augustine’s ideas and find expression in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, among many others. A simple return, however, to the

105 Daniel Bell argues that before the middle of the twentieth century, the "basic American value pattern emphasized the virtue of achievement, defined as doing and making, and a man displayed his character in the quality of his work. By the 1950s, the pattern of achievement remained, but it had been redefined to emphasize status and taste. The culture was no longer concerned with how to work and achieve, but with how to spend and enjoy." In other words, Bell argues that the very wealth and prosperity that emerged from capitalist enterprise, and often attributed to the virtues of hard work and delayed gratification, creates so much wealth and prosperity that those virtues become undermined in the shift toward conspicuous consumerism. See Daniel Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1976), 70.
traditions’ earliest and pre-modern roots is not all that is necessary for the challenges at hand—those roots must be both pruned and nourished by the new experiences and new social and ecological understandings encountered within the everyday, living traditions of contemporary Christian faith communities. The next chapter turns to these living traditions in order to discern that which might help—and which may continue to hinder—a sense of solidarity with, and moral responsibility for, the world’s most marginalized communities, human and otherwise.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS AS HELP OR HINDRANCE IN A TIME OF NEED

In previous chapters, I have argued that the origins of the ecological and climate crises reside at least partly in those spaces occupied by culturally cherished, yet under-examined worldviews, stories, and religious narratives. Narrative accounts of creation rooted in Genesis 1, for example, have been overused across the centuries and stand as an obstacle to more creation-centered theologies, which are reasonably grounded in those accounts of creation found in Genesis 2. Moreover, the vast abundance and resiliency of nature can no longer be taken as a given, and so the way in which people see themselves in relation to others and the world around them needs to change too. I have argued this by identifying prevailing, broad-based accounts of dominant modern Christian views of the human and the rest of nature that have emerged from, and been sustained by, a deeply entrenched and almost exclusive moral and religious emphasis on the human person.

In this chapter, I continue clarifying the “ambiguous” potential of those streams of Christian theological anthropology and cosmology that I have argued were pushed aside during the rise of the modern Western period. I turn to those accounts that I think may

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be specifically related to, and experienced within, the emotionally powerful religious life of Christian faith communities.²

This is a practical and important place to start because any adequately constructed ethic of adaptation to climate change must include a fundamental paradigm shift in human perspectives on justice and reverence for life on Earth. As Kathleen Dean Moore rightly asserts:

[W]e can armor shorelines, modify the genetics of trout, build giant dams, and in countless ways change the Earth, but effective and honorable adaptation will begin to take place only when we change ourselves.³

Accounts of various cosmologies and theological anthropologies offer powerful narratives to shape the way people think about themselves and their actions in the world. As a result, they offer an appropriate and relevant contact point for engaging Christian traditions within the context of the ecological and climate crises. Practical, concrete solutions to climate change are important, and I point to some examples in the next chapter. A functional theological anthropology and cosmology, however, is a necessary and fundamental part of what is needed to drive and sustain the kind of mental and emotional energy Christian communities will need to both employ and mobilize others to join the push for ecologically responsible and equitable polices.

² For a wide-ranging general overview of the cultural power of religion, from a cognitive-evolutionary perspective, and its ability to help the human mind deal with emotionally compelling problems, see Scott Atran, In Gods we Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

This chapter’s first section is a response to the idea that, as Pope John Paul II writes, the Church’s social teachings are intended to be perceived as an “application of the word of God to people’s lives and the life of society, as well as to the earthly realities connected with them.” That concern comes to life in the way we grapple with the following question: How can ideas and narratives, regarding an ecologically and socially responsible cosmology and theological anthropology, be “lived-out” and affirmed by the religious life of Christian faith communities? My reply to that question in this chapter is not a direct response to the ecological and climate crises, but is instead a turn to understanding the religious life as an especially creative space in which perceptions regarding human embeddedness in the natural order and its cosmic sacramentality can be formed and shaped. I argue that religious narratives of sacramentality offer significant potential for some people in the pews to understand more intimately, and more deeply connect with social and ecological concerns in a way that acts powerfully on their “moods and motivations.” Later, in the dissertation’s concluding chapter, I point to some practical solutions that I think inspire a sense of hope for the change that is

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6 For his classic definition of religion and its "moods and motivations" that each tradition sustains, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.
possible, and that are both compatible with Christian faith and also responsive to the various scientific and policy concerns highlighted over the course of the dissertation.

In the second section, I point to examples of ecologically-informed perspectives in contemporary Christian accounts of theological anthropology and cosmology that may prove helpful in pivoting theology away from such predominating focal concerns as the superiority of the human and the superiority of men over women, toward those that affirm social structures more mutually beneficial to all members of the larger global society.7 Specifically, this section is rooted in the assumption that the way Christians see themselves is enmeshed with how they see and understand the world and how they think God works in the world. While it is hard to make precise distinctions between different parts of the God-Human-Earth set of relationships, this section takes a Christian theological approach to understanding God and the cosmos in a way that recognizes and honors a sense of human embeddedness in both social and ecological systems.8

7 While I refer to "social structures" in a broad sense throughout the dissertation, in this chapter I refer to them in a similar way as described by Elsbernd and Bieringer, which is as "independently operative patterns of relationships between foundational components of a social system. These behaviors, attitudes, values, roles, institutions, and norms are interconnected, have a life of their own, and will continue to function whether individuals are aware of them or not. As such, social structures are resistant to change and are the locus of social problems." See Elsbernd and Bieringer, When Love is Not enough: A Theo-Ethic of Justice, 171; As per Elsbernd and Bieringer, see also Bronislaw Malinowski, The Ethnography of Malinowski: The Trobriand Islands (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan, 1979), 79.

8 H. Paul Santmire argues that, when used theologically, the word "ecological" is rightly understood "as pertaining to a system of interrelationships between God, humanity, and nature." See Santmire, The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology, 9.
In the third section, I describe how Christian religious institutions harness their moral authority to act powerfully and persuasively on public issues and alongside other prevailing establishments to push forward an ecologically-informed paradigm shift. Since Christian religious institutions have often employed their influence to sway public conscience toward a concern for the needs of the poor and oppressed, I argue that, in light of the ecological “signs of the times” outlined in chapter two, Christian communities should “green” themselves and apply their influence to an expanded sense of moral concern for the Earth in addition to their concerns for poor and oppressed human populations. This section describes how accounts of theological anthropology and cosmology function in and through institutional power on the one hand, and how they can influence those social structures governing decisions made by human communities on the other.

In the chapter’s fourth and final section, I acknowledge some possible problems or lacunae that an expansion of moral concern for the Earth opens ups. A noteworthy aspect of the way I argue for expanding moral concern to include concern for ecological and planetary systems also includes a turn to ecological and evolutionary science as a way to inform contemporary theology. While I think reclaimed and reimagined accounts of Christian theology can be informed by the best science of our day in order to offer help in this time of ecological need, I acknowledge that there may be some perils in doing

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This section grapples especially with issues of death and suffering when nature is perceived as not always so "nice," specifically with regard to the way evolution functions through natural selection with relative indifference to themes of Christian solidarity and hope.

**The Need for an Ecologically-Informed Paradigm Shift**

Thomas Berry’s account of cosmological and planetary history is often endorsed by Roman Catholic theologians for the way in which it emphasizes the interrelated and interdependent themes of ecology and evolution on the one hand and Christian mysticism and spirituality on the other. One passage in which this connection is clearly evident can be found when Barry notes that:

The story of the universe is the story of the emergence of a galactic system in which each new level of expression emerges through the urgency of self-transcendence. Hydrogen in the presence of some millions of degrees of heat emerges into helium. After the stars take shape as oceans of life in the heavens, they go through a sequence of transformations. Some eventually explode into the stardust out of which the solar system and the earth take shape. Earth gives unique expression of itself in its rock and crystalline structures and in the variety and splendor of living forms, until humans appear as the moment in which the unfolding universe becomes conscious of itself. The human emerges not only as an earthling, but as a worldling. We bear the universe in our beings as the universe bears us in its being. The two have a total presence to each other and to that deeper mystery out of which both the universe and ourselves have emerged.¹¹

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¹⁰ In this section, I do not propose an argument in favor of Intelligent Design and I do not propose to reject science in favor of Intelligent Design theology. For a helpful and interesting overview of evolution and evolutionary biology within the context of Christian environmentalism broadly, including Intelligent Design approaches specifically, see Lisa Sideris, "Evolving Environmentalism: The Role of Ecotheology in Creation/Evolution Controversies," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 11, no. 1 (2007), 58-82.

Berry’s summary of the evolution of the universe describes how the entire process through which all beings come into being can be interpreted as a moving story with ethical and moral consequences especially for a species like ours that has come into being with a sense of our own conscious self-awareness. For those who engage in theological reflection today, normative claims about the human person and our place in the world cannot responsibly take place without also engaging the scientifically described evolutionary processes out of which both have emerged.12

For example, when Robert A. Ludwig points to Berry’s description of the emergence of human beings within this evolutionary story as “the moment in which the unfolding universe becomes conscious itself,” I think the correct reading of this statement is one that underscores human embeddedness within a cosmic narrative rather than one that sets human beings apart from it as somehow divergent or detached from the world and others in it.13 The human person, like the human species broadly conceived, is most authentically rooted and embedded in the evolutionary process that has birthed


12 Daniel Spencer argues that literacy in both evolutionary theory and scientific methods is so critical for theology that they should be a required component of graduate theological education. See Daniel T. Spencer, "Evolutionary Literacy: A Prerequisite for Theological Education?" *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture & Ecology* 11, no. 1 (03, 2007), 83-102.

everything else in the cosmos into being. This is recognition of a kind of radical
communion or radical continuity, with normative consequences, which binds all life
together through a shared and sacred story.  

For Ludwig and other theologians who borrow inspiration from Berry’s story of
the universe, the Earth’s evolutionary processes are themselves an emergent process of
the universe and they are the mechanism through which the universe births its own
consciousness into being. Through the evolution of conscious self-awareness, existing in
various levels among several species but most impressively in the human species as far as
we know, it is possible to perceive the universe as being able to reflect on itself each time
a person contemplates. In other words, the human species and its evolved sense of
consciousness are in turn demonstrative of a kind of evolved sense of “consciousness” for
the universe itself that is manifest in humanity’s conscious self-awareness. This is a
sense of perceived “consciousness” as pervasive in and through an otherwise material
universe but one that is inherently mysterious to human experience, and so the use of
spiritualized language in reference to that which may otherwise reside beyond description
and often used to refer to divine presence, like “Mystery.”

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14 See also Thomas Berry, The Great Work: Our Way into the Future (New York:
Random House, 1999), 4, 82. See also Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Divine Milieu: An

15 Ludwig, Reconstructing Catholicism: for a New Generation, 98-100, 103; For a
discussion on the way natural selection may favor mystical or "intense spiritual
experiences" in nature, see Terry Louise Terhaar, "Evolutionary Advantages of Intense
no. 3 (09, 2009), 303-339.
Describing consciousness in the universe, or conceiving of God as a divine presence or Mystery that dwells in and amidst the material universe, reveals something of a vibrant and persisting panentheistic tradition that holds in tension both the imminent and transcendent qualities people use to describe their experience of God. If God can be thought of as existing in all things but simultaneously not fully contained or limited by any physical boundaries associated with those things, then God can be said to be dwelling within everything and beyond it all as well. Panentheism, while certainly a Christian way of describing God, is also a way of describing the divine in other religious traditions. Moreover, it is a particularly helpful way of engaging the age-old wisdom inherent in religious creation stories while also acknowledging the newly emerging scientific accounts of human, planetary, and cosmic creation. At heart, an ecological and evolutionary approach to the reconciliation of these two traditions, one stressing imminence and the other transcendence, is really about reclaiming a sense of humanity as being at home on Earth and in nature.

This is a task that, as Max Oelschlaeger puts it, can be “carried on in a variety of ways” across many of the world’s faith traditions because many creation stories “converge on caring for creation.” There is convergence because creation stories and streams of thought across the world’s religions have traditions emphasizing themes promoting holistic conceptualizations of community-wide flourishing over and above

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those themes in which exploitation of the world is somehow defendable because God is wholly transcendent from it. This more communitarian and ecological understanding of the human person, of God, and the world, are quite prominent in many streams of Christian thought and across the ages. Notably, it is a theme in Aquinas’s central priority of the common good over private gain, and this tradition and others like it expressed during the medieval period stands in contrast to prominent streams of modern cosmological and anthropological accounts. Those accounts tend to interpret the person’s primary encounter with God as emerging out of the individual’s conceptual realization of divine grace rather than a direct experience of God in all things. Consequently, a divinized view of the world grounded in ecology and evolutionary history may threaten the primarily mechanistic and economically utilitarian views that arose in a very prominently way during the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution.\(^\text{18}\)

Max Oelschlaeger points to a historical shift in widespread thinking in this regard when he notes the Protestant shift to the individualist realization of grace and movement away from a pre-modern emphasis on the role of sacramentalism. He says:

By proclaiming the central place of the individual in the realization of grace, rather than sacramental ritual administered by the priesthood, Protestantism affected all elements (political, economical, intellectual) of the medieval world, however unclear the exact lines of influence. And worldly success, rather than being prohibited by holy sanction, was now religiously reinforced. The Protestant

believer saw no surer indication that one was chosen (predestined for salvation) than the accumulation of wealth: economic success was a sign of God’s favor.\(^{19}\)

In this passage, Oelschlaeger describes what he sees to be the seeds of an important shift in culture—a general shift in the implicit way the individual is perceived. For Oelschlaeger, as with Max Weber, the advent of the Protestant Reformation is one important factor among several other factors that occurred alongside a larger arc in the trajectory of cultural movements that heralded the beginning of the modern period.\(^{20}\) He continues:

The Reformation did not change the idea of wilderness per se. What had changed, however subtly, was perspective: humankind increasingly looked at the world through economic rather than religious spectacles. Wealth was viewed as virtue, not vice. Wholesale exploitation of the naturally given ensued, for the Protestant goal was to capitalize on nature as rapidly and prosperously as possible. The consumer society lay just around the corner; all that was needed was democratic revolution, techniques of mass production, and the idea of a market society.\(^{21}\)

This is not to say that free markets hinge on religious authority. Rather, it is to acknowledge the powerful way in which historical and social context shapes an individual’s or a community’s interpretive framework, which in turn shapes the way individuals make assumptions about both themselves and the world around them. Core aspects of a largely modern framework continue to understand the human person and structure her or his place in the world in a way that is highly individualistic instead of


communitarian, shaped in terms of mind rather than as an embodied person, and as a consumer rather than as a global citizen.22

Clearly, some positive developments have come out of this historical emphasis on the individual, namely, a predominating sense of concern for personal freedom. The Enlightenment turn toward an emphasis on individual human rights and also toward an appreciation of reason and science was certainly not an ill-formed transformation of the medieval social context, but it may have come at great cost to ways of thinking about the self and the world that are more amenable to an ecologically-responsible perspective. As Susan Thistlethwaite argues:

As human beings became individuals in the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, they discovered “freedom.” There is a good reason why the early centuries of this period are called “The Age of Enlightenment.” But freedom and individuality can also have a price. In a literal sense, some people’s freedom is finally purchased with the freedom of others, if not in actual slavery, then in its economic or social equivalent. In the “Enlightenment” the dominant classes started to understand themselves more as individuals, and less as members of communities, more as “minds” and less as bodies that are part of the natural world. This period accelerated the alienation of a powerful group of people from nature, and from those who symbolize nature, women and non-dominant races.23

Both beneficial and harmful consequences have emerged from the development of complex historical movements. In terms of some streams of thought in modern Christian

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22 Since the world in which people live is increasingly globalized, and since environmental challenges are increasingly global in nature, the question of how theological reflection engages the particular and the global in its contributions to a global ethic, is noteworthy. Jenkins argues that "theological engagement with global ethics begins from practical responses to global problems." See Willis Jenkins, "Global Ethics, Christian Theology, and the Challenge of Sustainability," Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture & Ecology 12, no. 2 (07, 2008), 213.

accounts of theology, broadly speaking, significant shifts from a communitarian and
sacramental worldview to a more individualistic and mechanistic one established a sense
of individual freedom and human dignity.24 Those gains, however, may have come at the
expense of an overriding concern for the common good and the neglect and abuse of
ecological systems. Informed and responsible people cannot overlook how grave
modernity’s neglect and abuse of ecological systems has become. Still, social justice
demands recognition of the moral claim the poor have on society to be free of systemic
neglect and abuse.25

The contemporary ecological and climate crises pose such a significant challenge
partly because the implicit stories—the cosmological and anthropological narratives that
have come to undergird the modern way of thinking sustained by the global economy—
do not square with what is actually known about and happening in the world. The
dominate culture of the modern period has an undercurrent of, as Larry Rasmussen puts
it, “the incapacity to receive the world as a holy mystery and gift; and to stand in utter

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24 C.B. Macpherson describes this general shift in terms of what he calls "possessive
individualism" in the sense that the individual perceives of her or himself as "essentially
the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The
individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as
an owner of himself." See C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive
overview of the cultural aspects of individualism, descriptions of various "modes" of
individualism, and a discussion on the embeddedness of modern individualism within
U.S. American culture, see Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and
Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 27-54,
142-166.

25 With regard to climate change in particular, see Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral
Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (Maryknoll; New York: Orbis Books, 2007),
281-285.
awe and celebration of life as holy mystery and gift.”  Dominating narratives are inadequate partly because they leave a deep hole in the hearts and minds of people who do not have either the time or the privilege to reflect deeply on the fundamental assumptions undergirding their worldviews. Such narratives do not satisfy that part of the human self that longs for a sense of meaning and purpose—the part that needs a way to make sense of things, even if it is implicit and under-examined ways. Also, they leave un-reconciled the dual claims that the global poor and ecological systems now make on all people of good will who seek to create more just and peaceful societies.

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker summarize well the difficulty that they see in Christian communities, which they describe as entwined in the struggle to create just and peaceful societies. Regarding the difficulty those communities have encountered in managing the dual claims of the poor and of ecological systems, they note that:

Where commitments to environmental issues take center stage, discussions of racism and sexism are often attenuated or absent. Where commitments to justice and nonviolence are strong, environmental issues are often neglected. Integrating environmental and social justice issues is difficult when the primary framework is one of nostalgia and hope [rather than a commitment to] working together to shape our homes, workplaces, and cities to be integrated, sustainable, humane environments.

The modern period’s overly reductionist approach to issues is reflected here in the very structure of Brock and Parker’s description of how issues are cleaved in ways that make


them nearly impossible to resolve. They continue by adding that such a framework “allow[s] the privileged leaders of corporations and governments to ignore the way that environmental problems are the new face of racism, sexism, and poverty.” Overly reductionist and individualistic approaches do not adequately address the incredibly complex, interconnected, tangled set of issues that require the attention of those seeking to establish more adequate accounts of cosmology and anthropology—accounts of who we are and what we need to do to sustain a viable presence on this planet.

At bottom, accounts of cosmology and anthropology grounded in an attentive, responsible consideration for the challenges of a contemporary ecological and increasingly globalized social context really need to confront an overly individualistic and rationalistic Enlightenment legacy as well as a consumer-driven culture dependent upon discounted costs of production in which ecological concern is practically non-existent. Instead of addressing these issues, dominant accounts over the last centuries have greatly overemphasized themes of salvation theology and personal and social ethics, underscoring a human-centered historical narrative over and above a more Earthly theological framework and to the near exclusion of other prominent themes in the traditions. What is needed now is to deemphasize those themes that have been recently

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28 Ibid.

29 For an account of the Enlightenment legacy that offers a nuanced description of the various perspectives of key Enlightenment thinkers and the diversity of their views on nature, see Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005). Reill's account demonstrates the peril in assuming only one monolithic approach to nature existed during the time, even if one of instrumental reason did eventually prevail and come to be known as characterizing this period.
overemphasized, partly through a critical recovery of pre-modern creation-centered worldviews and partly by remembering the larger sacramental context in which Christian theology can be done. This necessarily sets the stage for a kind of “body theology” that is thoroughly grounded in a sense of human embeddedness in, and amongst, other bodies who share in an Earthly ecological context and evolutionary history.

James E. Nelson offers a helpful description of this kind of “body theology” when he says:

Body theology starts with the fleshy experience of life—with our hungers and our passions, our bodily aliveness and deadness, with the smell of coffee, with the homeless and the hungry we see on our streets, with the warm touch of a friend, with bodies violated and torn apart in war, with the scent of honeysuckle or the soft sting of autumn air on the cheek, with bodies tortured and raped, with the bodyself making love with the beloved and lovemaking with the earth.30

The starting point is not, at least for those Christians who see the world as the good creation of a good and loving God, a human-centered story of Jesus on the cross dying for human salvation. It is rather a cosmic Christ who entered into the world as an embodied person—as an incarnate creator deity dwelling in and amidst its own creation—because the Creator so loved the world.31

There needs to be a shift in focus in the way human beings imagine their identity within this kind of liberative and creation-centered framework. Elizabeth Johnson observes and then argues that:

All contextual, liberation, feminist, and post-colonial theologies proceed with the realization that while dominant theologies may include “the other” in some


31 This is a reference to John 3:16.
beneficial manner, the center of their intellectual and ethical interest remains the advantaged group, which does less than justice to those on the margins. The focus has to shift to those who have been silenced, so that their voices are heard and they are seen as of central importance in themselves. In a similar manner, the nascent field of ecological theology asks that we give careful consideration to the natural world in its own right as an irreplaceable element in the theological project.\(^3\)

The chief goals of ecological theology, with an emphasis on the inherent goodness of the world and its planetary flourishing, are different from a theology that emphasizes salvation for individual humans, and salvation from their Earthly experience. They are different because they assert, instead, an understanding of the human person whose salvation is directly tied up with both other people and that of the Earth and the flourishing of Earth’s ecological systems. Each of these aspects say something important about what is needed in the kind of ecologically-informed paradigm shift in which I think Christian communities can play an active and constructive role.

In the next section, I point to the promise and possibilities inherent to the kind of ecologically-informed accounts of Christian theological anthropology and cosmology that are capable of building the social change and institutional transformation necessary for our species to remake our world into one that is more hospitable to the flourishing of all life on the planet and also more equitable. I think these examples, placed in dialogue with and alongside their parallels in the sacramental life of living Christian faith communities, reflect the kind of narratives with the mental and emotional energy people require for the great work of changing the trajectory of human cultural development away from environmental degradation and toward a vision of ecological responsibility and

\(^3\) Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, xv.
social justice. Put simply, the kind of radical individualism and ecological discontinuity found in those accounts of Christian theology that emerged and came to predominate through institutional power largely during the modern period are not the only perspectives from which religious traditions draw the necessary energy in order to help people make sense of their world and the lives they lead in it.

**Examples of Ecologically-Informed Accounts of Christian Theological Anthropology and Cosmology**

Roman Catholic and some Protestant traditions continue in their religious practices a ritualized notion of sacramentality. For example, the idea that God’s real presence can be experienced through the sacraments of bread and wine is believed by many Christians to be one of the most direct and accessible ways they encounter God—a weekly reminder that God can be met in and through common elements around a common table. For those Christian religious communities that do maintain robust sacramental traditions, the bread and wine of the communion table might be able to serve as powerful reminders of God’s presence in the world and of the miracle of creation. In other words, a reclaimed sacramental tradition may be one helpful entry point for living Christian communities to engage in and sustain a deepened kind of ecological reflection.

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33 This is a passing reference to Augustine's declaration that a single grain of any seed can inspire awe because it reflects the miraculous works of God (paraphrased). Margaret Miles cites this directly and adds that for Augustine, it is only a failure to order affections rightly and to use our senses that prevents us from experiencing this miracle of creation. See Margaret R. Miles, *Augustine on the Body* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 38.
at the heart of religious life. The Eucharist, however, has all too often not been interpreted across the traditions in the broader sort of sacramental sense that might deepen ecological reflection for Christians today. A sustained focus on only the way in which the Eucharist is shared and with whom, an over emphasis on the Bible and on God’s activity within the four walls of a Church have tended to eclipse some of the more ecological aspects of sacramental theology.

During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther is said to have argued that God is as present in his cabbage soup as in the sacraments of bread and wine, albeit hidden in the former and revealed in the latter. His claim is sometimes interpreted as one that either downplays the importance of sacramentality or denigrates how one encounters the divine through the sacraments, but it is understood rightly as his recognition of God’s all-pervading presence in the world. Since the Reformation, some Christian traditions no longer emphasize sacramental theology or acknowledge a sacramental aspect to the ritual and practice of communion in their traditions. The ritual is nonetheless still considered a sacred experience by many Christian communities that continue to set aside bread and wine as special items in which the divine can be imminently and directly encountered in

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35 Thomas Berry's notorious suggestion that Christians place the Bible on the shelf for a while is partly his reaction to this concern that there has long been an over emphasis on God's expression through the written word rather than in the natural world. See Ervin Laszlo and Allan Combs, *Thomas Berry, Dreamer of the Earth: The Spiritual Ecology of the Father of Environmentalism* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2011), 25.

the coming-together of God’s people around a common table. This does not mean, however, that those who participate in the practice as a regular part of their religious life are aware of the profound significance of the ritual’s sacramental undergirding. Instead, the ritual can have the opposite effect on people in the pews, drawing their attention to a nearly exclusive focus on God’s activity in and through the institutional church and away from God’s all-pervading presence in the natural world.

Other religious traditions have their own rich history and practice of recognizing the sacredness of things like a grove of trees, a body of water, or a stream in arguably similar ways many Christians revere the sacred elements of the bread and wine or baptismal waters.\(^ {37}\) In this section, I point to specific ways in which a critical recovery of core aspects of Christian traditions can be realized in the living theology and religious narratives and rituals of Christian faith communities. Oelschlaeger argues that most of the world religions have within them much to draw upon and room to grow their general concern for Creation.\(^ {38}\) The Christian traditions are included here, with much to draw from and point to in pre-modern creation-centered worldviews that work far better with the emerging ecological and evolutionary worldview than some relatively recent aspects

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\(^{37}\) Rosemary Radford Ruether offers a helpful overview of the importance of the sacramental tradition within Christian traditions, though she cautions that the helpfulness of the sacramental traditions can only be responsibly reclaimed if they are reshaped in ways that free them of their patriarchal heritage. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1992), 9, 229-253.

\(^{38}\) Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis*, 105.
of modern theology.\(^{39}\) Ecologically-informed accounts of God and the cosmos can inspire a renewed focus on the primacy of the world as a subject itself and help Christians develop a more adequate set of focused ethical priorities.

Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology, Body of God, and the Ecological Self*

Sallie McFague is Distinguished Theologian in Residence at the Vancouver School of Theology, has previously served on the faculties of Harvard Divinity School and Vanderbilt Divinity School, and has published prolifically since the 1980s on the topic of “metaphorical theology” and its later application to issues of ecological concern.\(^{40}\) She has been called a “key voice in urging the reading of the scripture as metaphor” and in “connecting the pre-modern to the modern.”\(^{41}\) McFague’s approach to cosmology adopts a contemporary, scientific worldview and an ecological understanding of the person as emergent from an evolving universe as the lens through which she approaches theology. She rightly asserts that scientific accounts of the evolution of the universe are “the necessary starting point for any twenty-first-century anthropology.”\(^{42}\)

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\(^{41}\) See Alastair McIntosh, "A New Climate for Theology," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 5, no. 3 (09, 2011), 384-386. While McIntosh's review of McFague's longstanding legacy and her recent work is generally positive, as noted, he does offer a critique of her allegedly inadequate treatment of postmodernism.

McFague identifies one specific part of those accounts as particularly helpful in articulating a reclaimed theological anthropology and cosmology for the twenty-first-century; namely, it is the part that “implies...all things are interrelated and interdependent in both macro and micro ways.”

McFague maintains that the problem of climate change arises out of an anthropology that too heavily emphasizes the wants of the individual rather than the health and flourishing of the ecological and human communities to which the individual belongs. She asserts that “Western societies have spent the last three hundred years internalizing an anthropology of radical individualism,” and she urges that “we now must internalize a profoundly different anthropology if our planet is to survive and flourish” in light of the challenges put forth by climate change.

The pertinent question arises: What might a different account of theological anthropology look like—one that is both ecologically informed and rooted in some of the prominent themes of reclaimed pre-modern Christian theologies? McFague crafts her theological anthropology around the primary concern that whatever it means to be human in this era of ecological destruction, it must necessarily embrace a focus on those aspects of the human person’s core identity as a species grounded in an account of creation that sees the world (and even the universe) as a subject itself. As McFague argues for Christian communities, the context “is not me and my salvation nor even the salvation of human beings, but the planet’s well-being.”

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43 Ibid., 46.

44 Ibid., 48.

Creator who dwells in and amidst all things and as a source of all life and sustaining vitality, then the focus can shift from one that emphasizes human-centric, salvation-focused themes to themes of a cosmic nature that include the flourishing of all life everywhere.\textsuperscript{46}

The flourishing of the planet becomes the primary context in which, as McFague puts it, the Earth’s subjectivity is restored and human subjectivity is recognized as being in relation with a cosmos of other subjects:

The view of the self or subject that emerges within this context for theology is not the individual who is “saved” for life in another world, but a thoroughly embodied, relational subject who understands herself or himself as interdependent with everyone and everything else. The subject that both postmodernism and the liberation theologies rightly object to is the separate, individualistic, selfish, pretentious self who refuses to acknowledge its radical relativity.\textsuperscript{47}

In short, the world is not a place from which a person needs to be saved in order to experience God’s fullness. God is rather experienced in and through the here and now. For McFague, the world is a place where all subjects in the universe are infused with, and can genuinely encounter, the spirit of God who dwells in and among all things. The human person, understood in terms such as these, is rightly recognized as a self, but also

\textsuperscript{46} My argument here is not against soteriology but rather its relatively modern predominance in Christian theology at the expense of creation themes. The "greening" of Christian soteriology may indeed be a fruitful avenue in addition to a renewed focus on creation as a subject itself. For various examples of ways theologians and ethicists endeavor to ecologize Christian soteriology, see the contributions in Ernst M. Conradie and Willis Jenkins, eds., \textit{Ecology and Christian Soteriology} [Special issue of \textit{Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology}], Vol. 14 (Num: 2-3, 2010), 107-265.

\textsuperscript{47} McFague, \textit{Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril}, 31.
as a self that is thoroughly embedded within the larger framework of creation—a sacred cosmos.\(^{48}\)

McFague calls this self the “ecological self” and argues that, with these accounts of God, the world, and the human person, theology becomes a “functional activity” whose chief goal is to “help the world prosper.”\(^{49}\) When the world is seen as a place in which the human person is fully embodied and authentically embedded as an Earthly creature and therefore as a being whose flourishing is tied up with all other forms of life, transcendent and eschatologically salvific themes are displaced as themes of primary significance and replaced by themes emphasizing God’s work in the world and human participation in that work.

According to McFague, however, this is not a central theme in modern theology, and it presents a significant stumbling block that could hinder the Christian community from playing a constructive role in the challenges of the contemporary ecological crisis. McFague asserts that:

Most people in Western democracies think they are, basically and centrally, “individuals.” They do not, first of all, think of themselves as members of a community, not of a human community and even less of a natural or planetary community […] What if we discover that individualistic anthropology is a lie, that ecological anthropology is truer to the way things are? […] What if a very different view of who we think we are should become common, become

\(^{48}\) This is different from the way that some might describe the human person in terms of evolutionary biology. For McFague, a sense of the "self" remains, but others might interpret the ecological continuity of the human person so materially as to conclude that autonomous human consciousness, and regard for the "self," is wholly illusory. See, for example, Harold Fromm, *The Nature of being Human: From Environmentalism to Consciousness* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 245-246.

\(^{49}\) McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*, 31, 32., 31, 32.
conventional, become “natural”? […] Global warming is not just another important issue that human beings need to deal with; rather, it is the demand that we live differently. We cannot solve it, deal with it, given our current anthropology. It is not simply an issue of management; rather, it demands a paradigm shift in who we think we are. This is certainly not the only thing that is needed, but it is a central one.\(^{50}\)

While some thought forms of Christian theology have stressed the order of creation and the work of divine providence for the vast majority of Christianity’s history up to the modern period, they have been eclipsed by a turn toward the individualistic self and result in an impoverished and materialistic view of the Earth ecological complexity.\(^{51}\)

McFague’s accounts of God and the cosmos reclaim an understanding of the divine that sees God as metaphorically enmeshed within the earth’s ecosystems as its “source of life and vitality.”\(^{52}\) Her account maintains a vision of God that both dwells within species and ecosystems and beyond them at the same time. The transcendent qualities of God have long been an enduring part of the Christian traditions, but they have tended to exist in tension alongside God’s imminent qualities, largely until the modern period. The traditions describe God as capable of residing both imminently within the sphere of creation and also wholly transcending all matter in much the same way that air dwells both in and around all breathing creatures.

\(^{50}\) McFague, A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming, 44.


McFague’s account offers a metaphor of the universe as the body for the spirit of God. The terms “spirit” and “body” figure prominently in McFague’s metaphor and may initially appear to represent a heavily dualistic metaphor much like the mind/body metaphor, which asserts an understanding of God as orderer and controller of the universe. McFague’s use of the term “spirit,” however, may not be as esoteric and dis-embodied as it sounds.\(^{53}\) She uses it in a way that refers to the human experience of that which “enlivens” and “energizes” the universe in the same way a team’s “spirit” energizes it to win a game or a spirit of resolution and vitality binds a group of people together “in a common cause to oppose oppression.”\(^{54}\) McFague uses the term “spirit” in the same wide-ranging way it is used in common discourse and describes it as “a term with many meanings built upon its physical base as the breath of life.”\(^{55}\) For McFague, “spirit” is not a term she intends to convey any kind of dualism; rather, she uses it in keeping with an integrated theology of the body.

McFague asserts that interpreting the world as a divinely inspirited body is not only authentically rooted in the Christian traditions, but is also a strategically helpful metaphor for faith communities seeking a creation-centered framework for the new challenges posed to the traditions by the ecological and climate crises. She sees her task as one of reclaiming those themes deeply embedded within the traditions. She does as much by grounding her theology in the parable of the feast and the traditions of the

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\(^{53}\) Ibid., 144-145.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 143.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 143.
sacramental theology connected to that parable. Her description of the parable reflects the way in which her model for God continues the dramatic shift in theological themes away from a focus on the individual self toward a focus on a more communitarian worldview, in much the same way that an emphasis on the sacramental aspects of the tradition extends Christian concern for Christ’s body to include a concern for the entire body of Creation.

For example, McFague suggests that, within the ancient Mediterranean context in which early Christians struggled with a fear of the unclean, the communion table was a radical place where the way in which early Christians related to each other was transformed. It asserted a radical egalitarianism in which all people were invited to share bread and wine around a common table, regardless of social position or ceremonial cleanliness. To illustrate this concept, McFague quotes John D. Crossan, who explained that the communion table was intended to be a place where “[t]he Kingdom of God […] began at the level of the body and appeared as a shared community of healing and eating—that is to say, of spiritual and physical resources available to each and all without discrimination, or hierarchies.”56 Put differently, the consumption of the sacred elements of bread and wine served a functional role in religious life—one that broke down socially constructed barriers between individuals through a ritual that nourished the physical body by way of food and drink and also ground the person in a communitarian context around a shared table. The tradition was socially disruptive for early Christian communities in

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the way that it radically extended a sense of egalitarianism amidst the community of believers. In light of the contemporary ecological crisis, sacramental theology might be helpful to a creation-centered framework if Christian communities are able to receive the tradition in ways that do not focus attention exclusively on the body of Christ in the Eucharist but rather empower Christians to see the habit of a community coming together around a shared table as an expression of God’s embodiment within and concern for all of Creation.

Crossan points to Augustine’s description of the sacramental theology, specifically the sacramental aspects of bread and wine, as a powerful way in which contemporary Christians can imagine themselves in communion with the larger global community and in relation to a sacred world. William Cavanaugh suggests that the act of consumption can work both ways: taking things into oneself and being taken up into something greater than oneself. He cites to, and then paraphrases Augustine’s sacramental description of common elements, when he quotes Augustine:

“I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me.” In the Christian view, we do not simply stand apart, as individuals, from the rest of creation—appropriating, consuming, and discarding. In the Eucharist, we are absorbed into a larger body. The small individual self is de-centered and put in the context of a much wider community of participation with others.

57 Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, 113-114.


59 Ibid., 54-55.
The ramifications of this interpretation may hold significant potential for impacting economic life in an ecologically appropriate way if the significance of sacramental theology lies less in functions of eternal salvation and more in its ability to transform the individual’s concept of self and relations in the world by bringing people into a fuller communion with the rest of humanity and the ecological systems in which the human species shares the planet.

In this sacramental framework that Cavanaugh pulls forward from Augustine’s description, the human person is a distinct individual but is also one who identifies so intimately with the poor and oppressed neighbor in need that the “very distinction between what is mine and what is yours breaks down [...] your pain is my pain, and my stuff is available to be communicated to you in your need.”60 This re-evaluation of what the Christian religious traditions have to say about the human person has serious implications for not only the individual’s interpersonal relationships, but also the relationships individuals and communities have with material goods, the processes of consuming those goods, and all other beings. In effect, it transforms the primary way Christians may ask the question, “What does it mean to be human?” by instead asking, “What does it mean to be human within the context of a sacred cosmos?”

These interpretations of the larger meaning and purpose to be found in Christian sacramental traditions, offer a challenging call of transformation to living Christian faith communities today. It is not enough for Christians to take a wafer and contemplate Christ’s suffering on the cross—that misses the whole point of the important ways

60 Ibid., 56.
sacramental theology is understood at the communion table. Rather, if such Christian traditions are practiced in light of their sacramentalism, then one might do well to remember the suffering and degraded planet upon which all people depend and upon which the poorest among us suffer amidst the most severe forms of poverty. McFague observes and asserts that “[u]nlike […] first-century Mediterranean counterparts, North American middle-class Christians are not terrified by the unclean, but […] are terrified by the poor.”61 McFague further argues that such fear is rightly understandable if the sacramental nature of the Christian communion table is appropriately internalized, since it demands Christians acknowledge the sacred nature of the Earth and “share the planet’s resources justly and sustainably with all” of the billions of poor around the world.62 She notes that the economic and political aspect of communitarian claims like these “demands basic changes in our economic policies toward greater egalitarianism at all levels.”63 Moreover, consideration for the needs of the poor cannot remain limited to just those people who can barely subsist but should also be extended in some significant way to those species and ecological communities with whom all people share this sacred Earth.

Extending this consideration not only means learning to live differently alongside all other beings, but more fundamentally learning to see the human species itself in a way that is more accurately informed by its ecological context and evolutionary past. For McFague, ecological and evolutionary accounts of creation offer a chance to see the

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
human person in a biologically continuous and pivotal way when she describes humanity’s evolved sense of consciousness within the larger context of Earth’s evolutionary history. Regarding that scientific account of creation, she says:

> It is a story in which we human beings are, at present, the most complex developed creatures on earth, yet we are imbedded in, the products of, the earth and its evolution. [...] We share a common origin with everything else [...] and could not have arrived any earlier than we did: we needed the billions of years of the evolving universe for us to appear. We are part and parcel of all that has gone before us: they are our ancestors, our kin, our roots. [...] And yet we are special, *as is everything else* [emphasis added]. Our “specialty” [or ecological niche] is self-consciousness: we know that we know. [...] We are by no means the only distinctive creatures: all creatures are. Would a dolphin think we could swim? An eagle that we could fly? A deer that we could run? [...] What our peculiar distinction has led us to see is that, given our present numbers and power, we have the ability to be either for or against the rest of nature. We are not the only ones who matter, but we are the ones who are increasingly responsible for the others in creation [...] we now know that “who we are” is interconnected with all other living things.  

The evolutionary process birthed the ability for conscious self-awareness or reflective consciousness; it is an ability that has emerged quite impressively in the human species even though it may exist to some degree in other species as well. That ability, however, does not divorce our species from its evolutionary continuity with all other life on Earth any more than a bird’s ability to fly might divorce it. All life on Earth shares in this evolutionary story.

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64 Ibid., 46-48.

The human species is indeed special, but as McFague observes, so are all creatures because they are all grounded in an ecological, evolutionary account of cosmology. All life and all species are special in each of their own distinctive capacities just as all species in an ecosystem have their own unique ecological *niche*. That is not necessarily, though, the same as saying that all species are to be regarded with equal concern when needs compete or that all other species ought to be regarded by our species according to the same moral standards. Certain distinctions may very well merit certain moral and ecological privileges and responsibilities. My argument at this point, however, is that the various distinctions between species do not, or ought not, generate an arbitrary dividing line in some “great chain of being” that gives to one species the conceptual freedom to treat the Earth and all others in it as a kind of blank check to do with whatever the wealthiest and most powerful among us might wish.66

As McFague notes, both our understanding of individual human consciousness and of human societies generally evolve over time. So, as humanity’s collective sense of

consciousness and as societies continue to evolve over time, people may be increasingly able to see themselves as individuals, as communities, and as a species, quite differently than they did during the rise of free market systems and the Industrial Revolution that ushered in the modern era.\textsuperscript{67} Informed by a scientifically articulated understanding of ecology and the evolution of planetary and human history, and forced to reconsider the modern cosmological and anthropological paradigm, McFague is quite hopeful that it may now be possible to:

[...] see ourselves differently: not as post-Enlightenment individuals who have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but as part of a vast network of interrelationships, and specifically as the “part” responsible for the rest, for other human beings and other life-forms.\textsuperscript{68}

If such a paradigm shift in the West’s predominating, normative worldviews is indeed possible, then it very well may entail replacing the kind of radical individualism that arose to such prominence during the modern era with a more communitarian and ecological understanding of the human person as embedded within and responsible for maintaining Earth’s ecological integrity.

With the body as locus for experience with an indwelling divinity and a context in which the flourishing of the planet’s species and ecosystems is primary, sacramental theology may be one important way for how Christians approach their faith traditions in

\textsuperscript{67} David Wilson argues that human society can be thought of as a kind of organism that is capable of culturally evolving in such a way that human society allows the species to do things individuals could not do alone as individuals. Thought of in this way, he posits then that morality and religion may be perceived of as playing an adaptive function for society in which society can grow and evolve over time in much the same way individual species do. See David Sloan Wilson, \textit{Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

\textsuperscript{68} McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming}, 48.
light of the necessary ecological and social context that accompanies global climate change. For McFague, who approaches the communion table from such a perspective, she says of that practice:

It reminds us that our planet is a deteriorating body in desperate need, and only as we begin to live differently—to live by its house rules of just distribution and sustainability—will we begin to respond appropriately to the crisis.  

Put differently, a sacramental approach to Christian religious traditions that are responsive to the particularities of the contemporary ecological context is such when it challenges Christians to a kind of radical communitarianism that acknowledges human equity and ecological embodiment. Christian religious communities are ecologically responsible when they are able to harness the power and potential of their traditions in a way that encourages and inspires Christians to see themselves in right relations with others and with the planet itself, whose needs are worthy of moral consideration. In essence, McFague argues that God’s love and the Christian community’s responsibilities extend “not just [to] needy human beings, but the air, the water, the land, and each and every creature, no matter how small and seemingly insignificant.”

Such an interpretation serves to inform, and be informed by, important traditions in the Christian intellectual heritage. But what, more precisely, does it actually look like to invite not only needy human beings to the table, but also air and water and land, as Sallie McFague suggests? Moreover, what does it look like to make such an invitation in a way that is meaningful and helpful to the globe’s most marginalized people? How does

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69 Ibid., 94.

70 Ibid., 93.
the deeply profound indwelling of the divine in a sacramental world inspire a New
Creation Story that lends itself to inspiring responsible decisions about, and responses to,
today’s most pressing ecological and environmental challenges? What role can religious
establishments realistically play in establishing the kind of paradigm shift that is
necessary? What might be some of the limitations of, or challenges to, these worldviews
if they become normative in Christian communities? My responses to the first couple
questions constitute much of the substance of the dissertation’s concluding chapter and I
grapple with the latter two questions in the third and fourth sections of this chapter,
respectively. But first, I turn to Thomas Berry’s work in the following sub-section in
order to address specifically the way ecology and evolution might inform a New Creation
Story with practical implications for religious communities.

Thomas Berry, Ecology, and the Story of Evolution as the New Creation Story

Fr. Thomas Berry (1914-2009), named William Nathan at birth, was a Catholic
priest who entered the Passionist Order in high school and assumed his new name
because of his high regard for St. Thomas Aquinas.71 Berry trained as a cultural

71 Mary Evelyn Tucker, "Biography of Thomas Berry," The Thomas Berry Foundation,
www.ThomasBerry.org (accessed October, 2014). In preparing this section on Thomas
Berry, I am indebted to Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and the Forum on Religion and
Ecology at Yale Divinity School for hosting "Living Cosmology: Christian Responses to
Journey of the Universe" from 7-9 November 2014 in New Haven, CT. The conference
yielded many excellent papers on Berry's work and I am particularly grateful for the
personal stories and first-hand accounts of Thomas Berry offered by those who knew him
well, including Tom and Catherine Keevey whose correspondence and gracious resource
sharing has been invaluable to my understanding of Thomas Berry, the man behind his
books. See also Thomas Keevey, "Thomas Berry, C.P.: The Passionist Heritage in the
Great Work" (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, paper presented at the
"Colloquium on Thomas Berry’s Work: Development, Difference, Importance,
Applications" sponsored by the Center for Ecozoic Societies and Carolina Seminars of
the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 28-30 May 2014, 2014).
historian, writing his dissertation on Giambattista Vico—a philosophical historian whose project was to articulate operative patterns and delineate historical periods in history from a “big picture” perspective. Vico’s periodization of history is reflected in Berry’s own periodization framework and naming of historical periods that feature prominently in his work alongside the seismic shifts of cultural awareness and cultural change that he argues happen during the transitions from one period to another.

Earlier in Berry’s academic career, and probably inspired in part from his direct experience of living in China in 1948, he focused on the history of cultures and religions in East Asia. As President of the American Teilhard Association from 1975 to 1987, Berry began to develop more clearly his own unique project around ecology and the story of evolution as the “new creation story.” The legacy of Berry’s project, the creation of a unitive vision or a kind of grand narrative with practical implications for daily living, is one that he hopes will “sustain human civilization in its transformation” from the present modern era of ecological destruction into a new ecological or “Ecozoic Era” of restored human–Earth relations.

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72 See Thomas Berry, "The Historical Theory of Giambattista Vico" (PhD Diss., Catholic University of America Press, 1949).


75 See, for example, Berry, *The New Story*.

For Berry, participating constructively in this transition is what he considers to be the “great work” of the present time—our time. The “our” to which he so often refers is not one group of people who share one particular religious, social, cultural worldview but rather it refers to *homo sapiens sapiens*, the human species as it is broadly considered. He calls this “The Great Work,” and its task is “to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.” For Berry, humanity’s social institutions play an important and practical role in carrying out the concrete work involved in such a transition, while religious institutions specifically help push other institutions by offering the psychic, spiritual, and religious energy necessary to inspire people in their efforts.

He argues that all human contributions, fields of study, and social institutions ought to contribute in some way to this necessary historical and cultural transition. For Berry, Christians do this by turning to the book of nature as a revelatory text in which certain aspects of the natural order become normative for all aspects of their life, however they may contribute to society. Once while reflecting on a meadow, Berry had a realization that has become a normative part of his ethic. It is summarized as follows:

> Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good [...] what is good recognizes the rights of this meadow and the creek and the woodlands beyond to exist and flourish in their ever-renewing seasonal expression even while larger processes shape the bioregion in its sequence of transformation.\(^\text{78}\)

\(^\text{77}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^\text{78}\) Ibid., 13.
Since “rights” language is inherently assertive and strong language, it is important to consider how he uses the concept of “rights” in this context. He endeavors to nuance his use and is not endeavoring to extend human rights to things like meadows and creeks. Rather, he argues that “[t]rees have tree rights, insects have insect rights, rivers have river rights, mountains have mountain rights [...] all rights are limited and relative.”

Berry’s use of this language echoes a Thomistic framework of the common good tradition, in which people may “own property in accord with the well-being of the property and for the benefit of the larger community as well as ourselves.”

Consideration for the needs of the poor and marginalized today ought to include consideration for the needs of endangered species, polluted streams, and entire ecological systems. We are, as Berry so eloquently puts it, “in between stories,” wherein the “old story” is no longer adequate, partly because it does not allow for the necessary expanding of moral consideration from a singular emphasis on human needs to include those needs of other species and the ecological systems on which humans depend. This is implicitly part of the paradigm shift from an overly anthropocentric worldview to an appropriately reclaimed creation-centered framework that is so necessary for human flourishing. A theme found across Thomas Berry’s writing is his argument that creation-centered or “ecocentric” worldviews are found explicitly in some contemporary indigenous communities. He argues that some ancient societies have been able to sustain themselves...

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79 Ibid., 5.
80 Ibid.
81 Berry, The Dream of the Earth, 123.
ecologically into the present age precisely because they operate out of an ecocentric worldview that acknowledges the limitations and sacredness of ecological systems.\textsuperscript{82}

In this way, Berry envisions a reclaiming of certain pre-modern aspects of an ecocentric worldview as necessarily replacing those dominant streams of thought that have become predominate since the advent of the modern period. According to this view, since human well-being is now so thoroughly wrapped up with the flourishing of the planet itself, we have a moral obligation to make the continued functioning of the Earth’s ecosystems a primary concern in all decisions made and debated in the public square. It is increasingly clear that for humanity, and for the poorest in our societies as well, the ability to survive and thrive is inseparable from the flourishing of the planet as a whole. Furthermore, a new way of motivating people to reclaim a creation-centered framework that is rooted in an ecological and evolutionary account, or the “Epic of Evolution” as Berry calls it, is necessary in order to replace the deeply ingrained modern frameworks that cloud human judgment at this precarious time in globalized society’s development.\textsuperscript{83}

That new framework, inspired by both pre-modern accounts of the human person embedded within a framework of creation and also contemporary ecological and evolutionary knowledge, has been developed and articulated in new and compelling ways. Thomas Berry, a priest and theologian, co-authored a book with Brian Swimme, a


\textsuperscript{83} Thomas Berry, \textit{Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community}, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 113-125.
noted physicist, in which they describe theories of contemporary scientific cosmology and tell the story of human and planetary evolution in a way that it can become the foundation for an informed theological anthropology and cosmology.\textsuperscript{84} That story has also been turned into a gripping film, broadcast on publicly accessible networks like PBS and Netflix.\textsuperscript{85}

Ludwig’s and McFague’s contributions demonstrate their appreciation for the important role this ecological theological anthropology and evolutionary cosmology might play in reframing the way Christian communities incorporate a sense of human embeddedness within their theologies. The embeddedness of people, and the human species broadly speaking, within an ecological context and evolutionary story interprets any special or distinctive attributes pertaining to our species as simultaneously wound up with and connected to every other being with which our species has shared in the evolutionary process. As noted in Ludwig’s and McFague’s accounts as well, special or distinctive attributes that can be associated with the human species (whatever they may be) do not necessarily imply separation from everything else but rather cosmic unity and continuity with everything else. That is because they are interpreted from within a unifying context and story—one in which each species emerges from a shared process.


Individual species may occupy a specific *niche*, but it is one that functions within a shared planetary ecosystem.  

The highly developed and evolved ability for self-conscious reflection emergent in our species, though not necessarily wholly exclusive to our species, could be conceived of as a kind of ecological *niche*, which the human species fills at this particular moment in Earth history and which we may choose to occupy with increasingly focused intentionality. By becoming more aware of both humanity’s role in Earth’s ecological decline and also the collective power now at our disposal to change that trajectory, we might instead be able to create a new set of human–Earth relations upon which human civilizations take responsibility for maintaining the flourishing of all life on Earth. This evolutionary ability to reflect self-consciously on ourselves and our role in the world around us may be the key to the kind of “ecological revolution” in our thinking that is needed in order to ensure our continued survival on this planet.  

Thomas Berry’s description of the universe and its Earthly inhabitants as a communion of deeply connected subjects offers a framework that sees the human person as thoroughly embedded in a larger community of accountability. Berry is well-known for this perspective, and it stands in resistance to the Kantian idea that the ability of

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(human) reason is the sole source of subjectivity, reducing all else to mere objects of human study.\(^8\) Berry’s concern seems to be that the modern sciences implicitly harbor this Kantian idea. This concern sobers his otherwise positive embrace of the sciences, as seen in his statement, when he observes: “[t]he difficulty [...] with the rise of the modern sciences [is] we began to think of the universe as a collection of objects rather than as a communion of subjects.”\(^8\) If the human person is not adequately situated within an ecological context, then, Berry argues, the human species finds itself “ethically destitute” at a time when humanity most needs its ethical traditions in order to respond effectively to the incredible challenges of the eco-crisis.\(^9\)

Berry’s perspective, like McFague’s, betrays a worry about the prevailing dominance of an overly anthropocentric focus in predominant streams of modern thought.\(^9\) Such streams of thought generally fail to acknowledge the ecological interconnectedness of the human species with all other life forms. They tend to focus on themes of personal salvation and the transcendent qualities of a divine being, often to the exclusion of any imminent qualities that might better attend to the challenges posed by a people living beyond the natural limits of what planetary systems can bear. If that worry

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\(^8\) For example, Kant posits that "[...] a human being really finds in himself a capacity by which he distinguishes himself from all other things, even from himself insofar as he is affected by objects, and that is reason." See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* [Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten], trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 57.

is as well-founded as I think it is, then the question remains: How can religious establishments push forward an ecologically-informed paradigm shift?

**How Can Religious Establishments Push Forward an Ecologically-Informed Paradigm Shift?**

Sallie McFague argues that, as they stand presently, “the three major societal institutions of religion, economics, and government all agree on a basic anthropology—one that focuses on, supports, and celebrates the needs and wants of individuals.”

She contends that, during the Protestant Reformation, Western expressions of Christianity generally took a turn toward the prioritization of those theological aspects of the traditions that overly focused on the individual before God rather than, and often at the exclusion of, a framework of theology emphasizing the Creator in relation to the entire community of creation.

This infatuation with, and alleged overemphasis on, a kind of radical individualism by those institutions emerging from the spheres of religion, economics, and government sustains a set of worldviews, values, and beliefs that contribute generally to the larger problems driving ecological degradation and climate change.

As already noted, her theological anthropology essentially deemphasizes the significant role she thinks individualistic conceptualizations of the self ought to play in

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93 Ibid., 45.

94 For a helpful overview of the deep-seated nature of individualism in U.S. culture, see Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 142-144; See also Oelschlaeger, who refers to "utilitarian individualism" as the "lingua franca of society and politics" in Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis*, 9-13.
contemporary society, arguing instead for an anthropology that recognizes the ecological embeddedness of “embodied persons.”

Thomas Berry makes an astute observation and a fascinating claim regarding the growing significance of human decision-making and its impact on planetary life. He says that “[t]he planet that ruled itself directly over these past millennia is now determining its future largely through human decision.” For the vast majority of humanity’s existence on this planet, the human species’ ability to survive and thrive has been largely dependent upon environmental phenomenon far beyond the scope of our control. Natural selection and biological evolutionary processes are the factors to which Berry refers when he says the planet “ruled itself directly” over these past millennia. Our sheer numbers and collective power as a species, however, have grown so considerably since the Industrial Revolution that those decisions made within and by human social structures, especially national and international institutions including both governments and corporations, now have a greater ability to shape our lives (and that of all life on the planet) than at any other time in human and planetary history. To some extent, natural selection and

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95 I refer to "embodied persons" in the way it is often used by feminist anthropologies. Specifically, see for example, Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 129, 227. Generally, see also Maureen A. Tilley and Susan A. Ross, eds., *Broken and Whole: Essays on Religion and the Body* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995).


biological evolution govern the status of biodiversity of life on planet Earth much less now than do human cultural evolution and development.\textsuperscript{98}

In other words, the motives and motivations made manifest in human cultural social establishments increasingly govern the fate of all life on Earth. The overly individualistic, anthropocentric and often androcentric, overly-spiritualized, and otherworldly direction of our national and international institutions is no longer appropriate for the new challenges of the ecological and climate crises. However appropriate or understandable to their historical context these worldviews may have been at the time of their development, they are not sufficient for the promotion of equity and ecological sustainability required by the challenges of the contemporary context. As Moore observes, “we have the chance to choose adaptive strategies that create justice and honor life, and refuse those that protect and perpetuate injustice and destruction.”\textsuperscript{99} A major paradigm shift in collective human consciousness may be required in order to do this—one of such significant consequence that it is capable of inspiring and energizing not only the transformation of our institutions and social structures but also the fundamental way we humans think about ourselves as human beings and imagine our role as a species in an evolving planetary and cosmic history.

\textsuperscript{98} For a helpful overview of scientific approaches to the study of cultural evolution, see Alex Mesoudi, \textit{Cultural Evolution: How Darwinian Theory can Explain Human Culture and Synthesize the Social Sciences} (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{99} Moore, \textit{The Ethics of Adaptation to Global Warming}. 
For Berry, this kind of practical transformation requires a shift in the “fundamental establishments that control the human realm.”\textsuperscript{100} McFague stresses the role of religion, economics, and government as those establishments that both reflect a kind of radical individualism persistent in society and also uphold and maintain it.\textsuperscript{101} She is of a similar opinion as Berry here; however, Berry offers additional delineation regarding those establishments he thinks require transformation. He also asserts what he perceives to be the core problem inherent in the ecological crisis when he says:

The deepest cause of the present devastation is found in a mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the human and other modes of being...[other-than-human modes of being] have reality and value only through their use by the human. In this context the other than human becomes totally vulnerable to exploitation by the human, an attitude that is shared by all four of the fundamental establishments that control the human realm: governments, corporations, universities, and religions—the political, economic, intellectual, and religious establishments. All four are committed consciously or unconsciously to a radical discontinuity between the human and the nonhuman.\textsuperscript{102}

Berry points to “radical discontinuity” between human beings and other forms of life, which he sees reflected in and maintained by those establishments increasingly responsible for the fate of all life on Earth.\textsuperscript{103} McFague stresses the role of what she calls a kind of radical individualism inherent to, and maintained by, at least three of the institutions and social structures Berry names.

\textsuperscript{100} Berry, \textit{The Great Work: Our Way into the Future}, 4.

\textsuperscript{101} McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming}, 45-46.

\textsuperscript{102} Berry, \textit{The Great Work: Our Way into the Future}, 4.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
Both Berry and McFague point to aspects of a theological anthropology and worldview that work in and through the institutions and social structures governing human society. Both McFague’s radical individualism and Berry’s radical discontinuity are part of an overarching process of domination and subjugation that divorces people from an ecologically-informed sense of their own embodiment, their connection with other people, relations with those other beings sharing the planet, and embeddedness within the ecosystems that every embodied person is both wholly dependent upon and a functioning part of. The following, figure 13, organizes and illustrates this thinking.

Figure 13. The Movement of Power through Institutions and Social Structures
Using the fundamental establishments that both Thomas Berry and Sallie McFague name, figure 13 shows how these institutions and social structures act as conduits to facilitate or constrict justice.104

Specifically, figure 13 shows how worldviews rooted in a kind of radical individualism and reflecting radical discontinuity between human beings and other beings filter through and pervade these fundamental establishments. Anthropocentrism and androcentrism, patriarchy, and overly spiritualistic/other-worldly sentiments are all aspects of a worldview that benefits from and nourishes the continued “structural violence” caused by the domination, subjugation, control, and oppression of others, including specifically other species, women and the poor, and material and natural resources.105 Such attributes of power find expression, essentially, in the domination, subjugation, and oppression of vulnerable populations—those who do not hold any significant seat at those tables of decision-making that most directly impact their long-term survival and ability to flourish.

When the worldviews of a privileged population are normative, those worldviews are brought to bear on, in, and through the institutions the privileged build.106 They

104 While Oelschlaeger points to the special mediating role of religious institutions like churches, he also points to the significant role that the state, corporation, and university institutions play in governing human affairs. See Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis*, 192-200.


106 For further explication of this argument regarding the way ideas are remembered by those in a community "doing" the remembering, see James Mastaler, "The Magdalene of Internet, New Age, Goddess, and Nature Spiritualities," in *A Spouse for the Christ: Mary*
inherently skew justice in favor of those building, maintaining, and benefiting from the institutions that govern, direct, and shape the larger social structures under which all of society operates regardless of whether or not one benefits from those systems and structures. Those who do not, or cannot, participate in the kind of decision-making governing their lives—those who are excluded or forgotten by the institutions and social structures encompassing social life—are too often those individuals and populations who are denied the kind of social justice that would otherwise contribute to their ability to survive and thrive.

The transformation of larger trends in the trajectory of human history almost always occurs in and through the social structures shaping, and shaped by, the institutions human societies create and the stories or narratives that drive those societies.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, those institutions both shape and are shaped by the prevailing worldviews—the cosmologies and anthropologies—that become normative in human communities. One significant challenge before the world today is the need to remake critically, reimagine, or remember anew key aspects of those modern worldviews that have come to dominate and displace important pre-modern concepts in an increasingly globalized human society, and which have contributed to the ecological and climate crises before us.

In this section, I have argued that theological assumptions and perspectives permeate societal establishments and thusly wield a remarkable amount of institutional power. They are more than simply abstract theories—they encompass ideas that act powerfully on decisions made in the public square when they become normative, shaping actions taken in and through institutional power and social structures. The process of deconstructing and/or reconstructing various frameworks of understanding is not merely a theoretical exercise but also a substantial way to begin concretely shaping and transforming the institutions and social structures that largely reflect and govern not only human social life but also increasingly the fate of all life on the planet. Work on this worldviews-level of ideas is not the only work to be done, but it is a critical piece of the puzzle in an assemblage of solutions with the potential to move the human species through this challenging time.  

The problems of suffering and death, however, may pose a challenge to how far scientific accounts of cosmology and anthropology might be able to inform and inspire the values, beliefs, and traditions of a community of faith in which themes of life, hope, and resurrection predominate. Since I point to a new sense of what it means to be human and to a worldview in which the Earth and Earth’s ecological and evolutionary processes are perceived as primary, and since I claim that those perspectives can be authentically grounded in the sacramental traditions, I now turn to grapple with and endeavor to

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neutralize what some might see as a gross incompatibility between scientific accounts of creation and Christian theological accounts of the world. This last section is an addendum to the primary arguments of this chapter because while I do not see “suffering and death” as an impediment to a Christian reading of Earth’s ecological and evolutionary processes, some do. The following section aims to temper some of those protestations for those who do.

**An Addendum: Solidarity with the Earth when Nature is not so Nice**

This chapter began with my acknowledgement that, while I think the Christian traditions hold a tremendous amount of creative potential for engaging the relatively new problems of the ecological and climate crises, the promise comes with some uncomfortable perils as well. The Christian traditions, like many other religious traditions, offer accounts of cosmology and theological anthropology that ground people and their lives in a larger story of meaning and purpose. I have argued that the Christian traditions can be more effectively developed to tell and create such stories of meaning for contemporary people if these stories are informed by and responsive to the evolutionary and scientific accounts of human and planetary history. To that end, I have pointed to those aspects of the ecological and evolutionary accounts of creation that I see as working particularly well with Christian sacramental traditions. I now turn to contributions from Holmes Rolston III, Elizabeth Johnson, and Augustine on what some consider the “dark” side of nature, and then engage those perspectives with contributions from Annie Dillard and John Muir.
Some aspects of these accounts, however, prompt difficult questions for environmental ethics.\textsuperscript{109} In this section, I look specifically at those aspects pertaining to how closely scientific accounts of evolutionary natural history can inform and inspire Christian theology and religious life. It can be argued that a dark side to evolution exists that does not square with Christian themes of hope and resurrection. Elizabeth Johnson identifies these concerns when she observes that:

\begin{quote}
Pain, suffering, and death are intrinsic parts of the process of evolution. As such, they are woven into the very fabric of the origin of species, and need to be distinguished from the harm human beings do. Certainly human beings today must bend vigorous effort to preserve and protect the range of living species, a growing number of which are endangered. Absolutely, the One whom Gustavo Gutierrez brilliantly calls “the God of life” opposes oppression of all kinds, including the grinding down of poor people by unjust economic and political systems and also the wreckage of habitats and life-cycles of living species that are other than human. Surely the eschatological promise of fullness of life for all creation imbues Christian thought and behavior with generative hope. Granting these extraordinarily important insights, I still see a question rising up that has not been fully addressed. Pain and death are basic components of the creation of life on Earth, thankfully not the only components, but nevertheless essential to the way evolution plays out. They render the amazing emergence of life tragic in some dimension. How might theology interpret this reality in a way coherent with a view of the world as God’s beloved creation that is good, indeed, “very good” (Gen. 1.31)?\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

While I cannot and do not intend to claim I have an answer to this question, I do pause, as does Johnson and others, to acknowledge the question and grapple with it. This pause is only brief so as not to bog down the dissertation in concerns that are beyond the more


specific scope of my primary arguments regarding the ethical implications of climate-induced displacement.

Elizabeth Johnson’s own response to her question reflects her explicit intent to avoid engaging in the “theodicy project” of rationalizing suffering as a part of God’s will while also circumventing the framing of suffering and death as an evil to be resisted in every instance, especially that which she distinguishes as the natural kind.111 She examines arguments made by others who write in response to these concerns, namely Celia Deane-Drummond, Jürgen Moltmann, and John Haught, and concludes that she sees a need to yet make clear distinctions between “evil wrought by human deeds, against which we should indeed fight with every ounce of strength, with the occurrence of natural dying, which theology needs to respect, even for human beings.”112

There is, of course, more to it than this even though Johnson identifies in this statement a critically important distinction between two different sources of suffering and death (one allegedly human-caused and preventable, one presumably beyond human control and potentially inevitable).113 In making this distinction, Johnson notes that:

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111 Johnson, Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love, 186-188.


113 Holmes Rolston offers several helpful examples of "suffering" in the natural world that stand to complicate overly simplistic applications of human, cultural morality in what he considers to be wild contexts. See Holmes Rolston, "Ethical Responsibilities Toward Wildlife," Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association 200, no. 5 (1992), 615-622.
Without giving creation’s affliction ultimate meaning, without rooting it in the eternal will of a good and gracious God, without using it as an excuse not to do good, we begin by acknowledging its existence as part of the finite character of the natural world and respect its role in the evolutionary process.\footnote{Johnson, \textit{Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love}, 191-192.}

Johnson continues, however, with a direct description and response to the issue of suffering and death as it emerges specifically from the processes of evolution, or “natural death” as she calls it, when she considers how to place it in relation to the Christian traditions. She asserts that:

\[T\]he most fundamental move theology can make, in my view, is to affirm the compassionate presence of God in the midst of the shocking enormity of pain and death. [...] The experience of a tortured, unjust, tormented death of the worst sort dragged Jesus of Nazareth through godforsakenness into the silence of the tomb. There he met not annihilation but by the creative power of the Spirit who transformed his defeat into unimaginable new life in the glory of God. [...] In Christ, the living God who creates and empowers the evolutionary world also enters the fray, personally drinking the cup of suffering and going down into the nothingness of death, to transform it from within. Hope springs from this divine presence amid the turmoil.\footnote{Ibid.}

Johnson’s observations and arguments are insightful, and I think she rightly points to a theme of divine solidarity—of God’s presence and activity in and amidst it all—as one helpful way to approach the kind of suffering and death emergent from evolutionary processes from the Christian traditions. Her response to “creation’s affliction” is one of acknowledgement and respect, a condition in which she considers God thoroughly embedded in solidarity along with people and all other creatures that might suffer.\footnote{Ibid., 191-192.}
Put differently, the kind of death that happens in the world, as a natural part of Earth’s life support systems can be understood as a process in which the divine is fully present. Holmes Rolston III describes this “cruciform” element of the natural world in Christian terms, when he says:

The Spirit of God is the genius that makes alive, that redeems life from its evils. The cruciform creation is, in the end, deiform, godly just because of this element of struggle, not in spite of it. There is a great divine “yes” hidden behind and within every “no” of crushing nature. [...] Long before humans arrive, the way of nature was already a *via dolorosa*. In that sense, the aura of the cross is cast backwards across the whole global story, and it forever outlines the future. [...] The story is a passion play long before it reaches the Christ. Since the beginning, the myriad creatures have been giving up their lives as a ransom for many. In that sense, Jesus is not the exception to the natural order but a chief exemplification of it.117

Understood rightly, this passage does not glorify suffering and death as somehow pleasing to God but rather seeks to explain it in a way that emphasizes the creativity and hope that accompanies evolutionary processes. An attitude of hopefulness as the appropriate Christian orientation—the appropriate attitude one uses to color the lens through which one sees God in the midst of things.

The idea that God dwells in and amidst the pain of suffering and death, not as one who necessarily saves us from it but as one accompanying us in solidarity with it, may offer some emotional comfort to people of Christian faith.118 It does not, however,

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118 Holmes Rolston III argues that "God is not in a simple way the Benevolent Architect, but is rather the Suffering Redeemer" who suffers with Creation. For Rolston, however, suffering that is a natural part of life in nature is "redeemed" because of the creative possibility inherent in the multiform expressions of new life that emerge through the evolutionary process. See Holmes Rolston, "Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?" *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 29, no. 2 (1994), 205-229.
explain why people long for redemption, resurrection, new life, and the alleviation of suffering and death when suffering and death appear to be so inherently a part of, and required by, the existence of all life in the cosmos. It offers an account of God’s activity in the world amidst suffering and death, but it does not articulate a sense of who we are or how we ought to consider ourselves and our relations with a world that is seemingly antithetical to a vision of Christian hope. Why do some theologians think God should even need to “transform” the kind of suffering and death we observe in the natural world, in its evolutionary sense at least, when it is the primary driving force of natural selection and the descent of species, which is the way in which we arrive at such a beautiful and impressive diversity of life on Earth?

St. Augustine offers a commentary that is remarkably relevant to the question at hand—and his insight is impressive considering there is no evidence he would have understood a contemporary concept like natural selection read through the lens of evolutionary development. Nonetheless, he says:

[I]n those areas of the universe where such creatures have their proper being, we see a constant success, as some things pass away and others arise, as the weaker succumb to the stronger, and those that are overwhelmed change into the qualities of their conquerors; and thus we have a pattern of a world of continual transience. We, for our part, can see no beauty in this pattern to give us delight; and the reason is that we are involved in a section of it, under our condition of mortality, and so we cannot observe the whole design, in which these small parts, which are to us so disagreeable, fit together to make a scheme of ordered beauty. […] Therefore, it is the nature of things considered in itself, without regard to our convenience or inconvenience, that gives glory to the Creator.\(^{119}\)

Two concepts are particularly noteworthy here. First, he notes a context in which he seems to recognize the kind of natural pain and suffering at work in the world that is now associated with evolutionary processes. Second, his response to that is one in which he points to a kind of myopia caused by the distortion of the interpretive lens through which people construe God and God’s work in the world around them. Put differently, the problem according to Augustine is not that suffering and death exist in the natural world, but rather human beings fail to see the world beyond our own human and immediate context.

We do not see the world as God sees it, and perhaps we cannot, but that did not stop Augustine from trying to imagine it, nor do I think it should stop contemporary Christians from trying to interpret the world and the human place in it in terms of a larger context. For Christian communities engaged in that creative work, the question is still: How do people of faith rooted in, and accountable to, a sacramental tradition, and grounded by a contemporary ecological and evolutionary worldview, conceptualize God’s transformation of suffering and death into a more cohesive narrative that reads hope and life into an otherwise besmirched set of natural processes?

Together, Annie Dillard and John Muir offer deeply contemplative, first-hand reflections on their own lived experiences that shed some light on this question, and I will point to aspects of their work that are particularly relevant. Annie Dillard, born Meta Ann Doak in 1945 and raised as a Presbyterian in Pittsburgh, has been one of the most

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120 Matthew Eggemeier highlights the "significance of contemplative practice for the development of environmental ethics" and points to Annie Dillard as one such person who does so exceptionally well. See Matthew T. Eggemeier, "Ecology and Vision," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture & Ecology* 18, no. 1 (March, 2014), 54-76.
celebrated American literary figures since she won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, first published the year prior. Her work is rightly described as offering a kind of grand “[m]ythical narrative” for the particular way in which “[t]he questions and accounts elicited by Tinker Creek are of the sacred—the sacred not as a world apart, but a dimension of the here-and-now.” It is particularly relevant here because Dillard so poetically describes the tension she sees between the apparent brutality of nature as a prerequisite for all life on Earth and the ostensibly human desire, including her own, to see such brutality cease. She records her struggles when she observes that:

> Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me. This is easy to write, easy to read, and hard to believe. The words are simple, the concept clear—but you don’t believe it, do you? Nor do I. How could I, when we’re both so lovable? Are my values then so diametrically opposed to those that nature preserves?

Dillard grapples with what she expresses as the perceived cold, hard reality of evolution, suffering, and death. In this selection and the one that follows, Dillard goes on to describe her own efforts to square what she interprets as “nature’s values” with what she describes as her “human values” and how she might proceed in light of their seeming disjuncture. She continues:

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Must I then part ways with the only world I know? I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow. But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw the line. It looks as though the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down. Look: Cock Robin may die the most gruesome of slow deaths, and nature is no less pleased; the sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. I cannot feel that way about your death, nor you about mine, nor either of us about the robin’s—or even the barnacles’. We value the individual supremely, and nature values him not a whit. It looks for the moment as though I might have to reject this creek life unless I want to be utterly brutalized. Is human culture with its values my only real home after all? Can it possibly be that I should move my anchor-hold to the side of a library? This direction of thought brings me abruptly to a fork in the road where I stand paralyzed, unwilling to go on, for both ways lead to madness…. Either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am a freak.  

Her close ecological studies appear to force an acknowledgement from Dillard that all the suffering and death in nature are indeed a natural result of evolutionary processes responsible for the rich and marvelous collection of life on Earth, yet it seems to her to be wasteful, unnecessary, and also inherently sad.  

Her pronouncement that “either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am a freak,” gets right at the heart of the matter. She wants to love the Earth and learn to live in sync with its processes, yet she continues to see herself and her “human values” as inherently different from the values directing that which she sees herself as inherently a part of and emergent from. If, as Brian Swimme puts it in his narration of the Journey of the Universe film, “death and suffering are woven into the very heart of the Universe,” is, then, the Universe fundamentally at odds with human hope or are we missing something as Augustine suggested? Is the Earth our mother a monster, or are we freaks? This is

\[124\] Ibid.

\[125\] Ibid., 169-173.

\[126\] Northcutt and Kennard, Journey of the Universe.
really the core question, and Dillard appears unwilling to accept readily any easy answers, as does John Muir.

John Muir contracted malaria and almost died at what became the end of his now-famous 1000-mile walk from Indianapolis to the Gulf of Mexico in 1867. As a man of Christian upbringing in a transcendentalist historical context, Muir had always loved nature, and his bout with malaria contracted from his extended time spent in the outdoors amid nature was the first time he encountered nature as a significant source of his own suffering, rather than as respite from the discomforts of “civilized” social life. From Muir’s perspective as a man of faith and celebrated conservationist who encountered firsthand a near-death experience with “nature,” his reflections are helpful.

They are helpful not so much because they offer a direct response to the question but because they invert the question by challenging its hidden assumptions. He observes that the prevailing perspective of his day is one in which “[t]he world, we are told, was made especially for man [sic]—a presumption not supported by all the facts.” He then

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follows that with a brief account of the larger framework he relies on to see himself and
others in relation to the world around him, when he says that:

This star, our own good earth, made many a successful journey around the
heavens ere man was made, and whole kingdoms of creatures enjoyed existence
and returned to dust ere man appeared to claim them. After human beings have
also played their part in Creation’s plan, they too may disappear without any
general burning or extraordinary commotion whatever.\textsuperscript{131}

These two points, his critique of the overly anthropocentric worldviews prevailing during
his day and also the way in which he points to a larger, cosmic framework in which to
orient the human person over a much longer span of ecological and evolutionary time,
form the foundation for the inversion he makes in the section that follows:

I stated a page or two back that man claimed the earth was made for him, and I
was going to say that venomous beasts, thorny plants, and deadly diseases of
certain parts of the earth prove that the whole world was not made for him. When
an animal from a tropical climate is taken to high latitudes, it may perish of cold,
and we say that such an animal was never intended for so severe a climate. But
when man betakes himself to sickly parts of the tropics and perishes, he cannot
see that he was never intended for such deadly climates. No, he will rather accuse
the first mother of the cause of the difficulty, though she may never have seen a
fever district; or will consider it a providential chastisement for some self-
invented form of sin.\textsuperscript{132}

Muir’s reflections betray such a deep sense of humility before the larger context of
planetary life and cosmic evolution that, for him, the human person and concerns about
suffering and death are to be considered adequately only within this broader, cosmic
narrative of life and death. He is calling for an expansion of the context in which the
question is asked and answered, which changes the question in some important ways.

To set up the question in a way that requires a choice between either “mother is

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
monster” or “we are freaks,” or to conceive of nature as inherently “red in tooth and claw,” may be to reveal a kind of fundamental presumption that the human person is inherently distinct in some special way that culturally determined values become the only lens for adjudicating what in nature might be good. In other words, the presumption is that our experiences are unusually important and merit a yielding of the world to human desire rather than a conversion of the human to the Earth as God’s primary revelation.

In a sense, to read nature’s kind of “suffering and death” as a process that we should want to end, resist outright, or interpret as in need of God’s supernatural transformation, might be entirely to misapprehend God’s activity at work within evolution and evolutionary processes themselves. In a sense, it may be to interpret the evolutionary heritage of our planet as one wrought without God and void of God’s goodness because people conceptually transfer the immorality we rightly see in the suffering and death we cause onto those evolutionary processes that result in the descent of species and the development of ecologically complex communities. One might reasonably wonder whether this is a failure of our moral imagination, or a more subtle expression of human

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133 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam (A. H. H.)* (London, 1850), canto 56. Tennyson is believed to have been influenced by a popular book on evolution, originally published anonymously in 1844 but popular at the time and later attributed to Robert Chambers. See Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, 12th ed. (London; Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1884). Both Chambers and Tennyson published these works before Wallace and Darwin published their findings on natural selection. See Alfred Russel Wallace, "On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type" (London, Linnean Society of London, February, 1858); and Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, Or, the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1859).

domination—the expectation for cosmic processes to submit to a human vision misguided because of a misunderstanding of those very processes.

If all “natural” death is evil (of the kind to which Johnson refers) and “Cock Robin’s” natural death is gruesome and brutal, then perhaps either God is rightly to be considered gruesome and brutal too or perhaps the turn toward the Earth as humanity’s meeting place with God is simply not feasible for Christians. If, however, the kind of natural death that is a necessary part of evolutionary processes can be interpreted by Christians through a different lens, then maybe it can be perceived as not only “not bad” but even as a manifestation and metaphoric example of God’s presence and work in the world—however mysterious it may appear from a limited human perspective. If Christians can imagine God’s transformational activity at work in the kind of metaphorical “self death” that Cavanaugh and McFague describe, or use Rolston’s cruciform lens to find meaning in evolutionary narratives, then maybe God’s activity amidst the death in evolutionary processes can likewise be perceived as God’s creative activity amidst the rich biodiversity of life on Earth.135

Brian Swimme describes evolutionary processes in terms of a story that can bear spiritual and religious interpretations and parallels. Specifically, he describes the kind of evolutionary death that has resulted in Earth’s rich abundance of life and complex, diverse ecosystems in such a way that it facilitates an understanding of God’s activity in them. According to Swimme, scientific observations reveal that: 1) evolution “leads to

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more complex, co-evolutionary relationships,” 2) “interdependent communities arise,” and 3) the individual “self dies into and nourishes the whole community.”

To describe the kind of death that is inherently part of Earth’s evolutionary heritage in these ways is not to glorify death but rather to recognize its larger context and function in the creation and preservation of all life. In some respects, it is certainly a matter of choice to see ingenuity and life in evolutionary processes instead of endless suffering and death, but I think the Christian traditions set a strong precedence for doing so.

Necessarily, this larger context—or story—lends a sense of smallness to what has become a human story overly bloated by egocentric themes of grandeur. The human story is grand, but not for the reasons many have presumed over the course of the last several hundred years. The human story is grand because it is rooted in and grounded by a much larger, and much grander, cosmic story. One take-away from Muir’s reflection is that people are prone to the mistake of orienting the world around their own, immediate fears about suffering and death when they forget the larger context out of which we humans participate in a story much larger than our individual selves—a story in which Christians believe God breathed God’s own breath of life into the cosmos. That larger story gives the human story its grandeur and backdrop, and it can be a powerful source of hope amidst the immensity of despair that many people feel accompanies death in all its

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136 In the EMMY® Award winning film written by Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, produced and directed by Patsy Northcutt and David Kennard, Swimme serves as the documentary’s host and makes these comments. See Northcutt and Kennard, *Journey of the Universe*.

forms.

Neil Shubin tells it well when he pauses to reflect after recounting how stars are formed:

The smallest parts of our bodies have a history as big as the universe itself. Beginning as energy that converted to matter, the hydrogen atoms originated soon after the big bang and later recombined to form ever-larger atoms in stars and supernovae.\textsuperscript{138}

Shubin sees an implicit beauty and eternal element rooted in the shared particles forming the very make-up of all life that, for some, may remove some of the sting of death’s finitude. He continues:

The sky, like a thriving forest, continually recycles matter. With the heavens so full of stars manufacturing elements, then occasionally exploding and releasing them, only to recombine them again as a new star forms, the atoms that reach our planet have been the denizens of innumerable other suns. Each galaxy, star, or person is the temporary owner of particles that have passed through the births and deaths of entities across vast reaches of time and space. The particles that make us have traveled billions of years across the universe; long after we and our planet are gone, they will be a part of other worlds.\textsuperscript{139}

In short, I am not so sure that this Earth our mother is a monster any more than we humans are freaks of nature. We are embodied, ecologically embedded creatures who have emerged with an ability to reflect critically on ourselves and our place in the cosmos. Our species is distinct from other species in the way that every species is distinct from one another, but we are not separate—to be set above and beyond the rest of the world. The Christian traditions assert a vision of hope and life as antidote to the despair of suffering and death. I am not sure, however, that the kind of “natural”


\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
suffering and death described in Earth’s evolutionary development is really as sad or the same as the kind initiated by human evils. When we see it as such, it may say more about the interpreter’s orientation than it does about what is really going on at all.

In this chapter, I have identified the need for an ecologically-informed paradigm shift, and I have pointed to various ways in which Christian traditions may help, rather than hinder, such a shift. I have also pointed to examples of accounts of Christian theological anthropology and cosmology that I think may not only help facilitate that shift but also have a particular resonance with Christians in the pews—those people at the heart of contemporary Christian religious life whose daily actions wield the greatest potential for changing the current trajectory of human–Earth relations. This, then, represents a noteworthy turning point in my method of structured ethical reflection, wherein I pivot from a place of those primarily theoretical concerns before Christian theology and religious life, back to those concerns that have more direct bearing on the everyday lives of ordinary people now confronting the environmental threats and challenges of climate change. What, specifically, does social justice and ecological responsibility look like as it is emerging across the globe? What can people of good will do, and push their communities to do, in order to push our species to more adequately respond to the social challenges of climate change, its hammering of diverse species and ecosystems, and the growing number of climate-induced displacees? The next chapter responds to those questions.
CHAPTER FIVE

A THEOLOGY OF MOBILIZATION: INTEGRATING SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS TO SAVE A PLANET IN PERIL

This dissertation defends my claim that the most important moral challenge of this generation is the contemporary ecological crisis. I have argued that humanity has never before confronted a problem that so powerfully threatens the flourishing of our species, much less the vitality of the entire planetary life support system. That problem is a result of how inconceivably powerful humanity’s presence on Earth has grown during the modern era. Furthermore, I have argued that the contemporary ecological crisis in general, and human-induced climate change in particular, are both powerful forms of structural violence against all human communities of the planet, though especially against the poorest. Human-induced climate change is a key concern within the larger ecological crisis because inadequate adaptation planning for those least able to cope with it leads to climate-induced displacement: people compelled to relocate, internally or internationally, because environmental changes make viable livelihoods impossible.

The consequences of climate change are borne most heavily by the already poorest and most vulnerable. Many social structures and institutions do not yet adequately and equitably protect and empower the world’s poor, which makes climate change not only a complex moral concern but also a social justice issue. Indeed, it is the most important social justice issue of our time. What shall people of goodwill do? Given
the international community’s failure to prepare adequately for climate-induced displacement, and given the Christian community’s professed commitments to solidarity with the poor and oppressed, I have argued that Christians are morally obligated to urge their governments and institutions to ramp up adaptation planning. I have called for a holistic humanitarian “social justice” response to climate change and environmental problems—one that holistically addresses structural poverty, gender disparity, ecological degradation, and climate-induced displacement.¹

The moral and social justice aspects of this issue—including the collective failure to act and the need for future action—rest partly in what I think requires the most significant consideration: the general inadequacy of prominent streams of 20th-century Christian thinking about the nature of the person and the loss of an ecologically appropriate and functional worldview or cosmology that understands the human as an embodied, active participant within a larger created order. I have wrestled with Lynn White’s critique against the Christian traditions and nuanced his claims by offering an alternative understanding of Christian theology’s ecological culpability.² By following the rise of modern theology alongside the rise of modern science, the Industrial Revolution, and capitalist systems, I have shown that pervasive and persistent streams of anthropocentric ethics and anthropomorphized theology came to dominate streams of thought in Christian traditions through a “modern turn” in the tradition. The problem


² See Lynn White, Jr. “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.”
with Christian theology’s prevailing perspectives lies more in that modern turn than in any sort of inherent flaw within the traditions themselves, as White alleges. Therefore, Christian traditions, like all religious traditions, have the capacity to contribute both a perilous and a promising pathway through the complex moral web of social and environmental challenges embodied by the ecological and climate crisis. The key is to identify the more promising aspects of the tradition, reclaim them, and expand them.

I have called for a shift in the trajectory of Christian theological ethics that critically recovers aspects of Christian pre-modern heritage, but in a way that roots it robustly in the life of living faith traditions and in dialogue with the contemporary ecological and evolutionary sciences. This is not only practical but necessary because any adequately constructed ethic of adaptation to climate change ought to include a fundamental paradigm shift in human perspectives on justice and reverence for life on Earth. Cosmologies and theological anthropologies offer powerful narratives to shape the way people think about themselves and their actions in the world, and they offer an appropriate and relevant contact point for engaging Christian traditions within the context of the ecological and climate crises. Reclaimed and revised accounts of theological anthropology and cosmology are a fundamental part of what is needed to drive and sustain the kind of mental and emotional energy Christian communities require to mobilize others to join them in the push for ecologically responsible and equitable polices.

People of goodwill must necessarily grapple with the way in which ideas and narratives regarding an ecologically and socially responsible cosmology and
anthropology might be "lived-out" and affirmed by their communities, including their religious communities. Religious life and faith communities, and the reflective attitudes encouraged by their spiritual practices, have the potential to offer an especially creative space in which to shape new perceptions regarding human embeddedness in the natural order and a sense of its cosmic sacramentality. I have argued that religious narratives offer significant potential for many people to understand more intimately those social and ecological concerns that require attention. Religious narratives act powerfully on a person’s "moods and motivations" and may compel people to pursue a more just vision of the universal or cosmic common good.\(^3\)

These are the issues I have explored, the arguments I have made, and the conclusions I have drawn. In response, I must ask: what are the practical implications of this situation specifically regarding the current and future state of human-human and human-Earth relations? More precisely, what genuine hope (if any) of a better world can reasonable people believe is possible based on present trends and trajectories in the social structures and institutions governing human affairs on the planet? I conclude this dissertation by pointing to those developments that I think warrant at least a little hope for a future world in which the predominate global ethic can become one rooted in a shared concern for the dual responsibilities of social equity and environmental sustainability. In what follows, I point to examples of shifts within “embodied communities” and “particular contexts” that I think legitimize a reasonable sense of

\(^3\) For his classic definition of religion and its "moods and motivations" that each tradition sustains, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.
hopefulness that the kind of change the world requires is not only possible, but also beginning to actually happen. I am optimistic that these examples are only the beginning of what must become a much more fundamental and large-scale turn in the way an increasingly interconnected global civil society facilitates the actualization of social justice and sustainable development among the world’s most vulnerable populations.

None of these examples alone illustrate a panacea for all the challenges at hand, but they serve as inspiring and noteworthy markers in a process of social transformation that will likely occur across generations. I point to them as positive manifestations of the deeper change that is really only in the beginning stages. Perhaps, in a way, it may be helpful to think of them like hybrid vehicles in so far as hybrids may be considered a transitional technology between the old “dirty-fuel” paradigm and a newly emerging transportation paradigm (one not yet fully developed in terms of industry or infrastructure). Much like transitional technologies, these changes emerging across social and political contexts represent the infancy of what will be necessary for the human species to refashion its institutions and social structures in a way that may usher in something like the “Ecozoic era” envisioned by Fr. Thomas Berry and others.

In seeking out such examples, I have intentionally incorporated those of a legal-political framework that acknowledges an inherent value, moral worth, and sense of


equity for all people regardless of gender. I also include examples that emphasize the inherent value and moral worth of other beings. Likewise, I incorporate examples of social-economic systems that recognize the instrumental value of functioning ecosystems for human and planetary wellbeing. Including examples of success from both streams of thought represents the larger significance of the potential I see in practical, multi-modal approaches to environmental problems. It also recognizes the ongoing need within the larger conservation movement to move beyond the divisions that intrinsic versus instrumental value arguments have created, demonstrated by a petition signed by 240 original co-signatories and published in the journal Nature. Though I have generally argued for an increased recognition of nature’s inherent moral worth, human dependency upon an ecologically flourishing planet is so necessary that any reasonable anthropocentric case for preserving human life must necessarily acknowledge the importance of ecological preservation as well as the urgency for action. Progress of any sort in the preservation of life on Earth is better than the continued destruction and injustice that has come to define the present era. The key is mobilizing the kind of changes that are so desperately needed to preserve and sustain life on the planet, and I recognize that different motives can sometimes inspire and support a push for the same general goal.

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A Foundation for Sustainable Development: Integrating Lessons Observed First-Hand from Social Science, Eco-Feminism, and Liberation Theology

Starting with my first-hand observations working in a maternal and child health care facility in rural Bangladesh, I have seen how women’s reproductive health care needs play a particularly significant role in the life of women and their families, and particularly their children. These observations affirm what I have read in the social science literature regarding the special needs of women within a generally androcentric paradigm and impoverished social-ecological context. I share them because they speak to the relevance of eco-feminist and liberationist concerns to social justice and environmental sustainability explored in previous chapters. Rather typical examples of the medical cases I saw at the Lutheran Health Care Bangladesh (LHCB) facility were those in which doctors and nurses attended to young women and girls who had become pregnant and given birth at an age and in a condition before which their bodies were capable of a healthy, full-term pregnancy and delivery. At LHCB, these cases always involved girls who were considered “married women.” Even though the marriage age for women in Bangladesh is legally 18 years, some estimates have suggested that up to 20% of girls become wives before their 15th birthday. Compounding the early age at which

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7 The organization I worked for operates a health care facility in the small village of Dumki in southern Bangladesh. In addition to the hospital's core focus on maternal and child health care programs, it also provides education, training of traditional birth attendants (midwives), mobile clinics, small-savings groups and community development programs. See Lutheran Health Care Bangladesh (LHCB-USA), "Improving Lives through Health Care and Education," Lutheran Health Care Bangladesh, http://lhcb.org (accessed November 6, 2013).

young women are giving birth in some places is the generally reduced overall health of
the mothers usually due to varying combinations of undernourishment and
malnourishment.

For example, I vividly remember the case of one little girl admitted to LHCB. Her name was Hawa, a relatively common name given to little girls in this predominately Muslim community. The theological association is noteworthy, since in traditional Arabic “Hawa” is the name for the Eve figure in English translations of the Garden of Eden story found in both narratives of the Bible and Quran. When Hawa was admitted, she was one month old and diagnosed with kidney failure as a result of severe malnourishment, undernourishment, and dehydration. Her mother, who was emaciated and jaundiced, was unable to produce the breast milk her baby needed to survive. Like many poorer women in the local village, she fed her daughter Hawa a mix of what little sugar, rice powder, and water she could collect in place of breast milk, and the mixture was certainly not an adequate substitute for a healthy mother’s breast milk.

The doctors and nurses at LHCB were able to save Hawa’s life by admitting both mother and daughter for care and giving an intravenous saline solution and proper nutrition to the infant. However, many women and children are not lucky enough to have such charitable health care opportunities near them. Still others do not have husbands and families who will even allow them to seek the medical care many women and their infants desperately need. When these are the horrid conditions under which many women and girls are barely surviving, and when they have so little agency and decision-making ability over such basic things as the physical limitations of their own bodies, then
how can they possibly be expected to battle the deep social and ecological injustices that keep them from improving their general situation? Most often, they cannot, and for no shortcoming of their own merit. Women in these situations, like most people experiencing the most severe forms of poverty, rightly must focus on the more pressing demands of daily survival when they are denied the freedom to plan, envision, and strategize to move beyond such basic living by addressing the core aspects of their poverty.

Ivone Gebara has noted similar tragedies of this sort in Brazil, and her insights offer further explication of the way in which basic subsistence living can consume a person’s life and hamper one’s ability to move beyond it. Gebara is a Brazilian theologian and Catholic religious Sister who writes on eco-feminism and liberation theology. Her first-hand experiences working in Brazil’s infamous “favelas” or urban slums shape her theological work. Regarding the situation of women in the “Two-Thirds World,” she observes that, despite some progress:

[...] certain groups, particularly women, have historically not been considered as having equal abilities, rights, or even citizenship. Of even more concern is that such persons have not even been considered completely ethical beings. That is, they are not invited to take part in private or public decision making on issues that affect them. It is also unfortunate that these people themselves often believe that they cannot be historic subjects in the full sense of the term. Their consciousness is more or less asleep, and in the countries of the “Two-Thirds World,” the struggle for survival makes it even harder to awaken consciousness. To be more precise, the consciousness of poor women is tuned in to their personal situation, but these women are prisoners of their daily lives and have no access to the power

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needed to make effective change in their lives. It is as if the key to their prison were kept in faraway lands; the women do not have the strength either to knock down the bars or to get new keys made.\textsuperscript{11}

For some poorer women around the globe, their poverty and daily challenges are so intense that, as Gebara observes, they become a prisoner of their daily lives without the freedom to make the basic decisions regarding their own bodies that people in more empowered settings often take for granted. This major impediment results from basic social inequity and in turn impedes a community’s overall sustainable development, and so the primary pathway out of poverty.

Cultivating women’s agency in those issues pertaining to their health is one important step in the dismantling of such impediments. It is so important that it may be the single-most important thing societies can do to improve the condition of women’s chances at survival and to offer them and their families a pathway out of poverty and access to adequate facilities.\textsuperscript{12} Regarding reproductive health in particular, data suggests that:

\[\text{reproductive health is especially catalytic for women. From difficult pregnancies and childbirths to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, reproductive health problems comprise the leading causes of death and disability among women worldwide.}\textsuperscript{13}\]


\textsuperscript{12} Promoting a girl's education is generally recognized as one of the most effective ways to not only improve their chances of health and survival, but to also promote the economic development of their communities. See Lester R. Brown, \textit{Plan B 4.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization} (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 172-3, 184.

Improved access to a full range of holistic reproductive health care may improve women’s agency, or their sense of self as ethical beings, as Gebara puts it. This, in turn, is one primary way that community development research suggests women can be empowered to seize the “keys” to their own social and economic equity. Gaining access to these keys arguably has the potential to awaken their consciousness to the possibility of a life beyond survival—a life in which they and their families may begin to envision and enact strategies for how they might begin to not only survive, but to thrive. Put simply, equitable self-determination and sustainable development are two solutionary sides of the same coin in much the same way as issues of global poverty and environmental concern are two problematic sides of the same coin.  

Let me be as clear as I can be about what I am and am not saying. I do not propose to instruct women and tell them what it is I think they should do with their bodies. The morality or immorality of the decisions women make regarding their health care is far beyond the scope of this dissertation. My point, rather, is that it is women freely making decisions about their bodies as a realization of equitable self-determination that forms a key part of sustainable development. As Victoria Tauli-Corpuz puts it, this

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15 The "Capabilities Approach" outlined by Martha Nussbaum has greatly influenced important trajectories in contemporary international development policies, and specifically the United Nation's Human Development Index (HDI). Of the ten "central
is a matter of decisions regarding a woman’s health being made by and for women themselves so that their health care is not perceived as a tool to treat women as second-class beings without the agency to make crucial decisions about their bodies. She argues that women ought to have the freedom to make their own decisions with regard to their health, reproductive health included, as an integral part of achieving gender equity. Put differently:

there is unlikely to be gender equity until all women, men and young people have access to a full range of reproductive health services, from voluntary family planning to safe motherhood and the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

human functional capabilities” Nussbaum describes, "bodily health" or "being able to have good health, including reproductive health" is the second principle in her list. For the full list, see Martha Craven Nussbaum, Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 78-80. Regarding the measurement of capabilities and the HDI, see Martha Craven Nussbaum, Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 59-62. It should be noted also that Amartya Sen, with whom Nussbaum developed the capabilities approach, clarifies and distinguishes his own views on the informational versus social assessment and policy aspects of the approach in Amartya Sen, The Idea of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 228-235.

16 Victoria Tauli-Corpuz has spent much of her career organizing to defend the ancestral land rights of her people, the Kankana-ey as well as the rights of all indigenous peoples generally. She, and her organization the TebTebba Foundation, works actively on behalf of indigenous people in international fora like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conventions of the Parties (COPs). A United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report notes, among several of her accomplishments and contributions to women’s equity, indigenous rights, and sustainable development, that she “fought for—and, ultimately, helped win—“The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” which was adopted by the [UN] General Assembly in 2007.” See UNFPA, Facing a Changing World: Women, Population and Climate, 51.

17 Ibid., 53. As a general note, the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) was officially renamed the United Nations Population Fund in 1987. The original acronym, however, was retained for general communications and is used as the Fund’s title in all languages. See United Nations Population Fund, "What does UNFPA Stand for?" United Nations Population Fund,
Improving access to reproductive health care and the social and economic equity associated with that access is an activity that requires more than simply a technical shift of global resources. For that to happen, a shift must also take place in the general way in which women’s families, as well as their governments and religious establishments, value women, their contributions to society, and their agency as moral beings and decision-makers. In some places, this requires a significant shift in the way whole countries, cultures, and communities structure their social systems and institutions. This transformation, in turn, is facilitated if the people in those societies are able to find inspiration and power in those stories, narratives, and worldviews from which the mental, moral, and emotional energy to sustain such a paradigm shift can be found.

In her classic contribution on the moral treatment of women’s reproductive issues by the Roman Catholic Church, Christine E. Gudorf argues that:

\[i\]n a society where many, and potentially all, women are not in control of their own bodies, but are raped, beaten and molested by fathers, husbands and strangers, as well as subjected to medical care which often treats care of women’s bodies as if they were not women’s to control—in such a society we move in entirely the wrong direction when we refuse to allow women final responsibility for their bodies’ reproduction.\[18\]


Part of Gudorf’s argument, as it relates to the topic at hand, is the idea that women’s bodily integrity is a basic human right whose management is theirs to discern. Significantly, limiting that bodily integrity limits women’s agency, which consequently stagnates and impedes access to some of the basic opportunities women need to claim pathways out of poverty and help their families and communities make real progress toward the kind of sustainable development that is so necessary for the flourishing of both human and ecological communities.

Many of the world’s poorest women need basic health care, which includes comprehensive reproductive health care, as a prerequisite part of both concerns for gender equity as well as the social conditions that responsibly foster sustainable development. Women’s health care ought not to be treated, however, as merely a means to an end to meet some kind of development agenda. Proper health care access, made available to women in recognition of their right to see their basic human agency realized, is a reflection of the values and beliefs that generally orient and undergird more equitable societies. As has been shown in previous chapters, more equitable societies are generally equipped to weather the storms of climate change and displacement while protecting the most vulnerable within those societies far better than less equitable societies. Social equity is a key component of climate adaptation, and so women’s health care needs cannot be ignored if we are to prepare responsibly.

How individuals, communities, and societies envision what it means to be fully human—to be an equal member of society, in a society in which bodies matter—at least partly determines how those societies expand or limit a person’s social status, life
opportunity, and agency in relation to the rest of their society and how they appropriate (or do not) the necessary resources to carry out those values and beliefs in tangible ways. This includes the way in which societies determine personhood and whatever rights and privileges that may entail. Many legal and governmental institutions already afford certain aspects of personhood to entities like corporations and, to some degree, children, the incapacitated, and differently abled persons. Sometimes even pets and domesticated animals are afforded legal protections—the important ramifications of which I discuss in the next section. In short, moral status and moral worth matters. Unfortunately, women have been marginalized and undervalued as equal members of society, in most societies, for long periods of human history. That fact alone is not only a substantial moral problem and social injustice, but also a significant impediment to sustainable development as well. The inclusion of eco-feminist insights, along with those principles of liberation theology for the poor and oppressed noted in previous chapters, ought to represent a cornerstone in the foundation of any moral case calling for social justice and ecological responsibility. While many societies have made great strides in this regard, there is still a long way to go when human civilization is considered as a whole.

The Moral Status of Other Creatures and the Concept of “Mother Nature” in the Moral Imagination

Moving on from sex and gender concerns toward species-level distinctions, it may be responsible for some communities to extend some kind of moral and legal concern, recognition, and protection to other species and ecosystems, especially fellow primates who are also members of humanity’s taxonomic family, like chimpanzees and gorillas.
The expanded moral status afforded to other creatures and/or ecological systems may be an important expansion of moral concern for an ethic of social justice and ecological responsibility—perhaps important enough to consider it also a cornerstone in the moral foundation built by human communities. Several communities have indeed endeavored to create legal space for the consideration of the needs of other species by extending animal protection laws beyond those that categorize other species according to their human use.¹⁹

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 passed by the United States Congress and signed into law by President Nixon established important legal protections for threatened and endangered species and their habits because they were regarded as holding “esthetic, ecological, education, recreational, and scientific value [...]”²⁰ The legislation continues to afford certain legal protections to any species deemed threatened or endangered. The Great Ape Project, which began in the early 1990s as a scientific and moral call for the

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creation of a United Nations Declaration of Rights for Great Apes, took the concept of legal protections for other species to a new level.\textsuperscript{21} Since then, a number of locales have begun introducing (and, in some cases, successfully passing) constitutional provisions and laws that extend certain legal protections to humanity’s fellow hominids. For example, Switzerland passed a constitutional amendment in 1992 that recognized animals broadly as “beings” rather than as “things,” and Germany later added a clause to its constitution obligating the state to expand its respect and protection for human dignity to include respect and protection for “animal dignity.”\textsuperscript{22} Spain’s parliament passed a resolution in 2008 that banned medical experimentation on and made it a crime to kill any member species of the great apes (which includes gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, and orangutans).\textsuperscript{23}

Moral concern for the legal rights held by non-human beings is not limited to animal species and can be conceptually extended to more broad-based notions that include whole ecosystems and even bioregions. This particular kind of legal precedence around rights for nature, broadly defined, as opposed to the rights of individual species, has been more prevalent in the Americas. Whether “nature” as an entity unto itself should have inherently recognized rights within our political or legal systems is a


complex ethical and legal question.\textsuperscript{24} A full exploration of that question is beyond the scope of this section, but there is an ongoing, rich debate in some circles as to whether the development of nature rights is the most appropriate way to interpret proper human-Earth relations.\textsuperscript{25}

In the United States, the question of nature’s legal standing has been debated before the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1972, the Sierra Club argued a case against permitted development in Mineral King, a glacial valley near Sequoia National Park in California. The Sierra Club lost the case because it lacked standing; specifically, the court ruled that the Club could sue only on behalf of its members. In other words, the Court held that local residents would have standing to bring the case forward if they contended that the development would cause them tangible harm. No such residents came forward, however, and the Court ruled that, since the Sierra Club could not claim any such direct harm, they could not bring the case forward on the claim of representing the interests of the ecosystems alone. While this ruling was heralded as a victory for environmental


organizations because of their newfound ability to sue on behalf of their members, the dissenting opinion of Justice William O. Douglas was also significant for the way in which it argued that “inanimate objects” should have such standing in U.S. courts. Justice Douglas asserted that:

The critical question of “standing” would be simplified and also put neatly in focus if we fashioned a federal rule that allowed environmental issues to be litigated before federal agencies or federal courts in the name of the inanimate object about to be despoiled, defaced, or invaded by roads and bulldozers and where injury is the subject of public outrage. Contemporary public concern for protecting nature’s ecological equilibrium should lead to the conferral of standing upon environmental objects to sue for their own preservation […].

The ruling decided that the Club could not sue on behalf of nature itself since nature and natural systems such as rivers, lakes, and estuaries do not have legal standing before the court. Justice Douglas asserted, however, the idea that the Club ought to be able to make such an argument before the court—a much-discussed conceptual advance even if it failed to carry the views of the majority of the court. Though the legal standing of nature was not recognized by the U.S. federal government in Sierra Club v. Morton, the status of ecosystems as rights bearers rather than mere property has since been recognized by several municipal governments in New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

Even more noteworthy is the legal standing that nature has been accorded by Latin American governments. In 2008, the Ecuadorian people voted to approve a new constitution that gives nature “the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital

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cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution.”\(^{28}\) A few years later, the Bolivian government recognized the inherent rights of Pachamama, or Mother Earth, as its own legal entity and now recognizes nature’s rights to exist, to continue vital cycles, and not to be polluted.\(^{29}\) Known by various other names to indigenous communities across Latin America, Pachamama conceptualizes the sentiment that the divine animates or embodies all that a person sees around them—what many sometimes also call “nature” or “Mother Earth.”\(^{30}\) The Andean term Pachamama has received more international attention than other indigenous concepts for Nature or Mother Earth, and it has acted as a uniting force, bringing together many otherwise disparate indigenous communities together around a common political cause, rooted in a shared spiritual concern for Pachamama—that of legal protections for two traditionally vulnerable populations in Latin America: indigenous peoples and what each of those communities perceives to be their Mother Earth.\(^{31}\)

\(^{28}\) Ibid.


While not everyone shares the perspective that ecosystems and natural systems are the embodiment of the divine or that animals ought to have constitutional protection, it is clear that habitat and biodiversity loss is a significant problem. Communities that recognize this problem have written some of the most assertive legal precedents for according nature (or in this case, “Nature”) its own legal recognition and status under the law. Even if the effectiveness of such recognitions is not always as fully actualized as one might hope, it is nonetheless at least a conceptual advancement under modern law for other species or beings and ecological entities that have not traditionally had any such formal recognition or representation in human social institutions. To be afforded some vocalization of moral concern, given how they are so profoundly sensitive to the decisions made there, is an important contemporary legal advance, albeit one with ancient roots in indigenous conceptualizations of the Earth.

The conceptualization of the Earth as an entity or being with its own standing, in so far as it may be considered an “advance” in the moral imagination of contemporary consciousness, also represents how far modern imagination has moved from pre-modern iterations. As Carolyn Merchant argues, some pre-modern images of Earth as “a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings.” She argues that, with the advent of the Scientific Revolution and changing “metaphors and images of nature,” behavioral restraints are “changed into a

sanction.” Merchant, however, does not call for an uncritical return to these pre-modern images. Instead, she envisions a new postmodern story rooted in what she calls a “partnership ethic,” which reclaims some pre-modern images of Earth (insofar as she considers it a home shared by all living beings and non-living things) while also moving beyond the patriarchal images of subjugation and domination that came to prevail in the West during the modern era.

Any new story that relies on personable metaphors for the Earth, or even ecosystems, as a kind of being with standing, or as an “active partner” as Merchant suggests, arguably borrow from an incredibly rich metaphorical legacy that various indigenous communities across the globe have used to make meaning and connect with forces they believe to be at play in the universe. If personable metaphors are to be used and claimed today, especially among non-indigenous communities in the contemporary West, a critical and conscientious consideration for the social justice aspects of those metaphors—like class, gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity, for example—

33 Ibid., 4. Also, Jerry Mander points to a shift from what he considers to be the inherent wisdom found in some indigenous "systems of logic" toward what he calls "American technological society," which he argues is rooted in a myth of progress through technological advancement that contributes to the kind of ecological violence and industrial expansion occurring in the modern era. See Jerry Mander, In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991), 220, 39.


ought to be given due attention in order to circumvent the legacies of patriarchy and oppression that have otherwise co-opted pre-modern metaphors for Earth, as Merchant points out. It is important to note the impressive diversity of images that have occupied the moral imaginations of numerous indigenous communities around the globe for generations before the advent of modern civilizations. For contemporary peoples who aim to reclaim or claim anew what many consider to be a lost sense of human intimacy with the Earth and its natural systems, indigenous voices are a rich source of metaphors for the concept of “Mother Earth” in the moral imagination.

**Determining Ecological Value amidst Shifting Paradigms**

These are not the only paradigms under which some sense of value recognition may result in the protection of other species and ecosystems. Functionally, a paradigm in which their raw instrumental value to human wellbeing is more fully considered could potentially prove just as helpful or maybe even more helpful in the protection of other species and ecosystems within the context of predominating worldviews. It could be argued that the primary ecological problem is one of overconsumption by the world’s most privileged peoples. Presumably, this occurs partly because the costs of production and consumption are not fully accounted for within the economic order. Lester Brown

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once met with the former Vice President of Exxon for Norway and the North Sea, Øystein Dahle. Brown recalls that Dahle expressed a worry that:

Socialism collapsed because it did not allow the market to tell the economic truth. Capitalism may collapse because it does not allow the market to tell the ecological truth.  

Herein lies the greatest challenge to predominating market systems as it pertains to the contemporary ecological and climate crisis: When the costs and consequences of production and consumption, all the inputs and outputs required by an accurate balance sheet, are not accounted for, then somebody or something is short-changed. The long-term viability and functionality of predominating market systems is then jeopardized, a consequence of concern especially for those with the most to lose from the failure of such systems.  

Regarding some of the limitations of predominating market systems and balance sheets that do not reveal the whole truth of the costs of inputs and outputs, Jeffrey D. Sachs argues that free markets:

[…] fail when producers cause adverse spillovers to the rest of society, such as by polluting the rivers with toxic chemicals or emitting climate-changing carbon dioxide into the air from a coal-fired power plant. In such cases, the private economy tends to oversupply the goods in question, unless there are specific regulations or levies imposed on the offending actions. We say that the market

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37 Brown, Plan B 4.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization, 243.  
38 Whitney Bauman argues, for example, that consumerism or the promise of access to wealth and goods, can act as a "carrot" for poorer peoples to buy into capitalism as an economic system even though it may not be as effective at lifting as many people out of poverty as believed, at which point military and economic power concentrated in the hands of a wealthy elite then act as a "stick" to maintain a system that funnels wealth upward. See Whitney Bauman, "Consumerism and Capitalism: The True Costs of Integrity," Dialog 49, no. 4 (Winter, 2010), 263-264.
needs “corrective pricing,” such as a tax levied on the pollutant, in order to reduce negative spillovers.\footnote{Jeffrey D. Sachs, \textit{The Price of Civilization: Reawakening American Virtue and Prosperity} (New York: Random House, 2011), 33.}

These “spillovers” to which Sachs refers are also known as “externalities” or “uncounted costs” that private markets are not required to take into account on their balance sheets.\footnote{Albert Gore, \textit{An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and what we can do about It} (New York: Rodale Press, 2006), 270; Lester R. Brown, \textit{Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization} (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 8, 290, 367.}

William C. French offers a helpful overview of the ethical implications surrounding the problem of externalities, but is particularly astute in his description when he says:

“Externalities” are real costs that are imposed on third-parties now and will be imposed in the future on people other than the producer and the purchaser/consumer. By leaving these real but widely-diffused costs out of the price paid in the market transaction, we get an immense privileging of the present interests of some coupled with a structural blocking of necessary concern for burdens on others—other humans or animals and plants in ecosystems—our common future. Short-term concerns by some for profits and power are allowed to swamp long-range responsible planning for the common good.\footnote{William C. French, "On Knowing Oneself in an Age of Ecological Concern," in \textit{Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives}, ed. Jame Schaefer (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2011), 146.}

Since nobody charges a private company for spewing the waste products from their production process, like carbon dioxide or soot used in energy consumption, they need not worry about creating a surplus amount of such wastes that “spill over” into the global commons. For example, when a company is not required to account for the costs of safely processing industrial waste and that cost is absorbed into the global commons of
air and/or water, then oil and coal energy may appear “cheaper” than solar or wind because certain costs of production and consumption are not identified on the balance sheet. Those costs are ignored, so the economic value of the ecological services of air and water are ignored.\textsuperscript{42} The result is environmental degradation and suffering poor communities while stockholders with the largest ownership in large, multi-national corporations profit greatly. Energy company shareholders in companies like Exxon-Mobil are but one example of a small and super-elite group of people who profit while the communities in which the company operates pay the uncounted costs in terms of reduced health and quality of life from the search, production, transport, and consumption of non-renewable resource like oil, coal, and natural gas.

In order for capitalist systems to operate more fairly, society must at least ensure that the balance sheets and associated calculations are as accurate as possible so that corporate enterprises are accountable for the full costs of their production. Creating a more accurate balance sheet requires that the social institutions that maintain capitalistic systems at least attempt an honest accounting of both the use of common goods, such as air and water as noted above, and also of the services that natural ecosystems provide in terms of clean drinking water and flood protection, for example. Honest accounting is

good for ecosystems and the poor who so often depend most directly upon them.

Whether an ecosystem is judged inherently valuable in its own right or instrumentally important for human needs, it may matter little what the motives are so long as they lead to a shared commitment to protect and sustain the ecosystems on which we all depend. If this is a framework that can preserve and sustain the integrity of ecosystem functions until humanity’s cultural paradigms make the deeper shifts necessary to preserve and enhance the diversity of all life on Earth, then perhaps it is one important transitional pathway.

A study backed by the United Nations and several countries has assembled a report on “The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity” (TEEB) in order to help global society begin accounting for the economic value of the ecological services that ecosystems provide human societies.43 One of the study’s leaders, Pavan Sukhdev of Deutsche Bank, notes that all of the thousand-plus studies the group has evaluated regarding efforts to protect ecosystems around the globe point in the same direction; specifically, he says “no matter how you slice the figures up you come up with a ratio of benefits to costs that’s between 25-to-one and 100-to-one.”44 In other words, we now live in a world in which it is so overwhelmingly prudent to protect and conserve


natural resources, from a strictly economic perspective, that the financial benefits of preserving and protecting life now outweigh even the financial costs of ignoring the externalities when considered in the larger context of more honest accounting of resources in the global commons. The point here is that Western market systems took root at a time and a place in which nature’s bounty and ability to absorb human waste seemed, and perhaps to some degree may have been, nearly endless. That is certainly no longer the case. If Western market systems are to persist into the future, then at the very least they must adapt and begin to function under this new set of ecological limitations.

Presumably, an approach such as this to determining ecological value is an improvement over the predominating scenario in which corporate profits may soar while ecosystems and vulnerable communities bear much of the cost of that profit. In the long run, however, an approach such as this must necessarily be a transitional one since it embodies inherent tensions existing between differing worldviews, some of which may be incompatible with the kind of paradigm shift in human-Earth relations that is necessary. Thomas S. Kuhn, distinguished physicist and historian of science, introduced


the term “paradigm shift” in 1962 as a way to describe periodic shifts or revolutions in the advancement of scientific knowledge, particularly those shifts brought on by some sort of crisis within the “gestalt” of the scientific community. One such example is the shift in consensus from the Geocentric Model that was part of the Ptolemaic system to a Heliocentric Model developed and exchanged for the Copernican system in the 17th century. While Kuhn limited his use of the term to describe shifts or revolutions in science, the comprehensive and sometimes highly disruptive nature of those shifts upon prevailing worldviews as well as the lengthy timescale on which such shifts can take place allowed his idea to transcend his originally intended use for the term. It applies comfortably as a description of the kind of transformation now underway; due in part to a globalized human population’s emerging ecological consciousness, the paradigm shift happening now is challenging aspects of the predominating modern worldview.


48 For a general overview, see Thomas S. Kuhn, The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957). Also consider how the theory of plate tectonics and continental drift, as a more contemporary example, has advanced scientific understandings of evolutionary biology, ecology, and earth sciences. Such an advance was not only seismic in terms of how it helped to advance scientific understanding of planetary evolution and functions, but demonstrates how a paradigm shifts can often emerge only out of the collective work of many individuals and groups over an extended period of time, sometimes generations. See, for example, Neil Shubin, The Universe within: Discovering the Common History of Rocks, Planets, and People (New York: Pantheon Books, 2013), 84, 115-116, 201-202.

49 See, for example, how Edwards uses the term with regard to "sustainability" as a social revolution on par with (and in response to) the Industrial Revolution, in Andres R. Edwards, The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift (Gabriola, BC: New Society Publishers, 2005), 1-10.
The growing global appetite for consumer products, along with a growing human population whose purchasing power continues to increase, has reached such a level of intensity among the world’s most privileged that, with current industrial and commercial methods, it is generally argued that the average U.S. citizen is now consuming resources more than five times beyond what the Earth can sustainably accommodate. The production and consumption of energy and energy-intensive resources is one of the primary driving forces of climate change and many of the associated challenges to the planet’s most marginalized communities.

This overconsumption is happening as majorities of the world’s people are not consuming enough to meet even their basic needs. Some blame predominating market systems and the overarching modern economic order directly and inherently. Others blame the way in which poor people and ecosystem services are discounted within that order. Since I approach these problems through the lens of Christian ethics and social justice, my primary concern has been to understand how these systems function and the role deeply religious stories play in shaping them. I am optimistic that both the stories that orient our lives and the systems we create can be made more fair, just, and ecologically sustainable. Likewise, I am hopeful that there are a variety of ways to go about that task if doing so can be informed and oriented by a thoughtful vision of

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These questions remain: What does this new, necessary paradigm look like? In other words, what does social justice look like within the contexts of climate change and planetary ecological degradation? Furthermore, can Christian theology be drawn upon to tap into and harness the sizable resources and influence of the world’s two billion Christians, in order to mobilize and sustain these people of goodwill in the long and difficult work of moving civilization toward more sustainable human-Earth relations? To those questions I now turn.

**Moving toward a Theology of Mobilization**

A vision of ecological responsibility and social justice, in light of the problems examined over the course of this dissertation, is one in which the globe’s poorest people are free to claim and embody an empowered sense of their agency, equality, and access to basic resources. It is a world in which all people increasingly work to improve on their community’s social inequalities and preserve ecological integrity, even as their larger social structures and institutions are reoriented in a way that facilitates this great work. A community’s climate fitness, or the ability to survive and thrive amidst ecological and climate changes, depends partly upon this collective realization, by a community, of its own agency. Ecological responsibility in this context is rightly understood as a

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foundational part of social justice; in turn, social justice is a necessary part of ecological responsibility.

In short, a vision of ecological responsibility and social justice presupposes an ethic of “eco-justice” as an operative framework within this new paradigm. Gibson puts it well when he describes this ethic as follows:

[E]co-justice recognizes in other creatures and natural systems the claim to be respected and valued and taken into account in societal arrangements [...]. It sees humans as bound up with, and integral to, that larger living fabric of all that is, which some call simply nature and some call God’s good creation. [It] finds value in the health and integrity of the whole natural order. The concern for ecological soundness and sustainability includes but transcends the concern of human beings for themselves.  

In this ethic, there is recognition of the deeply entwined interconnectedness of concerns regarding justice for people and the flourishing of all life on the planet.

A theological understanding of “justice as participation” is inherently bound up with an ecologically informed worldview that recognizes the relationality and interdependency of all life upon our shared planet. These connections are all too

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53 Elsbernd and Bieringer understand justice as participation to be "coherent with those understandings of God which highlight God's universal invitation to enter into relationship with Godself and to continue the works of God, namely, creation, liberation (intervention), and resistance (judgment) to injustice. The image of God as a trinity of persons constituted in their difference provides additional theological underpinnings for justice as participation. Finally, our description for justice as participation is connected to an anthropology which recognizes the following constitutive characteristics:
apparent when certain success stories demonstrate how this new paradigm of the future is already breaking into the present. For example, one positive response to rising sea levels in the low-lying delta country of Bangladesh is “the creation of councils of women in every village ‘who are leading the efforts for community survival’.” In neighboring India’s Andhra Pradesh, “[a] collective of 5,000 women spread across 75 villages in the [region’s] arid interior” are developing “chemical-free, non-irrigated, organic” intensive agricultural practices that have the “resilience to withstand all the fallouts of elevated temperatures” and the shifts in rainfall patterns already beginning to occur with the changing of our globe’s climate. In these two examples, women are necessarily stepping up to ensure the survival of their communities and their regional ecosystems. In the process, they are stepping into more prominent leadership roles within their larger communities. They are claiming their agency, protecting their livelihoods, and preserving and enhancing Earth’s life support systems.

Within those larger communities, smart development policy and good governance function in terms of a positive feedback loop, creating an environment in which the poor

embodiment, social location, relationality, fundamental equality in originality, and accountable agency.” See Elsbernd and Bieringer, When Love is Not enough: A Theo-Ethic of Justice, 160.

54 This is a reference to discussions on normativity of the future, in which justice can be visualized as the eschatological City of God breaking into the present. See, for example, Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd, eds., Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective (Leuven, Belgium; Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2010).


and women are able not only to realize greater agency within their societies but also to create better policies that quicken the pace of sustainability.\textsuperscript{57} For example, Monique Barbut has worked to ensure that women are fully engaged in addressing climate change by incorporating gender perspectives and the unique needs of women and men in all levels of her institution’s work.\textsuperscript{58} She has done so by incorporating a gender perspective when considering the impacts of how the Global Environment Facility decides to fund certain projects, deeming public transportation projects as a particular priority because they reduce emissions from vehicles and also provide mobility to women in those cultures where women are not taught to drive.\textsuperscript{59} Including gender perspectives in development policy and governance make both aspects of social equity and environmental sustainability more achievable. Social equity and sustainable development go hand in hand; this is the structural embodiment of justice as participation taking place alongside projects of ecological responsibility and sustainability. Furthering gender equity, in particular poorer women’s agency and empowerment alongside sustainable human development, is a functional activity rooted in those ecological values that are likewise connected to the preservation and sustenance of the wellbeing and flourishing of all life on Earth.

\textsuperscript{57} Vince, \textit{Coping with Climate Change: Which Societies Will do Best?}

\textsuperscript{58} Monique Barbut was CEO of the Global Environment Facility, the world’s largest funder of efforts to preserve the global environment, from 2006-2012. The GEF has “provided or leveraged more than $40 billion in funding for environmental projects in the developing world since 1991.” See UNFPA, \textit{Facing a Changing World: Women, Population and Climate}, 56.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 27.
A vision of justice adequately rooted in concern for the poor, especially poorer women, and concern for the flourishing of all life on the planet within the context of the contemporary ecological and climate crisis is one that is as wide-ranging in its consideration of solutions as it is in its consideration of the problems. It is necessarily wide-ranging because “the elements likely to make societies resilient to climate change are probably the same [elements] that lead to equitable development, full exercise of human rights, social and environmental justice, and an environmentally sustainable world.”

Protecting and preserving the ecological integrity of a meadow, a forest, or a river, because each is good in its own right, is a powerful and persuasive argument. Protecting and preserving the planet’s ecological integrity because our species depends on it—especially the poorest and most vulnerable among us who tend to rely on functional ecosystems—is also a powerful argument. These two arguments are made most effectively together, especially during such a turbulent time when so much of the human-Earth future hangs in the balance.

Either argument alone is reason enough to mobilize everything Christian religious traditions can bring to the table in order to stop that madness of humanity’s collective destruction of the planetary home we all share. Either reason is also enough to inspire and sustain people of goodwill in the great work of making this shift from a culture of death to one that preserves and enhances life. Presently, however, I see few reasons why both

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60 Ibid., 50.

cases ought not to be made together. This great work is one in which every community and all cultures, traditions, and peoples must consider every possible way to lend their voice and their vocation to a globalized civilization’s collective efforts to transform itself anew. When taken in the larger span of time and space, the gross annihilation of life on this “pale blue dot,” as Carl Sagan puts it, is unshakably disturbing and either moral framework that helps humanity to see its folly may be a step in the right direction.62

It is haunting to think that, in this overwhelmingly vast, dark, and cold cosmos, only one pale blue dot—at least as much as we know presently—is home to the vast array of life forms that have ever been known and ever may be known by human beings, yet our species persists in systematically plucking this miracle of life out of existence. Sadly, we do this to other species even as we segregate and sometimes annihilate members of our own species for the most miniscule of perceived differences.63 This generation is

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62 Sagan's, now famous, reflection on human history within Earth's cosmic context is not only chilling, but resonates with my own argument here, especially when he says, "That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam." See Carl Sagan, Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space (New York: Random House, 1994), xv-xvi.

63 Certainly, differences between and among individuals, traditions, and cultures exist, as do differences in outlooks and worldviews within such communities over time and across contexts, and I do not think it is helpful to minimize those differences when they contribute to the richness of the human experience. That being said, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and many others have long been a champion of what may be considered "our common humanity," in the sense that those "factors which divide us are actually much more superficial than those we share. Despite all the characteristics that
living amidst an extinction event of our own doing, and it requires an “all-hands-on-deck” approach if we are to effectively alter this sorry, sorry state of affairs. In other words, the time for quibbling is over—now is the time to mobilize into action. While I think that both the ecocentric and anthropocentric can and should be made together, when that cannot be the case for one reason or another, then perhaps when they result in the same end it may not yet matter which case is made as long as the ecological integrity and functioning of Earth’s life support systems, upon which we all depend, are sustained into the future. This does not mean, though, that concern for social justice and concern for ecological responsibility can be segregated and still result in the adequate changes we need to see in a globalized civil society.

Envisioning a future of social justice and ecological responsibility is an indispensable step in the implementation of a robust theology of mobilization—one with enough thrust to rally communities of faith and people of goodwill into action now. Its ultimate aim is to inform, inspire, and mobilize Christian communities to partner with all people of goodwill in actively imagining and creating a new world wherein the poorest and most vulnerable among us are included in the decisions that affect their lives.


differentiate us--race, language, religion, gender, wealth, and many others--we are all equal in terms of our basic humanity." See Dalai Lama XIV Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 29. To this, I humbly add that given the scope of the ecological and climate challenges before us, I wonder if it would not be helpful for humanity to not only consider an emotive appeal to a sense of common humanity, but whether perhaps there may be any emotive appeal to humanity's shared "earthiness" or a sense of "shared being" with all other life forms. For Christians and Jews, perhaps a return to the Genesis account of God's one word for all "breathing creatures," as discussed in chapter three.

64 This phrase, "A Theology of Mobilization," is partly in response to, and inspired by, Lester Brown's call to action, and I am indebted to William French who encouraged me
Moreover, it is a world in which the most vulnerable ecosystems and non-human members in the community of life are not excluded from the human decisions that affect their ability to survive and flourish. The blueprint that follows is intended to help mobilize Christian communities into action on behalf of this vision, and I intend it in no way to be a comprehensive approach to the various challenges at hand. Rather, what follows are a few key principles—goals and objectives, really—that I think Christian communities can rely on to help mobilize the full force and power of their spiritual and religious traditions in shaping the social change necessary to confront global poverty, climate change, and ecological degradation on a massive scale.

The examples of creation-centered perspectives prevailing in streams of pre-modern Christian accounts of theological anthropology and cosmology that I described and reclaimed in chapters three and four can be rightly understood as supportive of the kind of ethical-political agenda that could inspire Christians to help move society toward more constructive responses to the challenges described in chapters one and two. If human beings are indeed “storytelling culture-dwellers,” as Oelschlaeger argues, then as Fasching and DeChant argue, “the kind of story we think we are in and the role we see ourselves playing in that story” really do matter. That story, as well as the role people see themselves playing in it, has a real-life set of consequences pertaining to the kind of

world societies maintain and construct on a daily basis. In reclaiming certain aspects of Christian theology for the contemporary ecological and climate crisis, some aspects of the pre-modern context, worldview, or “story” are rightly to be left behind in the historical record, as is argued in chapter four.

Still, there are relevant principles within this pre-modern heritage that can be carried forward into this new story that is beginning to emerge, but only so long as they are grounded in the “signs of the times.” In other words, they must be grounded within a contemporary social and ecological context that values both human dignity through social justice and also more-than-human dignity through humanity’s practice of ecological responsibility. For Christian communities, whether they may claim an ecocentric perspective or an anthropocentric perspective for the time being, one of the primary contributions of religious communities is the way in which they help people to engage in long-term thinking on a range of ethical concerns. At their best, they help societies to become more just and to consider the kind of ethical norms that can help create the conditions for life to flourish on Earth. Some key principles that I think integrate social justice concerns with a concern for ecological responsibility, within the context of climate change as I have engaged it throughout this dissertation, include:

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• A renewed sense of ecological humility alongside a heightened sense of agency and basic human equity irrespective of factors such as sex/gender, sexual orientation, perceived race, economic status, or country of birth;

• A renewed sense of creation’s intrinsic goodness and inherent worth alongside a heightened sense of the human person’s embodied, interconnected, ecological reality and especially its associated needs and limitations in relation to the needs and limitations of the larger planet;

• A renewed sense of the fundamentally social nature of the human person and the institutions people build alongside a heightened sense of the global commons and especially humanity’s social and institutional responsibility to facilitate the common good of all life on Earth; and

• A renewed appreciation for the role of lived-experience as a significant source for theological ethics alongside a heightened recognition of the special role of ecological and evolutionary Earth sciences in the formation of new spiritual-religious creation stories.

The first three principles aim to balance what have generally been approached as historically competing moral and ethical concerns within the traditions. They integrate on two fronts, by: 1) positioning social justice concerns on one side of a coin shared by ecological concerns, and 2) by showing that, while the traditions offer much that is still salient for the contemporary ecological and climate crises, this is still very much a new problem with new challenges posed to the traditions, for which new responses and new insights must be formed. The fourth principle imagines forward in time, anticipating how
these new stories may become substantive sources for future ethical insights and
responses that help shape and form society in more socially and ecologically responsible
ways.

While it should by now be quite obvious how much I think the fields of religious
studies and theological ethics have to offer the crisis at hand, perhaps it may also be
important to note how easily the moral thrust of an academic argument can sometimes get
bogged down in abstract theory.⁶⁸ The urgency associated with global poverty and
planetary degradation means that professional theologians and ethicists simply do not
have the luxury to afford any wasted time in unnecessarily complicating what is
essentially quite a clear and compelling moral call to action.⁶⁹ This is, at heart, what
pushes forward a theology of mobilization. At the end of the day, the precise way in

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⁶⁸ I am thinking here of James Garvey's argument that sometimes it is "the whole of a
life and the way it's lived" that is the more appropriate question in ethics than is the
particular moral dilemmas surrounding individual acts, especially within the context of a
challenge like climate change in which impactful individual action to thwart its
consequences may be impossible. See James Garvey, The Ethics of Climate Change:
Right and Wrong in a Warming World (London; New York: Continuum, 2008), 147-151.

⁶⁹ For an example of the great diversity of ethical arguments that ultimately rally around
a push for action on climate change, see Michael S. Northcott, A Political Theology of
Climate Change (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013);
and Michael S. Northcott, A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming (Maryknoll;
New York: Orbis Books, 2007). Also, Stephen Mark Gardiner, A Perfect Moral Storm:
The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011);
Ved P. Nanda, ed. Climate Change and Environmental Ethics (New Brunswick:
Transaction Publishers, 2011); Allen Thompson and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, eds.,
Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change: Human Virtues of the Future (Cambridge, MA:
& Climate Change (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993); and Paul
G. Harris and Steve Vanderheiden, Ethics and Global Environmental Policy:
Cosmopolitan Conceptions of Climate Change (Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA:
which humanity shifts the present paradigm of human-Earth relations may matter little. The greater concern is that we learn to conscientiously engage the challenge and earnestly accept the mission to preserve, sustain, and enhance life on this “pale blue dot” of a planet we call home.

Fortunately, as has been noted, this great work is already begun, and the world’s people are indeed mobilizing and actively working to build this new world in ways that embody some of the key principles identified in this chapter. At a practical level, what is necessary for a deep, lasting, and structural kind of change has to include but must also transcend what is possible through individual actions alone. Such structural change will be most effective when it acts upon and addresses holistically the structures of injustice that occur within those institutions described in chapter four, namely governmental/political, corporate/economic, cultural/intellectual, and religious

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institutions as well as social structures. These institutions govern the full range of social and environmental dimensions that are necessary for an inclusive and sustainable economic development approach that creates a “safe and just space for humanity,” which resides between the social foundation required to meet human needs and the planet’s ability to provide for those needs.  

Kate Raworth translated this idea for the advocacy community during her tenure with Oxfam International, which helped introduce it to the United Nations. A model such as this (see figure 14) offers a holistic approach to social and ecological challenges that visually demonstrates how the various aspects of moral concern, identified in the key principles I have described, can be held in careful tension with one another.

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Figure 14. A Safe and Just Space for Human Flourishing within Planetary Boundaries. Source: Raworth, *A Safe and Just Space for Humanity*.

To the degree that a “doughnut model” like the one depicted is in harmony with some of the key moral principles offered, and that it offers a framework in which the ecological and Earth sciences can be partnered with the social sciences and humanitarian organizations in charting a measurable path of progress toward sustainable development, one can begin to see the long arc of the moral universe beginning its bend toward justice.

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73 Raworth, *A Safe and Just Space for Humanity: Can we Live within the Doughnut?*
for the poorest of the poor and for the Earth as well. It demonstrates an inherent integration between concern for human needs and wellbeing within a context of concern for ecological responsibility, which can be grounded by the moral imperative for just and responsible action. Importantly, it also offers an example of how a larger social and ecological framework is necessary in order to approach the more specific climate concerns articulated in chapters one and two. Conceptually organizing the environmental impact of climate change and the social impact of climate-induced displacement within this larger framework of moral concern may be the only way in which a fair and just climate response may ultimately be negotiated and achieved.

Moreover, the great work of transforming human-Earth relations, understood rightly as a process already-in-motion-yet-not-fully-realized, is embodied in an even larger framework with greater long-term importance: the development of the Earth Charter, a comprehensive and distinctive document that has been called “the most negotiated document in human history.” The vision and principles set forth in that

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74 Though various iterations of this aphorism, the moral arc of the universe bending toward justice, have been used throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, I attribute my use of the phrase here to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

75 For a general overview of how climate accords are negotiated within the context of international relations, see Urs Luterbacher and Detlef F. Sprinz, eds., *International Relations and Global Climate Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

76 John Lane quotes Steven C. Rockefeller, whom Lane observes is one of the key architects of the document, with this description. See John Lane, "Lake Conestee," in *A Voice for Earth: American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter*, ed. Peter Blaze Corcoran, James Wohlpart, and Brandon P. Hollingshead (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 66. For a helpful overview of the Earth Charter and its significance, see Klaus Bosselmann and J. Ronald Engel, *The Earth Charter: A Framework for Global Governance* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: KIT Publishers, 2010); and Laura Westra
document, launched on 29 June 2000 by the Earth Charter Commission, embody a “global ethic” that unites the core themes of “respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence, and peace.”77 These values and principles offer an important ethical foundation upon which the current and future generations may live out the most significant paradigm shift in the cultural history of our species and perhaps even the biological history of our planet.78 Much in the Earth Charter resonates with some of the most deeply held ethical values and beliefs exemplified across the faith traditions of the world’s religions, including Christian


78 For examples of how the world's religions inspire and facilitate the Earth Charter, see Mary Evelyn Tucker, "World Religions, the Earth Charter, and Sustainability," World Views: Environment, Culture, Religion 12, no. 2/3 (2008), 115-128; and Tucker, Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter their Ecological Phase; Also, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).
traditions, and the document’s potential to inspire and mobilize the world into action has almost certainly not yet reached its full potential.

Christian communities, like many religious communities throughout history and around the world, have an impressive ability to mobilize a remarkable amount of energy embodied in their deeply held values and beliefs. I believe—I hope—that human beings are at their best when they are required to tap into this great, mysterious source that inspires and sustains human potential, even amidst great despair. If Christians are able to see and claim from within their traditions a renewed sense of ecological humility, a sense of creation’s intrinsic goodness and inherent worth, and a sense of the fundamentally social nature of the human person, then I think the prospect of a bright future moves from the realm of myth to possibility. If Christians are able also to claim the role of lived-experience as a significant source of theo-ethical reflection, make peace with the evolutionary and ecological sciences, and see them for the allies they really are, then I think they may be able to harness the enduring influence of their faith traditions in order to advocate for and to accompany the poorest of the poor, human or otherwise, in the pursuit of justice through a robust commitment to the principles of agency, equity, and embodiment within a shared global commons.

What may be required for those people of goodwill who would be so bold as to engage in this great work of our generation, and mobilize for this paradigm shift in human-Earth relations, is well-described in the rallying call to action found in the closing words of the Earth Charter. For humanity to find a way forward:

[...] requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility. We must imaginatively develop and
apply the vision of a sustainable way of life locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom. Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals. Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play. The arts, sciences, religions, educational institutions, media, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and governments are all called to offer creative leadership. The partnership of government, civil society, and business is essential for effective governance. [...] Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.\textsuperscript{79}

Indeed. Let us be bold with courage to quicken the struggle for justice and peace. Let us have the will and discover the resolve to find our way forward in this dark and trying time; that we may earnestly set forth in our mission to preserve, sustain, and enhance life on this planet we call home and, together, mobilize to create this new world of possibility.

\textsuperscript{79} The Earth Charter Initiative, \textit{The Earth Charter}. 
CONCLUSION

I began this dissertation with the aim of investigating what I perceived to be a set of neglected questions in the field of theological ethics: Why is it that those who are trained in ethical reasoning, either professionally or via a religious tradition or both, have typically not spent much time on ecological concerns relative to other moral dilemmas emerging from the human experience, like birth and death, sexuality, or war? More specifically, why is it that such profound environmental and social challenges like climate change and climate-induced displacement, have yet to receive adequate attention by the world’s religious traditions in a way that helps to mobilize human civilization around a moral call to action on the part of planetary survival? What is it about the way certain faith communities, and Christian communities in particular, paint a picture of the world and understand the role of the human person in ways that hinder or compel them to work for collective, structural change—the kind of change necessary to sustain the vitality of Earth’s ecosystems and some of the most vulnerable populations directly dependent upon them? What, if any, progress toward the kind of change we need might there be to inspire and support a reasonable attitude of hopefulness for a future world that more adequately addresses problems like structural poverty, gender disparity, ecological degradation, and climate-induced displacement?

My research and investigation into both the theoretical and practical implications of such questions has yielded “sticky” answers that are often as nuanced as the
complexity of the questions. This is an outcome of the carefully constructed model of structured ethical reflection I have used to guide my work—one that places interdisciplinary emphasis on the insights of science and social analysis and uses them in a case study-based approach that has been the bedrock of my theological excursus. Critically correlating the social and environmental problems posed by the climate crisis and presented in my case study, with Christian moral and ethical religious traditions, is a process that poses entirely new questions to a religion and to faith traditions that have never yet had to grapple with those questions. Perhaps more important than the answers to the questions I have posed and investigated, are the questions themselves. At the end of the day, however, I hope the reader walks away from my work with at least one conclusion drawn from my research as it pertains to social justice, ecological responsibility, climate-induced displacement, and environmental degradation: the human community can act, we ought to act, and the time to act is now.

But does this mean we will act? No, it certainly does not, and it is that base concern that we will not end the madness that is our collective assault on this planet, which paralyzes many people with fear. Friends and colleagues, who understandably find themselves feeling exasperated, overwhelmed, and disheartened by the immensity and severity of the problem before us, have on occasion asked me, “James, are you really hopeful? I mean, REALLY hopeful? How can anyone be truly hopeful if they have a solid grasp of what is really going on, especially someone who has seen so much pain and suffering, so much degradation and injustice all over the world?” While I have pointed to several reasons why I think it is quite reasonable for people to be hopeful that
our species is capable of the kind of mobilizing change human civilization must make, I have also argued that stories often weigh more heavily and influentially on the hearts and minds of people than sheer argument alone. In that vein, I offer a personal story to explain my own reason for hope amidst so much despair.

Shortly after returning from my tenure in rural Bangladesh, and before beginning my doctoral studies, I had the opportunity to spend some time on retreat at a secluded cabin in the woods with my extended family during late spring in the Appalachian Mountains. My first nephew was learning how to walk and talk and I was thrilled to be able to spend some time with him in such a beautiful natural environment. One afternoon while picnicking in a small park at the base of the Appalachians, my two-year-old nephew and I stumbled across a field of dandelions whose flowers were spent, leaving an almost endless sea of white, puffy seed-heads ready to disperse at the slightest disruption. Having grown up in the American Midwest I still find such a sight to be quite spectacular, even if slightly mundane because of its familiarity, notwithstanding that most people consider dandelions a rather unpleasant “weed.”

Rather than encourage my nephew to run through the field and set-off a snowfall of seeds, which certainly would have delighted him, we crouched down near the edge of it and picked only one dandelion. His delicate little fingers carefully held one small seed head and I encouraged him to blow on it gently in order to see what happens. He did so and I watched his eyes light up with unbridled astonishment as the seeds flew into the air and floated upward like magic. His quiet response was but a whisper and barely audible, but it has stuck with me nonetheless because it was the only word he knew to express the
sense of awe and wonder he was experiencing. He stared and pointed while letting out a very drawn-out “wow” that trailed off almost as quietly as it had started. In that “wow” I find tremendous hope—so much hope.

When I begin to feel overwhelmed by the great harm we are doing to each other and to the Earth’s ecological systems, I try to make room in the busyness of my daily schedule and seek out those tiny little moments in which I might recapture something of that child-like sense of awe and wonder that my nephew found in his encounter with a simple dandelion. It is one gift of our human condition to be able to stop and marvel, if even for a moment, at the beauty and grandeur that makes up this cosmic journey of life on our planet. I find that those moments lend humility and clarity by grounding my work in a larger trajectory of time, one which transcends my own life by situating me in a community of people who have long worked, and will long continue the work in this effort to nurture the miracle of life that has emerged on our planet—that inspires me to keep on going, even when it sometimes looks like our efforts are really only flying in the face of what might otherwise be insurmountable odds. I so desperately wish more of us would see and engage the world in this special way—to more clearly and more often experience that deeply mysterious, perhaps even magical, but certainly delightful sense of joy and peace that sometimes seems all around us when we have the eyes to see it and know it.
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VITA

James Stephen Mastaler is a life-long environmental advocate, having constructed the first Bachelor of Science degree awarded by North Park University for Environmental Studies in 2004 and having earned one of the first a Master of Arts degrees granted by Loyola University Chicago for Social Justice in 2008.

He has served as an observer delegate to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change for three Conferences of the Parties with the aim of grounding his teaching and scholarship in those issues that emerge from and serve the public square. Previously, he served as the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club's Global Warming Solutions Advocate and has experience with international development work from having lived and studied in countries like Bangladesh. He has performed graduate studies in Kenya and spent his undergraduate studies crisscrossing the globe, engaged in aquatic research in the Bahamas, ecological studies in South India, field research in Northern Michigan and experimental/sustainable tropical agricultural research in Florida. He is certified as a Field Naturalist and as an Environmental Analyst by the AuSable Institute of Environmental Studies and also holds a certificate in Sustainability Management from the University of Chicago.
The dissertation submitted by James Stephen Mastaler has been read and approved by the following committee:

William C. French, Ph.D., Director
Associate Professor of Theology
Loyola University Chicago

Michael J. Schuck, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Theology
Loyola University Chicago

Robert A. Ludwig, Ph.D.
Professor of Pastoral Studies
Loyola University Chicago

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature that appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

_________________________  __________________________
Date  Director’s Signature