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St Andrews

# St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology

## **Ecotheology**

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First published: 12 January 2023

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Ecotheology>

### **Citation**

Conradie, Ernst. 2023. 'Ecotheology', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Ecotheology> Accessed: 5 June 2026

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This article draws on the overview of the early exponents of ecotheology and the myriad of discourses in the fields of Christian ecotheology offered by Ernst Conradie and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda in an editors' introduction entitled 'Telling the Story en route: On this Road (*hodos*) and its Logic (*logos*)' in the volume *How Would We Know what God is up to?* (Durbanville: Aosis/Eugene: Cascade, forthcoming).



# Ecotheology

*Ernst Conradie*

This article offers a broad overview of Christian ecotheology, a theological movement reflecting on Christian responses to ecological destruction. Any such an overview can hardly cover its spread in different geographical contexts, confessional traditions, theological schools, and languages. With these limitations in mind, this entry offers a first approximation of Christian ecotheology on the basis of the Greek roots *oikos*, *theos*, and *logos*, and identifies four core tasks (a dual critical and a dual constructive task) for any form of ecotheology. It then explores various prompts, precursors, and subsequent developments in global Christian ecotheology. The article lists a myriad of current discourses within ecotheology before identifying and outlining a number of ongoing contestations in the field. On this basis, some perspectives on current paths and emerging horizons in the field are offered.

**Keywords:** Ecotheology, Ecology, Environmental crisis, Ecofeminism, Ecclesiology, Ethics, Religion and ecology, Sustainability, Worldwide Christianity

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# 1 Christian ecotheology: a first approximation

Although the roots of 'ecotheology' go much deeper, the term as such gained currency only in the 1990s. This was signalled by an important World Council of Churches volume entitled *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (1994), edited by David Hallman, and by the name change of the journal *Theology in Green* (1992–1996) to *Ecotheology* (1996–2006). The journal *Ecotheology* was then subsumed under the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* that started publishing in 2007, indicating another symbolic shift.

The abbreviated term 'ecotheology', instead of 'ecological theology', must be understood against the background of the term 'ecojustice'. Ecojustice is used in ecumenical discourse to capture the need for a comprehensive sense of justice that can respond to economic injustice, ecological degradation, and the interplay between them. This term was coined by William Gibson and popularized by Dieter Hessel (see 1985: 12). It builds upon the recognition that the English words 'ecology', 'economy', and 'ecumenical' share the same etymological root in the Greek *oikos* (household). Accordingly, ecology describes the underlying logic (*logos*) of the household, economy circumscribes the rules (*nomoi*) for the management of the household, while the 'whole inhabited world' (*oikoumene*) refers to the (human) inhabitation of the household (see e.g. Rasmussen 1996). In ecclesial terms one may also speak of 'ecodomy' as the upbuilding of the household (see Müller-Fahrenholz 1995).

One may therefore say that ecotheology is the English translation of the Greek *oikos* and *theos* and *logos*. Indeed, the 'whole household of God' has become a dominant root metaphor in many strands of ecotheology, following the early contributions by general secretaries such as Philip Potter (see 2013) and Konrad Raiser (see 1991). It is now found in contexts as far apart as the Pacific islands, South Africa, and South Korea (see Tofaeono 2000; Ayre and Conradie 2016; and the critique by Zachariah 2021). It needs to be added that if the Earth is indeed the only 'house' for humans (as the metaphor suggests), it does not provide a sense of home for everyone yet, while the habitat of many other forms of life is being destroyed. This suggests the need for a distinction between a house and a home, a sense of belonging and an eschatological longing (see Conradie 2005); indeed between a house, a home, and a warm hearth (see Kanyoro and Njoroge 1996).

One may also find forms of ecotheology in other theistic traditions. It is therefore best to add the qualifier 'Christian' to speak of Christian ecotheology. As an aside one may note that the English term is sometimes spelled with a hyphen (eco-theology) and sometimes without the hyphen (ecotheology). There seems to be no linguistic reason other than familiarity to use or not to use the hyphen so that publishers adopt different style guides in

this regard. Given the global spread of ecotheology it is suggested that the hyphen best be dropped.

Christian ecotheology is arguably characterized by a dual critique, namely both a Christian critique of ecological destruction *and* an ecological critique of Christian complicity in such destruction. The first critique tends to be dominant in prophetic forms of theology, discerning the signs of the time and a moment of truth (*kairos*). In multireligious and also multidisciplinary conversations it is the second critique that tends to dominate. One may say that the genius of ecotheology is to hold these two critiques together. Without a critique of Christianity, it can easily become an apologetic exercise that overlooks the need for a radical ecological reformation of Christianity and merely reiterates human responsibility towards the environment through notions of stewardship or priesthood. Without a Christian critique of ecological destruction, ecotheology loses its ability to offer any distinct contribution to wider debates. Ecotheology, then, becomes nothing more than one branch of 'religion and ecology' and cannot avoid the traps of self-secularization.

Recently, it has been argued that this dual critique is often complemented by a constructive contribution that is also of a dual nature, namely a constructive contribution to the common good (the global commons) and to Christian authenticity (see Conradie 2020b).

On the one hand Christians have to work with many others in addressing the full range of ecological challenges (see the argument in Conradie and Koster 2019). This has to be a multidisciplinary effort in which civil society is only one role player, alongside government, business and industry, trade unions, science and the like. Working with others implies having shared (penultimate) goals and shared agendas, even if the ultimate vision may remain distinct. However, at some point the question will emerge whether Christians have a specific contribution to offer. Some would suggest that the most significant contribution would be for Christianity to get its own house in order (following White 1967), given the deep ecumenical divides between those concerned with, for example climate justice and climate denialism that thrives in some Christian sectors.

The need for nothing short of an ongoing ecological reformation of the entire Christian tradition from within suggests a second constructive task for Christian ecotheology, namely to contribute to Christian authenticity. It would not do to merely apply external criteria to Christianity without doing justice to the core of the Christian gospel. Arguably, the constructive task in society can only come to fruition if it is indeed based on the ongoing renewal of Christianity from within and on the basis of a retrieval of its own core beliefs. This entails multiple tasks such as re-reading the Bible, revisiting the history of the Christian tradition, exploring its deepest convictions, symbols, moral visions, and forms of praxis (including liturgy, preaching, pastoral care, ministry, and missions). A core aspect

of this fourth task is to reflect on the identity and character of God in order to address the question of what this (Triune) God may be doing in a time of unprecedented ecological destruction (see Conradie and Lai 2021). Clearly, all the traditional subdisciplines of Christian theology are involved in these critical and constructive tasks.

## **2 Prompts for the emergence of Christian ecotheology**

In the Western academy, Christian ecotheology arguably emerged as an ecumenical scholarly discourse in 1970. This is marked by Frederick Elder's *Crisis in Eden*, Hugh Montefiore's *Can Man Survive?*, Paul Santmire's *Brother Earth* and Joseph Sittler's *The Ecology of Faith*, all published in that year. This was soon followed by John Cobb's *Is it Too Late?* (1972), Francis Schaeffer's *Pollution and the Death of Man* (1972), and Sittler's *Essays on Nature and Grace* (also in 1972). Notably, each of these early books was written in English and mostly by American men. This would change significantly in decades to come.

One may identify various secular prompts, theological precursors, and subsequent developments in the emergence of Christian ecotheology. Reconstructing the secular prompts may be facile, while the precursors are contested and the subsequent developments by now virtually impossible to survey.

One obvious prompt was the devastation wreaked by the nuclear bombs detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 8 August 1945, subsequent nuclear tests, the nuclear arms race, and the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. The threat of a nuclear winter will remain as long as humans know how to make such bombs. A second prompt is the recognition of the impact of chemical pollution following Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, first published in September 1962. A perhaps less obvious prompt may be associated with the messy process of decolonization after 1945 – in India and the East Indies, throughout Africa, and around the world. The extraction and control over natural resources and the impact of such extraction remain contested ever since. In close proximity to 1970 one may mention the UN Conference on the Environment held in Stockholm in June 1972, the *Limits to Growth Report* to the Club of Rome (1972), and the oil crisis of 1973. In hindsight one may also mention the early work of climate scientists, symbolized by Charles Keeling's work at the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii since 1958.

A more direct prompt for ecotheology was the (in)famous essay by the American historian (and Presbyterian layperson) Lynn White on 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' (1967), in which he traced such roots with the medieval influence of the Jewish-Christian tradition. White maintains that 'Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen' and concludes that 'Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt' (1967:

1205, 1207). In a similar critique of Christianity, German scholar Carl Amery (1971) describes the '*gnadenlose Folgen des Christentums*' (merciless consequences of Christianity). He highlights the impact of the history of interpretation of biblical motifs, such as humanity being created in the image of God, the command to have dominion over the earth, the notion of original sin and the history of human salvation. Likewise, the Australian Roderick Nash (1989: 91) contends that Christianity's anthropocentrism, dualism, otherworldliness and hierarchical worldview lie at the root of the environmental crisis and leaves nature as 'other' and thus fully exposed to human greed. The Californian philosopher John Passmore (1980: 12) complains that 'Christianity has encouraged man to think of himself as nature's absolute master, for whom everything that exists was designed'. One may argue that, at least in the Western academy, the early flourishing of ecotheology may be regarded as diverging responses to such critiques. Some offered an apology for Christianity (arguing that 'God is green'), while others apologized on behalf of Christianity for the ecological destruction it has wreaked.

However, the prompts for the emergence of ecotheology go much deeper in Western history. White's thesis may be regarded as an ecological reformulation of Max Weber's even more famous and contested thesis on the influence of the spirit of Calvinism on the rise of capitalism. The critique of Christianity reveals an uneasy relationship between Christianity and modernity. Modernity may itself be understood as a critique of Christianity even though it emerged precisely within the context of Christendom. If Christianity did not always embrace the rise of modernity, at least Western Christianity found itself in collusion with four interrelated pillars of modernity.

The first pillar is the voyages of exploration and exploitation, partially based on Eurocentrism, white supremacy, and the slave trade. Such voyages enabled successive waves of Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, Danish, French, British, Belgian, and German colonialism, followed by neo-colonial quests for American, Russian, Japanese, and Chinese supremacy. The second pillar is the intellectual movements associated with the Renaissance, the European reformations, the rise of empirical science from Galileo onwards, Cartesian rationalism, German idealism, and attempts to come to terms with positivism. The third pillar is the political movements associated especially with the French and American revolutions, the rise of democracy, the abolition of slavery, voting rights for women and other excluded groups, the emphasis on human dignity and subsequently on human rights and human responsibilities.

The fourth pillar is the industrial revolution based on technological innovation, extended from Germany and Britain to Silicon Valley and sweatshops in Asia with at least four phases that are widely recognized in the literature. The industrial revolution itself became deeply intertwined with the rise of various forms of capitalism that spurred on the process of industrialization through the mantra of sustained economic growth.

Indeed, ecological impact may be closely associated with the rise of industrialized capitalism (including the correctives of industrialized socialism). Despite shifts in the global economy from a focus on agriculture to mining and industry and then to services and the knowledge industry, there has been no actual decrease in such biophysical throughput (through dematerialization), or in the use of energy. A report from the Global Carbon Project indicates that the carbon emissions for 2022 will be the highest recorded as yet, surpassing the pre-Covid-19 peak of 2019 (see <https://www.globalcarbonproject.org>). Environmental impact can be closely correlated with such biophysical throughput and the use of fossilized energy.

Globally, ecotheology may undoubtedly be understood as a response to modernity, more specifically to modernity's long-term environmental impact and Christian complicity in the systems and mechanisms of modernity. Put differently, the root causes of ecological destruction can be located squarely in modernity itself, prompting critiques of capitalism, feminist critiques, and more recently postcolonial and decolonial critiques.

Ecotheology could therefore be said to be 'antimodern' in the sense of being a resistance movement against modernity. However, that would underestimate the lasting legacy of modernity, and the ways in which the intellectual and technological tools of modernity are employed in ecotheology. It would also not suffice to suggest that ecotheology is postmodern – at least insofar as the ecological impact of late modernity remains undeniable. Some forms of ecotheology may be premodern by retrieving the ecological wisdom from early Christian traditions or indigenous ecological wisdom, but none can escape the impact of globalized threats associated with climate change, ocean acidification, the rapid loss of biodiversity, the emergence of zoonotic diseases (of which Covid-19 is but one), or ozone depletion. One may also identify 'submodern' forms of ecotheology, referring to the subdued and subjugated victims of modernity, including other forms of life, and the articulation of such concerns, for example in subaltern movements (Moltmann 1999: 11). In one way or another, ecotheology therefore cannot be separated from the legacy of modernity. One may also argue that a focus on ecotheology under conditions of modernity may be regarded as an appropriate form of contextual theology within the Global North, namely to challenge such impact of modernity from within – without assumptions of the universal validity of such theological reflections.

### **3 Precursors and early exponents of Christian ecotheology**

One may identify some ecological sensitivities and wisdom in the biblical roots and subsequent history of the Christian tradition long before ecotheology emerged as a scholarly discipline. Although an ecological biblical hermeneutics is discussed in the literature only in the last three decades or so, the biblical texts are of course much older.

The ecological wisdom embedded in premodern examples such as the desert fathers and mothers, apophatic forms of spirituality, Benedictine monasteries, Celtic Christianity, Franciscan spirituality, medieval mystics, including notable female mystics, the Protestant and Catholic reformations, the agrarian rootedness of Anabaptists, Puritans and Amish – and many more – are retrieved and widely discussed in Christian literature.

The precursors and early exponents of ecotheology are more difficult to reconstruct and may be readily contested. The Finnish theologian Panu Pihkala (2017) has written extensively on ‘early ecotheology’. His focus is on British and American exponents with specific reference to the American Lutheran scholar Joseph Sittler and the influences on him from the social gospel movement, process theology, the Life and Work conference in Oxford (1937), and the retrieval of a theology of nature in the work of, for example, William Temple and Paul Tillich. Sittler is undoubtedly a significant exponent of early ecotheology (see Bakken and Bouma-Prediger 2000), especially given his retrieval of the cosmic Christ in his keynote speech ‘Called to Unity’ at the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1961; see Sittler 1962). Yet, such a one-sided focus on him can create a Western stereotype that would fail to recognize why ecotheology has become a global theological movement.

In two volumes both entitled *Creation and Salvation* a large group of scholars from six continents associated with the Christian Faith and the Earth project explored *A Mosaic of Selected Classic Christian Theologies* (Conradie 2011b) and then offered *A Companion on Recent Theological Movements* (Conradie 2012). The latter volume included chapters on ‘Eastern Christian thought’, ‘Roman Catholic theologies’, ‘North Atlantic Lutheran theologies’, ‘West-European Reformed theologies’, ‘Nordic theologies’, ‘Science and Theology discourse’, ‘Process and relational theisms’, ‘Western Ecofeminist theologies’, ‘North American perspectives from the margins’, ‘Latin American theologies’, ‘African theological perspectives’, ‘Asian theological perspectives’, ‘Oceanic readings’, and ‘Global ecumenical theology’. The short essays on individual theologians and theological movements cover a wide array of early precursors from around the world, well before 1970.

In a recent essay George Zachariah (2021) observed that this does not provide a full picture yet. He notes that Indian theologians and lay economists such as M. M. Thomas, Paulose Mar Gregorios, S. L. Parmar, J. C. Kumarappa and C. T. Kurien were instrumental in initiating an ecumenical engagement with economics, development, technology, and sustainability in the 1960s and 1970s.

This does suggest the need to recognize four factors in reconstructing subsequent developments in ecotheology. The first is to recognize the role of theological developments from the margins of former colonial powers in order to gain anything coming even close

to a global perspective. This requires attention to geographic context, the full spectrum of confessional traditions, cultures, and languages.

The second is to recognize the role of the laity and forms of a Christian ethos, praxis, and spirituality from which any second-order theological reflection necessarily stems. Indeed, in theological reflection on ecological concerns the laity have often and appropriately taken the lead. This requires an emphasis on ‘doing theology’ as a form of praxis, i.e. ongoing critical reflection on the Christian faith as embedded in Christian praxis. It may be added that the term ‘doing theology’ deliberately and explicitly includes the theological reflection of the laity. It also includes whatever is taught in sermons, Christian education, pastoral care, and counselling, and so forth, and the popular literature that may be produced in the process. It does not exclude formal theological education or the scholarly production of research in the field of ecotheology, but this is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Even so, ecotheology is often reduced to scholarly output – which may well be understood as ‘producing’ theology, rather than ‘teaching’, ‘studying’, or ‘doing’ theology.

The third is to widen the lens of themes that are recognized as relevant for ecotheology. It simply cannot be reduced to the doctrine of creation, understanding the relationship between the (now outmoded) ‘man and nature’, or an environmental ethics. It has to cover the full spectrum of Christian doctrine and the full range of theological subdisciplines.

A fourth factor is the dominance of the English language in ecotheology. English is opted for as the preferred medium of communication not only in the UK, the USA, Canada, and Australia but also by many scholars from elsewhere in Europe, Africa and India. Moreover, the other languages in which ecotheology is regularly published cannot be disassociated from the legacy of colonialism, including Afrikaans, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish. Either way, some vigilance is clearly required for any attempt to offer an overview of the emergence and flourishing of contemporary Christian ecotheology (see especially Deane-Drummond 2017; also Conradie 2006).

## **4 Ecotheology taking root across the globe**

Given the dominance of the Western academy, limitations of language, geographical context, and ecumenical contacts, it is far from easy to do justice to the flourishing of ecotheology since the early 1970s. In a recent and as yet unpublished editors’ introduction entitled ‘Telling the Story *en route*: On this Road (*hodos*) and its Logic (*logos*)’, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda and Ernst Conradie focused on the early exponents in various schools of theology and parts of the world. This article draws on that overview here.

### **4.1 Ecumenical theology**

In ecumenical theology, early milestones that prompted widespread further reflection include a conference on ‘Science and Technology for Human Development’ in Bucharest in 1974, the Nairobi Assembly (1975) of the World Council of Churches with its motto of ‘Towards a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society’, a major conference on ‘Faith, Science and the Future’ hosted by the World Council of Churches sub-unit on Church and Society at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology (1979), and the Conciliar Process towards ‘Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation’, following the Vancouver Assembly (1983) and leading towards the World Convocation on JPIC in Seoul (1990) (see Niles 1989; 1992). Such work is sustained through ongoing ecumenical programmes on climate change and on water networks, each with a huge corpus of publications (see e.g. Kim 2016).

## **4.2 Denominational perspectives**

### **4.2.1 Orthodox theologies**

In Orthodox theology, the cosmic work of the Holy Spirit was easily extended to address ecological concerns, especially through the influence of the ecumenical patriarchs Dimitrios I (1972–1991) and Bartholomew (1992–) and scholars such as Louk Andrianos, John Chryssavgis, K. M. George, Paulus Mar Gregorios, Christina Gschwandtner, Dimitri Oikonomou, Elizabeth Theokritoff, Petros Vassiliadis, Kallistos Ware, and John Zizioulas (see the overview by Vassiliadis 2019). Orthodox witnessing on ecological concerns culminated in the Orthodox conciliar document *The Witness of the Church in Today’s World*, adopted by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox (2016). The distinct voice of Oriental Orthodox churches, including the Syriac Orthodox Church in India (with contributions by Geevarghese Mar Coorilose) need to be mentioned specifically as such voices are often underappreciated in scholarly discourse.

### **4.2.2 Western Catholicism**

In Western Catholicism, one may find some precursors to ecotheology (e.g. in the writings of Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Teilhard de Chardin). However, ecotheology began to flourish through the work of diverse scholars such as Thomas Berry, Celia Deane-Drummond, Ilia Delio, Denis Edwards, Matthew Fox, Elizabeth Johnson, Hans Küng (on prospects for a global ethic), Susan Rakoczy, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Markus Vogt, notably including significant women’s voices. The Roman Catholic witness on integral ecology came to fruition in Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* (2015) and the responses to that from around the world ever since.

### **4.2.3 Anglican theologies**

Churches belonging to the Anglican Communion are often at the forefront of addressing environmental concerns with a spirit of pragmatism. The roots of Anglican engagement

in ecotheology may be found in ecumenical figures such as William Temple and J. H. Oldham. More recent contributions may be found in the work of Geoff Davies, Willis Jenkins, Kopya Kaoma, Rachel Mash, Sallie McFague, Michael Northcott, Peter Scott, Christopher Southgate, and Andrew Warmback. Some of these scholars draw on a distinctly Anglican Eucharistic spirituality while others underplay their Anglican affiliation and engage in science and theology and/or political discourse.

#### **4.2.4 Lutheran and Reformed theology**

Lutheran and Reformed scholars such as Günter Altner, Hendrikus Berkhof, Calvin DeWitt, Philip Hefner, Dieter Hessel, Ole Jensen, Gerard Liedke, Christian Link, Klaus Meyer-Abich, Jürgen Moltmann, Ted Peters, Larry Rasmussen, Holmes Rolston III, Paul Santmire, Joseph Sittler, and Loren Wilkinson each made significant contributions to ecotheology already in the 1970s, typically drawing on influential figures such as Karl Barth, Herman Bavinck, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Emil Brunner, and Paul Tillich. More recent contributions are offered by Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Sigurd Bergmann, Steven Bouma-Prediger, Ernst Conradie, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir, Hilda Koster, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Klaus Nürnberger, Barbara Rossing, Vitor Westhelle, and Dietrich Werner.

#### **4.2.5 Methodist theology**

Methodist scholars who have contributed to ecotheology tend to revisit the ministry of John and Charles Wesley and recognize its significance for contemporary debates. The early contributions by William Everett and James Nash as well as the more recent contributions by David Field, David Glough, Stephen Plant, and Norman Wirzba come to mind here.

#### **4.2.6 Pentecostal theologies**

It is hard to capture a distinctly Pentecostal form of ecotheology, not least given the many waves of Pentecostalism in different parts of the world. A focus on North America cannot do justice to Pentecostalism in Africa, the Caribbean, East Asia, Latin America, or the Pacific. In general, its apparently other-worldly orientation is countered by a this-worldly embracing of audio-visual technology addressing the needs of the urban poor and the propagation of the prosperity gospel. The wry remark is still apt: while liberation theology opted for the poor, the poor opted for Pentecostalism.

### **4.3 Regional perspectives**

#### **4.3.1 Indigenous scholarship**

Indigenous scholars from around the world made contributions to ecumenical reflection on the integrity of creation and retrieved indigenous ecological wisdom in this regard. In the Native American context, Vine Deloria's *God is Red* (1973) and many influential essays by

George Tinker may be mentioned (see also Weaver 1996). Contributions from elsewhere in the world soon followed.

#### **4.3.2 Africa**

In the African context, some early contributions were made in the 1980s by Emmanuel Asante, Marthinus Daneel, Jesse Mugambi, Gabriel Setiloane and Harvey Sindima. The more recent contributions by Robert Agyarko, Emmanuel Amin, Ezra Chitando, Samson Gitau, Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo, Kapyra Kaoma, Chammah Kaunda, and Teddy Sakupapa may also be mentioned. Ecotheology flourishes especially in the context of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians, as is illustrated by a volume entitled *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, edited by Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (1996). The work of Mercy Oduyoye remains foundational, while the more recent contributions by Sophia Chirongoma, Musa Dube, Mary Getui, Eunice Kamaara, Loreen Maseno, Fulata Lusungu Moyo, Isabel Mukonyora, Kuzipa Nalwamba, Isabel Phiri, Lilian Siwila, Gloriose Umuziranenge, and others are noteworthy.

While some African contributions retrieve indigenous ecological wisdom in African culture, others seek to come to terms with the rise of neo-Pentecostalism and the popularity of the prosperity gospel. Prophetic and liberation theologies focus on issues of international debt, the environmental impact of structural adjustment programmes, the long-term impact of extractive colonialism, climate justice, and climate adaptation.

#### **4.3.3 India**

In the Indian context, contributions to ecotheology placed an emphasis on linking environmental and economic concerns in the face of massive poverty. This ensured that ecotheology remains intersectional and justice-oriented, as illustrated in the work of K. C. Abraham, Geevarghese Mar Coorilose, Aruna Gnanadason, Paulos Mar Gregorios, Sebastian Kappen SJ, and Samuel Rayan SJ (with gratitude to George Zachariah for such references). Another early contribution to ecotheology from South Asia was by Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya in *Planetary Theology* (1984).

#### **4.3.4 Nordic countries**

Given the impact of climate change on the Arctic, a wide variety of Nordic voices are becoming significant in contemporary ecotheology. In addition to many Lutheran voices, some retrieve the legacy of Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861), consult Indigenous Sami wisdom, or offer an ecofeminist critique of environmental destruction (see Vähäkangas 2012).

#### **4.3.5 Pasifika**

Contributions to ecotheology from the Pacific region are becoming increasingly significant, not least given experiences of the impact of rising sea levels. Such voices are prominent in the lobbying of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) at the various Conferences of the Parties, at consultations of the World Council of Churches and through postgraduate studies by church leaders. An early example is the doctoral thesis of Ama'amalele Tofaeono (Samoa) entitled *Eco-Theology: Aiga – The Household of Life* (2000). Subsequent contributions may be found in the work of Cliff Bird (Solomon Islands), Faafetai Aiava (Samoa) and Upolu Lumā Vaai (Samoa/Fiji), while Clive Pearson (originally from New Zealand) regularly supervises postgraduate projects in the field.

## **4.4 Theological and other discourses**

### **4.4.1 Process theology**

The earliest contributions to ecotheology from the perspective of process theology were by John Cobb Jr. (see above). This was followed by Ian Barbour, Philip Clayton, John Haught, Catherine Keller, Jay B. McDaniel, Thomas Oord, and many others, typically approaching the subject matter from the perspective of discourse on science and theology.

### **4.4.2 Ecofeminist theology**

One of the first contributions to ecofeminist theology in the North Atlantic context was by Rosemary Radford Ruether, namely *New Woman / New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), while Mary Daly published *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaphysics of Radical Feminism* in 1978. Other early contributions were by Mary Grey, Catharina Halkes, Grace Jantzen, Catherine Keller, Sallie McFague, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Anne Primavesi and Dorothy Sölle.

### **4.4.3 Minjung theology**

In Minjung theologies (in South Korea), the concept of 'life' is sometimes used instead of 'ecology', as illustrated in the early contributions of Kim Yong Bock, Heup Yong Kim, and Chung Hyun Kyung. Other recent Asian voices include contributions by Sharon Bong, Meehyun Chung, Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Pan-Chiu Lai, Kwok Pui-Lan, Jea Sophia Oh, and others. Such contributions are not necessarily translated into English and are easily marginalized in overviews from a Western perspective.

### **4.4.4 Latin American liberation theology**

One may say that there is a sensitivity for ecological concerns as a transversal in most forms of Latin America liberation theology (see also Althaus-Reid, Petrella and Susin 2007). This was made explicit by proponents such as Leonardo Boff (1997), Virgilio Elizondo (Boff and Elizondo 1995), and Ivone Gebara (1999) who recognized the link between poverty and ecology, the 'cry of the poor' and the 'cry of the Earth'. This motto

was also picked up by the Argentinian Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* (2015). More recently, responding to current challenges, various editions of *Voices*, the journal of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians published significant contributions to ecotheology by the Latin American section of EATWOT (mostly in Spanish and Portuguese, see Kerber 2019). Guillermo Kerber from Uruguay became an important voice, also through his involvement in the climate change advocacy of the World Council of Churches. Daniel Castillo (2019) has provided a significant recent contribution on ecological liberation.

#### **4.4.5 North American Black theology**

A significant contribution from the perspective of North American Black theology was made by James Cone through a paper entitled 'Whose Earth is it anyway?' (1998, see 2001). Ecowomanist theologies began appearing in the early 1990s, for example through contributions by Karen Baker-Fletcher, Shamara Shantu Riley, and Delores Williams. Numerous younger voices, led by Melanie Harris (see 2017), soon followed.

### **4.5 Religion and ecology**

The academic field of religion and ecology – stimulated by the work of Thomas Berry and further developed through a series of ten conferences organized by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim beginning in 1996 at the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions – provided fertile soil for the growth of ecotheology (see e.g. Hessel and Ruether 2000). Such conversations between the various world religions, including Indigenous religions, have subsequently flourished in different geographic regions throughout the world. The two volumes of *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (see Taylor 2005) played a significant role in advancing the field. 'Religion and ecology' represents a distinct field of study and should therefore not be subsumed under Christian ecotheology. While for some scholars, discourse on 'religion and ecology' cannot be clearly distinguished from Christian ecotheology, others frame it as a debate concerning a 'theology of religions'.

The listing of such names of scholars who have contributed to ecotheology cannot be comprehensive, and the selection can certainly be critiqued. It may serve here primarily as an invitation to others to reflect on the rise of ecotheology, in various confessional traditions, geographical contexts and theological schools, and to add further names and approaches. Alongside individual scholars, the role of multiple institutions around the world – as well as various global or regional ecumenical and academic networks – need to be highlighted.

## **5 A myriad of discourses in the fields of Christian ecotheology**

Even though the term ecotheology is widely used, there is little or no consensus on what doing ecotheology entails or what could be included or excluded under 'ecotheology' as an umbrella term. This is shaped by a variety of geographical contexts, languages of communication, confessional traditions, theological schools, subdisciplines, conversation partners, and so forth. As such, it is helpful to list some of the rubrics on which contributions to ecotheology tend to focus.

Consider the following rubrics, in randomized order, each with a vast literature from around the world, considerable internal contestation and partial overlaps with other such discourses. References could easily be multiplied. In each case, only a few significant references were therefore selected for the sake of illustration and to provoke readers to find other examples.

- Christian discourse on environmental stewardship (see Berry 2006), earthkeeping (see Conradie 2011a), or 'creation care' (e.g. McDonagh 1986), typically with reference to nature conservation, wilderness preservation, the loss of biodiversity and with attention to greening the church or forming eco-congregations, also on Christian mission (see Keum 2013; DeWitt and Prance 1992), seeing creation as being at the heart of God's mission (Conradie 2010) and therefore also the missions of the church;
- Christian discourse on climate change mitigation and adaptation and associated issues around climate debt, climate justice, climate racism, technology transfer and the threats of geo-engineering (e.g. Clingerman and O'Brien 2016), and weather patterns (Bergmann 2020; Chitando and Conradie 2017; see also numerous WCC publications as well as Chitando, Conradie and Kilonzo 2022; Conradie and Koster 2019; Kim 2016; Keller 2021; Northcott 2007; 2013; Northcott and Scott 2014);
- Christian discourse on a 'Season of Creation' (with internet based material from around the world), greening the liturgy and preaching (Hessel 1985), seeking appropriate rituals amid environmental disasters, seeing pastoral care as ecotherapy (Clinebell 1996);
- Christian discourse on the rights of Indigenous peoples (e.g. Weaver 1996), the rights of future generations and the rights of nature/Mother Nature (see Vischer 1990);
- Christian discourse on ecotheology as a form of political theology, situating nature within contestations over the political economy (see Keller 2021; Northcott 2013; Scharper 1997; Scott 2003);
- Christian discourse on 'animal theology' (Linzey 1995) and human relationships with other animals, e.g. regarding multiple issues around animal wellbeing, animal liberation and animal rights amid the impact of industrialized agriculture (e.g. Clough 2012; 2019; Deane-Drummond 2020; Janowski and Riede 1999; Liedke 1985);

- Christian discourse on embodiment, the bodily senses, sensuality and intimacy, typically with reference to issues of gender, sexual orientation, reproductive health and family life and the multiple ways in which issues of gender intersect with food, agriculture and the home economy (Bauman 2018; Kaoma 2013; Moyo 2011; Spencer 1996), also leading to a wealth of theoretical literature on ecofeminism and ecofeminist theology in particular;
- Christian discourse on an ecological biblical hermeneutics retrieving the biblical texts (with both a hermeneutics of suspicion and trust) amid vast ecological challenges (see especially the five volumes of the Earth Bible series as well as the subsequent Earth Bible commentary series under the leadership of Norman Habel, e.g. Habel 2000; also Horrell et al. 2010);
- Christian discourse on the environmental dimension of racism and the racial dimension of environmental issues, for example with reference to toxic waste management and the disproportionate impact of climate change on people of colour around the world, often coupled with a critique of white supremacy, class and caste differentiation, and of the lasting impact of colonialism (e.g. Cone 2001; Mendoza and Zachariah 2021; Moe-Lobeda 2013);
- Christian discourse on cosmology, the epic of cosmic, biological and human evolution, and the ecological moral of the story of the universe (e.g. Berry 1988; Berry and Swimme 1992; Swimme and Tucker 2011);
- Christian discourse addressing macro-economic concerns over poverty, unemployment and inequality, and multiple linkages between globalization, economic injustices, and ecological destruction (e.g. Diakonia Council of Churches 2006; Grau 2004; Moe-Lobeda 2003; Mshana 2012; Nürnberger 1999; Peralta and Mshana 2016; Rieger 2009; World Council of Churches 2005);
- Christian discourse on the multiple linkages between ecological degradation, violent conflict, the need for reconciliation, the role of peace, peace-making, peacebuilding and peacekeeping and the quest for a participatory (democratic) society (see numerous publications on the Conciliar Process towards Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation; also Douglas 2019).
- Christian discourse on food and eating (Ayres 2013; Carter 2021; Grumett and Muers 2012; Wirzba 2011), sustenance, food security, sustainable livelihoods (De Gruchy 2015), sustainable agriculture, an agrarian lifestyle and spirituality (see Wirzba 2003; 2015), the plight of farmed animals, the use of biotechnology and genetic engineering in farming;
- Christian discourse on moral theories and moral traditions (e.g. Rasmussen 2013) from around the world, the interpretation of moral codes, ecological virtues (e.g. Bouma-Prediger 2019; Nash 1991) and the full spectrum of moral categories such as justice, peace and sustainability (e.g. Jenkins 2013; Martin-Schramm and Stivers 2003; Scott 2003), typically in conversation with (Western) moral philosophy;

- Christian discourse on a wide range of classic and emerging forms of spirituality: Aboriginal, African, Anglican, animist (Wallace 2019), Celtic, ecofeminist, evangelical, Franciscan, Ignatian, Indigenous, Lutheran, Mennonite (Redekop 2000), New Age, Pentecostal, Quaker, Reformed, Wesleyan, etc.
- Christian participation in multireligious and multidisciplinary dialogue on each of the above.
- Christian discourse on the critique of and reinterpretation of classic symbols, doctrines, and the full range of aspects of the Christian faith – including themes such as creation, and humanity, but also sin, providence, election, covenant, salvation, church, the sacraments, eschatology and the Triune God as Father/Mother, Son/Wisdom/Sophia, and Spirit.

Some elaboration may be warranted on this rubric since the volume of literature in this category is truly overwhelming, and hard to capture across confessional traditions and geographical contexts. An Australian volume of essays entitled *Earth Revealing – Earth Healing* (see Edwards 2001) accompanied the Earth Bible project and marks an early emphasis on the full spectrum of doctrinal loci. The project on Christian Faith and the Earth (see Edwards 2014) brought many perspectives together, as will the envisaged series on *An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the Anthropocene* (starting with Conradie and Lai 2021). Earlier contributions tended to focus on an adequate creation theology and identified the relationship between human beings and nature (better revised to read: the place of humanity in the earth community) as the heart of the matter (e.g. contributions by James Gustafson, Sallie McFague, Jürgen Moltmann, and Paul Santmire).

Understandably, the sense of environmental crisis also elicited interest in eschatology, with notable contributions by Sigurd Bergmann, Ernst Conradie, John Haught, Catherine Keller, Anne Primavesi, Rosemary Ruether, Stefan Skrimshire and others. The tension between creation, salvation and consummation therefore elicits considerable interest (see the volumes edited by Conradie 2011b; 2012; also Conradie 2013b; 2015).

As ecotheology matured as a field it became doctrinally comprehensive, covering all aspects of the Christian faith – as is evident in the oeuvres of scholars such as Sigurd Bergmann, Leonardo Boff, Steven Bouma-Prediger, David Glough, Ernst Conradie, Celia Deane-Drummond, Denis Edwards, Ivone Gebara, Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine Keller, Sallie McFague, James Nash, Michael Northcott, Rosemary Ruether, Peter Scott, Christopher Southgate, Mark Wallace, and Norman Wirzba, to name a few mainly Western scholars. Profiling such contributions inevitably distorts the picture given the use of English as medium for publication and predominantly Western conversation partners. Such a Western orientation will undoubtedly change with the shift in the centre of gravity in global Christianity southwards and eastwards. Holding the various aspects of the Christian faith together with a Trinitarian intuition will become increasingly more challenging.

Given this diverging array of ecotheologies, it comes as no surprise that there are several attempts – typically by Western scholars – to identify models of doing ecotheology. One may mention the typologies offered by Sigurd Bergmann, Ernst Conradie, Celia Deane-Drummond, Heather Eaton, James Gustafson, John Haught, Michael Northcott, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Paul Santmire, Peter Scott, and many more. The line of demarcation of each typology is different so that one may even be tempted to explore a typology of typologies (for a critical survey of such typologies see Conradie 2011a).

## **6 Contestations within ecotheology**

It may be helpful to discern and circumscribe some of the contestations within contemporary ecotheology. This is not to deny some overwhelming consensus that have emerged over the last five decades. Such consensus arguably includes the following: (1) prophetic resistance against ecological destruction; (2) a commitment to diagnose the economic, cultural, intellectual, and religious roots of the problem (on Christian sin-talk as a form of social diagnostics, see Conradie 2017; 2020a), (3) a willingness to engage in a response to the critique of Christianity in this regard; (4) concern over consumerist lifestyles in church and in society, not only in highly industrialized countries; (5) a critique of the prosperity gospel; (6) resistance against any escapist eschatology that relativises the importance of this earthly life by longing for a heavenly hereafter; (7) an emphasis on the ecological significance of God's immanence (see McFague 1993), especially through the incarnation of Christ and the inhabitation of the Spirit; (8) a critique of understanding the place of humanity in God's creation in terms of domination; (9) an emphasis on the responsibility of the church to care for creation, to include ecological concerns in the churches' understanding of mission; and (10) a recognition that an ecological theology needs to be coupled with an ecological praxis, ethos and spirituality.

Nevertheless, there is little or no consensus on what doing ecotheology entails. Ecotheology is characterized by global divides – along confessional lines, between the North and the South, the West and the East, between academics and church practitioners, the clergy and the laity, on nature conservation versus ecojustice, on issues of gender and sexual orientation and, especially, by reference to contemporary science (especially in the Global North) and/or traditional, indigenous wisdom (widespread in the Global South). Worldviews clearly play an important role, although this category is itself contested and open to confusion (see Conradie 2014).

Another crucial factor, prompting both a rich plurality of voices and considerable confusion, is the role of interlocutors and implied readers. These are found in the academy (with the full range of disciplines), the church (the laity or church leaders and decision making bodies), and various sectors of society (including politics, agriculture, business and industry, jurisprudence, the media and activist movements in civil society). Often particular

discourses in ecotheology remain isolated from others in ‘special interest’ lobby groups characterized by the divides mentioned above.

In this section, a series of partially overlapping dualities that lead to tensions that are not necessarily creative will be identified. In some cases, fruitless binaries can be avoided – but how to do that is not always clear.

## **6.1 On Western versus ‘Restern’ ecotheologies**

The term ‘Restern’ was coined somewhat mischievously by the late South African economist Sampie Terreblanche (2014) to confront prevailing inequalities in the global economy. Such tensions between what is Western and what is ‘Restern’ may well apply to contemporary ecotheology. In the North-Atlantic region ecotheology may be an appropriate form of self-critical contextual theology to confront the massive ecological impact of Western economies. This may be symbolized by historical carbon emissions but the indirect impact is equally pertinent, namely through the forces of globalization in production, the rapid transfer of finance, the assumption that industrialized capitalism is the only viable alternative, the colonizing of markets, and the global spread of American-style consumerism.

The underlying problem is that the by now massive production of Christian ecotheology could tacitly follow the same assumptions as the economies where such publications originated from. At worst this means the production of ecotheology by scholars situated in the West (even if they come from elsewhere), aimed primarily at readers in the West but then exported for consumption elsewhere. Scholars situated in the Restern world may follow suit by publishing their work in English (preferably) through networks where globalized distribution seems assured. Often Eurocentric assumptions of Western superiority (and white supremacy) prevail on the basis of a focus on Western theological traditions without qualifying this as one limited perspective amongst others. As a result, promising developments in ecotheology in the Restern world tend to remain marginalized or are merely inserted as novelties within a predominantly Western market. This suggests the need to decolonize ecotheology (Mendoza and Zachariah 2021). This is why a sense of ‘planetary solidarity’ (Kim and Koster 2017) and efforts to do ecotheology ecumenically are so important but face huge obstacles. This is only possible if what is ‘Western’ is properly provincialized and not portrayed as ‘universal’.

## **6.2 On sustainable development versus ‘radical’ critiques of capitalism**

The term sustainability was first developed, if not coined, at an ecumenical gathering in Bucharest in 1974. At first it had to be understood with reference to the report on *Limits to Growth* (1972) and the sustained use of non-renewable sources. The question was

how long such use can be stretched. In secular circles the focus shifted to the sustainable use of renewable resources and then with the Brundtland-report on *Our Common Future* (1987) to discourse on sustainable development. The question was how socio-economic development can be maintained without compromising the ability of future generations to sustain themselves. Following the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002), such a focus on sustainable development is nowadays framed in terms of the United Nations' 17 interlinked Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, 2015).

Such secular debates could not but influence theological reflection, often leading to Christians embracing the UN process. Soon questions were asked whether sustainable development assumes sustained economic growth and whether that is not a contradiction in terms (Béguin-Austin 1993). Others argued that the many failures of 'development' (see Granberg-Michaelson 1992; also Conradie 2016) cannot be addressed by coupling that with the term 'sustainable'. In short, does an emphasis on sustainable development not amount to an attempt at greening capitalism (see Boff 1995; 1997)? In ecumenical discourse the emphasis thus shifted towards notions of sustainable community and sustainable livelihoods (see e.g. De Gruchy 2015; Rasmussen 1996; Wellman 2001). This allowed for radical critiques of capitalism and of globalization, for example expressed in the Accra Confession (2004) and the WCC report on *Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth (AGAPE)* (2005). Such contestations remain unresolved in Christian ecotheology.

### **6.3 On the green versus the brown agenda**

A closely related contestation, also mainly taking place in secular circles, is colour-coded to refer to the tension between a focus on nature conservation (the 'green' agenda) or on environmental justice (the 'brown' agenda mixing 'green' with 'red'). Aligned with this tension is a focus on either population as the main driver of ecological destruction (pointing the finger at ruinous birth rates in the 'Third World') or on consumption patterns (pointing the finger at an unequal distribution of wealth and the environmental impact of the 'First World'). The green agenda is often accused of being misanthropic while the brown agenda is accused of remaining anthropocentric in its focus on human poverty, environmental racism, the plight of the poor, women, workers, slum dwellers and so forth. As James Cone (2001) points out, this all too real tension is necessarily fruitless. In an essay entitled 'Whose Earth is it anyway?' he challenges the ecological movement to critique itself through a radical and ongoing engagement with racism and also challenges the black liberation movement to take a critical look at itself through the lens of the ecological movement. Such a concern is picked up by virtually all Indigenous, Black, and Womanist contributions to ecotheology.

The WCC clearly regards concerns over 'Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation' (JPIC) to be inseparable, but where the priority should be remains contested. From within the South African context Steve de Gruchy (2007) proposed 'an olive agenda' to hold together the green and the brown agendas. Whether this would allow for a 'rainbow alliance' (see Cock 1992; Conradie and Field 2016), also involving the church ('purple'), labour unions ('red'), and the LGBTQIA+ movement ('pink'?) remains to be seen, but is unlikely given deep divisions within ecotheology in this regard.

## **6.4 On apologetic versus revisionist approaches**

The accusation by Lynn White and others that Christianity is deeply implicated in the root causes of environmental destruction has prompted both apologetic and revisionist responses (see Santmire 1985; 2000). Some defend Christianity, the Christian understanding of God, the Christian faith, the Bible and so forth against such criticisms, and hence seek to retrieve the ecological wisdom embedded in the Christian tradition. One may add that while this critique applies to Western Christianity – and then only broadly speaking – it does not necessarily apply to other Christian traditions. By contrast, there are others who recognize the legitimacy of the criticism and short of abandoning Christianity emphasize the need to revisit basically every aspect of it: reading the Bible with a hermeneutics of suspicion, radically reinterpreting the Christian faith, transforming Christian practices and so forth. This tension could be a creative one, as calls for an ecological reformation amply illustrate (see already Nash 1996; the Volos Call edited by Conradie, Tsalamponi and Werner 2016; the Wuppertal Declaration edited by Andrianos et al. 2019; and the volume by Dahill and Martin-Schramm 2016). The assumption is that Christianity is again in need of a reformation – but also that it can indeed be reformed from within. However, maintaining such a creative tension is far from easy as diverging positions on (a) the appropriateness of the term stewardship; (b) the debate on the brown or the green agenda (see above); and (c) assumptions on human uniqueness and hence human supremacy quickly reveal.

## **6.5 On the role of doctrine versus other theological subdisciplines**

Given the wide-ranging scope of ecotheology and the way in which 'ecology' operates as a transversal across various subdisciplines and discourses, as a dimension of practically everything else, one may assume that ecotheology typically involves fruitful interaction among the various disciplines within theological studies. Indeed, at times it does. Ecotheology is typically interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary in orientation, not only within the family of disciplines comprising theological studies (e.g. biblical studies, the history of Christianity, systematic or constructive theology, Christian ethics, practical theology, missiology, etc.), but also in relationship to other academic disciplines.

Nevertheless, the old methodological disputes between the theological subdisciplines are readily revived in the context of ecotheology, often leading to misunderstanding if not conflict. Contributions from within such subdisciplines approach the subject matter in diverging ways. Consider the resistance to doctrine in biblical hermeneutics, or the difficulty of defining what is theological about the history of Christianity, or the ecumenical divide between Ecclesiology and Ethics; the tensions between practical theology, with its typical empirical orientation, and systematic theology with its conceptual focus; or between the agenda of Christian mission and how this is related to all the other theological subdisciplines. As an aside, one may note that it is exceptionally hard to introduce ecotheology into any theological curriculum because it is not clear where it should be made to fit in. It could fit everywhere but often fits nowhere. There is by now a wealth of literature on theological education touching on ecotheology and vice versa, but it is hard to single out contributions that provide an overview.

## **6.6 On ‘Ecclesiology’ versus ‘Ethics’**

There is a long-standing ecumenical divide between discourse on ‘Faith and Order’ and on ‘Life and Work’. This is captured in old slogans such as ‘Doctrine divides but service unites’ and the inverse ‘Service divides but doctrine unites’. At times either the one or the other rings true. This stimulated a significant WCC project on ‘Ecclesiology and Ethics’, namely to reflect on the conceptual links between what the church does *as church* and what the church actually *does* and should be doing in the world (Best and Robra 1997). Theoretically there should be no tension but in reality there is a deep divide here – likened to trying to build the same bridge over a wide river from two sides without the bridge coming together. This divide cannot but influence ecotheology. Some are understandably keen for Christians (and for theological reflection on Christian praxis to make a difference with regard to pressing ecological concerns at a local, regional, or global level). Others argue that the most significant contribution that Christianity can make to address such concerns is to get its own house in order through a radical ecological transformation of the church itself (see Ecological Ethics). Understandably, this divide also reflects the contrasting concerns of the clergy (on the church as an institution) and the laity (on the church as an organism in the world).

## **6.7 On a christological focus versus a Pneumatological width**

A closely related, if less obvious, tension goes to the core of the Christian confession, namely the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This has long divided Christianity in the West and the East, symbolized by the Great Schism of 1054 and the *filioque* controversy. Does the Spirit ‘proceed’ from the Father or also from the Son? Behind the terminological dispute lies a deeper concern: does God’s Spirit work in the world mainly through Christ and therefore through the witness to Christ (scripture), the

body of Christ (the church), the offices of the church, the sacraments (communion with Christ) and the ministries and missions of the church? Or does the Spirit also (or even primarily) work independently of Christ's presence, far beyond the confines of the church? The latter position is affirmed by those who find the Spirit's presence in direct illuminations and interventions (as some Pentecostals assume), in diverse liberation movements, in women's movements, in indigenous (ecological) wisdom, and in non-Christian forms of spirituality.

This divide is obviously also found in ecotheology. There are many who would find common ground and cooperation with secular climate activists much more congenial than with some of those who confess Christ, including fundamentalist climate change denialists. This is a divide that cannot be tolerated given the Trinitarian heart of the Christian confession, but the simple 'and' that links the first article of the creed with the second and the third cannot be taken for granted.

There is a significant corpus of literature on pneumatology and ecology, with important individual contributions by Sigurd Bergmann, Denis Edwards, Elizabeth Johnson, Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Jürgen Moltmann, Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, Kuzipa Nalwamba, Teddy Sakupapa, and Mark Wallace. In addition, there is a wealth of literature on indigenous and ecofeminist spirituality (see also the overview and collection of essays edited by Conradie 2012). The same does not apply to Christology and ecology – where a few contributions by Celia Deane-Drummond (2009) and Denis Edwards (1995) come to mind. This poses obvious problems for maintaining a fully Trinitarian theology (see Conradie 2013a). Nevertheless, one finds an affirmation of the ecological significance of faith in a Triune God (the immanent Trinity) in the work of some leading scholars (see especially Bergmann 2005; Edwards 2006; 2014).

## **6.8 On longitudinal versus latitudinal emphases**

Does ecology have to do primarily with issues of space or issues of time? The early concerns over sustainability as expressed in the reports on 'Limits to Growth' and 'Our Common Future' suggest that 'the future ain't what it used to be' (see Rasmussen 1975). This stimulated reflection on the rights of future generations. Apocalyptic fears over climate change, ocean acidification, the loss of biodiversity and species extinction likewise focus on what the future may hold for human survival. Theologically, such concerns are addressed with reference to Christian views on hope, including hope for the Earth, and thus a critique of any form of escapism (see especially Moltmann 1979; 1989; also Peters 1980). By contrast, one may also argue that 'ecology' should focus on a sense of place, on the wellbeing of the land, on the destruction of habitat, on the displacement of people, on environmental refugees, for example due to toxic waste dumping or the impact of climate change.

One may also focus on the impact of environmental degradation on farm workers, factory workers, on the living conditions of the urban poor, on women and children, or the elderly. This prompts concerns over environmental racism, spatial justice, urban design, being embodied, food choices and the plight of non-human animals. Theologically, such concerns are addressed with reference to land restitution and restoration, the need for ecological healing, and for ecological liberation. The emphasis is therefore on soteriology instead of eschatology, or at least on a latitudinal instead of a longitudinal approach to eschatology (see Westhelle 1998; 2012; also Bergmann 2018).

The spatial turn is by itself ambiguous – as nationalist, racist, xenophobic, and patriarchal contestations over home, habitat and ‘lebensraum’ illustrate. Theoretically, it should be possible to hold together a latitudinal and a longitudinal emphasis (see already Moltmann 1985). However, the tensions are not readily resolved, as discourse on ecotheology from Black, Indigenous, and subaltern perspectives amply illustrate.

## **6.9 On contemporary science versus Indigenous worldviews**

A quite different way of framing global tensions within Christian ecotheology is with reference to the question whether contemporary science or indigenous worldviews are adopted as the dominant conversation partner (see Eaton 2005). This may or may not coincide with the divide between the West and the ‘Rest’. Understandably, the focus on ecology in the narrower sense requires scientific expertise; but the same applies to climate science and its multiple interactions with a wide array of natural sciences and, given anthropogenic climate change, also the social sciences.

The use of science to address ethical concerns does not by itself shape worldviews. That is shaped by theological conversations with four disciplines in particular, namely astrophysics (on the formation of the universe), geology (on the formation of the earth), evolutionary biology and palaeoanthropology (on the origin and evolution of species), and the cognitive sciences (on human origins and human distinctiveness). Together, insights emerging from such disciplines are often integrating in ‘the universe story’, while a clear ecological moral is then discerned in that story (see above). However, such a use of science to support an environmental ethos is criticized by others as ‘consecrating science’ (see Sideris 2017). This prompts further debates on the naturalistic fallacy: can one derive only one or several conflicting ethical positions from evolutionary biology?

In response, the victims of white supremacy, imperialism and colonialism intuitively sense that modern science and technology as the products of modernity need to be regarded with a hermeneutics of suspicion. Instead, the ecological wisdom embedded in Indigenous traditions from around the world is retrieved, also in conversation with non-Western religious traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Taoism. Such insights are typically retrieved to reinterpret the place and vocation of humans and to

resist capitalist exploitation of the Earth. Most African contributions to ecotheology outside of South Africa seek to retrieve Indigenous ecological African wisdom, often coupled with a decolonial critique (e.g. Gitau 2000; Mugambi 1987; Mugambi and Vähäkangas 2001). The same applies to Native American ecotheology. The extensive work of Mary Evelyn Tucker through the Forum on Religion and Ecology is in this sense remarkable, because an interest in both contemporary science and pre-modern Indigenous wisdom is maintained as sources to confront the modern logic of domination.

It may be noted that Christianity is not necessarily tied to any one worldview. The cosmology embedded in biblical narratives need not be normative. It is nevertheless striking that conversations either with contemporary science or with Indigenous wisdom tend to become one-sided so that any specific Christian content becomes bracketed in order to embrace the one or the other. If the focus is on the themes of creation and anthropology, the Christian message of redemption is side-lined as implausible, either because science, education, and technology (or perhaps welfare, development, and aid) is regarded as salvific, or because of the allegiance between Christianity and colonialism so that the message of the gospel as 'good news' for the whole earth is met with suspicion.

## **6.10 On religion and ecology versus ecotheology**

A similar tension follows from the previous one. It is clearly necessary to address ecological concerns, most notably climate change, in a collaborative, multidisciplinary way. There is a need to look for as much common ground as possible to work together with others in the global commons. Understandably, such a need for collaboration leads to an emphasis on religious studies. In the public sphere Christianity is regarded as one religious tradition alongside others, while the role of religion in general is regarded, if not as something purely private, then as part of civil society (alongside government, business and industry, the judiciary, the media and so on).

On this basis, multifaith organizations have emerged all over the world to address common concerns, on issues ranging from nuclear threats to the loss of biodiversity, to resource extraction and its impact on Indigenous land, to climate engineering. Likewise, the field of 'religion and ecology' has burgeoned through multiple conferences, forums, and publications. For some there is no clear border between ecotheology and discourse on religion and ecology. Others are more concerned with Christian particularity and authenticity and hence understand the '*theos*' in ecotheology in a more specifically Trinitarian way. Some evangelicals may regard 'ecology' at best as another opportunity for Christian witness. Others maintain that the best way for Christians to contribute to planetary wellbeing, given its disastrous track record, is to get its own house in order.

## **6.11 On the identity and character of the *theos* in ecotheology**

With other theological discourses, ecotheology shares the need to make distinctions while also drawing connections and perhaps challenging dualities in various arenas – the relationships of Christian theology with other forms of theology (especially in the Abrahamic faiths but also with reference to notions of the ‘Supreme Being’ in Indigenous religion); theology with religious studies; the humanities with the social sciences; and, in the ‘Anthropocene’, the humanities with the natural sciences. All the disputes on the very existence, identity, and character of God (the *theos* in ecotheology) come into play when juxtaposed with the terms *oikos* and *logos*. There are not only diverging views on *theos* and *oikos* but also on the presumed *logos*/Logos given the long-standing disputes between the various subdisciplines of Christian theology and between theological studies, secular fields of ethics, religious studies, and philosophy. Not surprisingly, such disputes and interplay spill over into discourse on ecotheology. This does not need to inhibit multifaith cooperation on ecological concerns (see the remarkable studies by Daneel 1998; 1999) but only if issues of identity and authenticity are not underplayed.

## **7 From current paths to emerging horizons in Christian ecotheology**

The phrases ‘current paths’ and ‘emerging horizons’ were used in the subtitle of a volume on *Christian Faith and the Earth* that concluded an international project that focused on the contribution of systematic theology to ecotheology (see Conradie et al. 2014). However, ecotheology of course also touches on all the other traditional subdisciplines of Christian theology, on interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary attempts to overcome narrow specialization, on comparative theology in conversation with other religious traditions and on multidisciplinary discourse on specific ecological challenges. It would, therefore, be presumptuous and probably vacuous to identify such current paths and emerging horizons. A few personal impressions will therefore have to suffice here.

A first impression is that ecotheology is becoming increasingly fluid precisely due to its spread across confessional traditions, geographical contexts, and theological schools. As a result, it can easily become insular again with so many scholars, topics, and approaches that one cannot maintain a conversation with all others. Moreover, an ecological awareness is now found as a transversal in most forms of theological reflection so that it is hard to demarcate what counts as ecotheology and what not. The same would apply to transversals around race, class, and gender and so forth. This tendency towards increasing diversity cannot be avoided and may even be a sign of its impact, but it does leave any attempt to offer an overview (as the one that is offered here) in danger of creating hegemony.

A second impression is that, precisely given this diversifying tendency, global ecumenical dialogue across the divides mentioned above remains vital but it is much harder than

is often assumed. That applies especially to North-South and East-West dialogues where issues of language, worldviews, manifestations of religious plurality, and socio-economic power inhibit respectful but also mutually critical conversation. This is my experience in working on multiple edited volumes in the field given the impact of the language of communication, publishers, countries of origin, current location, and dominant conversation partners. How a project is conceptualized, who is to be invited, and within what institutional framework that is done is always tricky.

Even where there is North-South dialogue, it is often between like-minded scholars who agree to collaborate so that the harder conversations do not actually take place. For example, ecumenical critics of Bretton Woods institutions and representatives from such institutions rarely share the same platform. The same applies to tensions between pro-life and pro-choice lobbyists, between creationists and proponents of the epic of evolution, between climate denialists and climate change activists who all profess to share the same Christian faith. Within ecotheology itself, it is often the case that evangelical proponents of responsible stewardship in the consumer classes or Orthodox proponents of priesthood, for example, seldom talk to climate change activists in subaltern movements. There are diverging positions on how to address religious plurality theologically but these are seldom addressed. The edited volumes by Ruether (1997), Kim and Koster (2017) and Dube (2021), gathering together women's voices from around the world, are exemplary in this regard.

A third impression is that confessional divides are often underplayed or trivialized for the sake of ecumenical collaboration. The same applies sometimes to religious divides. That is hardly helpful as different theological assumptions typically re-emerge and are then harder to address than if they were acknowledged upfront. The classic theological debates on nature and grace, general revelation and special revelation, natural theology or a theology of nature, creation and redemption, orthodox or liberal, Thomists or Scotists, a focus on Christ or on the Spirit, diverging views on the Eucharist/Lord's Supper and infant or adult baptism, episcopal versus presbyterian church structures, and so on and so forth, are never fully left behind because the real differences do come to the fore through sustained conversations.

Such divides do not necessarily inhibit global ecotheology. In fact, it may be precisely an encounter of such differences that energises further reflection. The danger, though, is that when times get rough churches and individual theologians would give preference to purely local concerns without addressing issues that are indeed of global concern. That would deflate the core intuition of ecotheology, namely that there are indeed concerns that have to be addressed by the whole household of God.

## **Attributions**

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This article draws on the overview of the early exponents of ecotheology and the myriad of discourses in the fields of Christian ecotheology offered by Ernst Conradie and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda in an editors' introduction entitled 'Telling the Story en route: On this Road (hodos) and its Logic (logos)' in the volume *How Would We Know what God is up to?* (Durbanville: Aosis/Eugene: Cascade, forthcoming).

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