



**Rigby, K. (2016) 'Religion and ecology: towards a communion of creatures', in Oppermann, S. and Lovino, S., eds. *Environmental humanities: voices from the Anthropocene*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 273-294.**

Official URL: <http://www.rowmaninternational.com/books/environmental-humanities>

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**Pre-page-proofed version accepted for Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds):  
*Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (London: Rowman and  
Littlefield, 2016): 273-294.**

Religion and Ecology: Towards a Communion of Creatures

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Why religion?

For better or ill, religion informs the environmental views, values, relations, and behaviour of an overwhelming majority of people around the world, often in profound ways. For this reason alone, studies in religion and ecology should comprise a crucial component of the wider work of the environmental humanities. It is the first task of this essay to show how this has indeed been the case. Among the world's many diverse religions, Christianity has become a dominant force globally. Christianity remains the most populous world religion, with some 3.2 billion followers, constituting over 31.5% of the global population (Pew Center). While the global predominance of practicing Christians is being challenged by the growth of Islam, estimated at 23.2% of the total population (*ibid.*) and growing rapidly, Christian traditions remain culturally influential, informing many of the secular attitudes, assumptions and institutions of modern western societies. Moreover, in light of the continuing geopolitical power of the USA, it is not insignificant that 78% of the US population identify as Christian of one kind or another (*ibid.*). If, as Larry Rasmussen has argued, it would be foolish for those with an interest in the prospects for a more sustainable world "to overlook the religious loyalties of some ten thousand religions and 85 percent of the planets' peoples" (6), so too it behoves religious studies researchers in the environmental humanities to inquire into the potential for the 'greening' of Christianity. In my own case, I should acknowledge upfront that Christianity forms part of my own cultural formation, something that I accept as a problematic inheritance with which I continue to grapple, personally, politically and academically. Accordingly, the latter part of this chapter homes in

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was written with the generous support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies.

on Christianity and ecology, with a view to tracing the lineaments of an emergent “communion of all creatures” (Rigby “Animal Calls”)

## Religion, Ecology and the Historical Roots of the Environmental Humanities

As the editors of a 2011 *Fieldguide to the Study of Religion and Ecology* observe, “religion” and “ecology” are both “complicated and controversial” terms (Baumann, Bohannon and O’Brien 4). The latter is often used rather loosely as a synonym for the environment, environmentalism, or, ever more problematically, ‘nature’. But even in its more narrow usage, to denote a branch of the natural sciences, ecology refers not to a fixed set of facts, a secure ground on which to found or evaluate ostensible green forms of faith, but to an open and evolving field of enquiry. Religious studies scholars, along with other EH researchers, are thereby challenged to grapple with new understandings and current debates, giving consideration, for example, to how the theorisation and practice of religious environmentalism might need to be reframed “for a post-natural world” (Lodge and Hamlin 279-307). “Religion” too is an even trickier term. Emerging from Western history and carrying “Western baggage” (Baumann 13), it has been variously understood and researched. In Clifford Geertz’s analysis, religion comprises a system of symbols that “establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations [...] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence” (Baumann 18). As such, it can function as a major source of social cohesion, as previously discerned by Emile Durkheim. Where its symbols and their interpretation have been captured by the interests of the powerful, religion is liable to contribute to the conservation of the socio-ecological *status quo*, as Karl Marx observed of mainstream Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century, which offered imaginary compensation for “oppressive social relations” (Baumann 19). Like all human institutions, religious organisations can also generate their own systems of oppression, harbouring corrupt practices that contradict their own teachings. Yet there is also ample historical evidence to show how the moods and motivations engendered by religious symbolism can become a powerful source of opposition to oppression, as exemplified in Marx’s own lifetime by the movements for the abolition of slavery and the prevention of cruelty to animals, both of which were framed through the Christian discourse of justice and compassion that inspired their most effective advocate, William Wilberforce (see Metaxis).

Depending on how literally its texts and teachings are taken, religious constructions of reality can come into conflict with other sources of knowledge, as well as engendering

exclusionary group identities with the potential to engender social conflicts that sometimes turn violent. From another perspective, though, this kind of literalism constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding of what religion is about. For the great German Protestant theologian, founder of the modern historical-critical method of biblical studies, Friedrich Schleiermacher, religion arises from a universally available human experience of profound connectedness to the becoming of the cosmos. The appropriate ethical response to this experience, in his view (and mine), was recognition of interdependence, combined with respect for the individuated others who co-become as part of this ungraspable, unfolding universe. As Schleiermacher argued in his 1799 talks on religion “to its cultured despisers” (principally his close friends among the Early German Romantics), the stories and rituals that arose historically as a means of framing and sharing such experiences became mixed up with the metaphysics and morals of the surrounding culture. In literate societies, moreover, these historically limited and culturally contingent ideas about the nature of reality, and how people should behave, got inscribed into sacred texts, which should therefore be treated with caution, understood contextually, and discerningly reinterpreted. From this enlightened perspective (which informs this essay), religion occupies a different place, and serves a different purpose, from science: while the latter is freed to become a preferred source of growing knowledge about the workings of the physical world, the former answers to the desire for the kinds of mystical experience, over-arching meanings, and shared ethical orientations that cannot be supplied by empirical science alone. Enhanced understanding of the historicity of any given set of religious symbols and narratives facilitates inter-religious dialogue by counteracting bigotry and fostering the re-interpretation of inherited beliefs in response to new knowledge and changing socio-ecological circumstances.

The branch of the environmental humanities that studies these two “complicated and controversial” phenomena in their complex and varied interrelations can be traced back to at least the early 1970s. Attending to both intellectual frameworks and lived practice, “[s]cholars of religion and ecology help people to think critically about how religion has been shaped by the natural environment and can be shaped by environmental degradation” (Baumann, Bohannon, and O’Brien 8). They also consider how specific religious perspectives and practices might work to either impede or advance the mitigation of socio-ecological ills, hampering or hastening the creation of more just, peaceful, and sustainable ways of living. While it is always risky to try to fix beginnings, the early stirrings of the study of religion and ecology have justly been traced to Lynn White Jr.’s oft-cited (if all too frequently misread) article in *Science* from 1967, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic

Crisis.” That White’s article first appeared in a scientific journal reflects the extent to which environmental destruction was at that stage still seen as a largely scientific and technical issue. Yet the burden of White’s article was precisely that while science was crucial to diagnosing ecological ills, it provided an inadequate basis for understanding, let alone resolving, a problem which was largely cultural and social in origin. In White’s analysis, “[w]hat people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion’ (1205). For this reason, White maintained that it was necessary to look to the dominant religious traditions of the West, whence originated that mode of industrial development now ravaging the Earth, in seeking to identify the primary source of those attitudes towards the natural world, which in his view had led to the current crisis.

White’s view of the primacy of religion as *the* underlying driver of environmental damage might be overstated. But the significance of this slim article, in my analysis, pertains to far more than his critique of Christianity (which, as discussed below, was actually far more nuanced than is generally assumed). For in his method of analysis and argumentation, White, who studied theology before becoming a pioneering scholar in the cultural history of science and technology (see Riley “Democratic Roots”), effectively lays out the entire project of the environmental humanities as an inter- or trans-disciplinary undertaking, as well as initiating the study of religion and ecology in particular. To begin with, White’s explanation of the aetiology of industrial modernity’s “ecologic crisis” incorporates an environmental historical dimension, entailing the recognition of nonhuman entities as historical actants: namely, the thick, sticky, clayey soils of northern Europe, which resisted being worked by the light scratch-plow, drawn by a single beast of burden, which originated in the Fertile Crescent and had been adopted throughout the Mediterranean region as agriculture spread north and westwards; and the heavy iron plough, which was invented towards the end of the seventh century, in order to work such resistant soils more effectively. This innovative technology reshaped northwestern European farmers’ relations with one another, their domesticated animals, and the land. White sees the impact of these changes in the altered depiction of the seasons in early medieval illustrated calendars, the imagery of which imply that “Man and nature are two things, and man is master” (1205). This assumption also began to inform Western Christian interpretations of the biblical injunction to human to “have dominion” over other creatures and “subdue the earth” (Gen. 1.26-28). In this respect, White’s method also incorporates a proto-ecocritical dimension, as the editors of the first ecocriticism reader,

Glotfelty and Fromm, rightly discerned in choosing to include it in their anthology. In addition, his article raises questions about the underlying onto-epistemological and normative assumptions informing the peculiarly Western alliance of science and technology, which would subsequently be pursued by environmental philosophers. In particular, White's identification of the profoundly dualistic and "anthropocentric" (1205) dimension of the mentality that came to predominate in modern Western society pre-figures the influential line of "deep ecological" analysis initiated by Arne Naess and the Routleys (later Richard Sylvan and Val Plumwood) in the mid-1970s. At the same time, however, White pre-empts more recent critiques of the "'wilderness area' mentality," which "advocates deep-freezing an ecology, whether San Gimignano or the High Sierra, as it was before the first Kleenex was dropped" (1204).

It is, however, above all as a first foray into the field of ecologically-oriented religious studies that White's slim article has borne most fruit. In view of the formative role of Western Christian attitudes and assumptions in the genesis and application of modern science and technology, White argued that, "[s]ince the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny" (1206). For this reason, he concludes with the recommendation that St. Francis, who "tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation," be made the "patron saint of ecologists" (*ibid.*). This call was answered by Pope John Paul II in 1979 when he declared Francis the Patron Saint of Animals and the Environment. Meanwhile, the urgent ecospiritual and eco-justice advocacy of the Pope who bears St. Francis' name promises to advance efforts already underway to effect the radical transformation envisaged and embodied by the "spiritual revolutionary" (White 1206) from Assisi. Later in this essay I will return to White's own proposal for the deep greening of Christianity. Firstly, though, I want to delineate the subsequent development of studies in religion and ecology, as part of the wider field of the environmental humanities.

White's 1967 article triggered an efflorescence of this area of study, with "[h]undreds of books and articles [...] written as a direct response to it" (Riley "Spiritual Democracy" 241). While White stressed that "Christianity is a complex faith and its consequences differ in different contexts" (1206), his assertion that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" (*ibid.*) for the industrial despoliation of the earth contributed significantly to the combination of self-critique and apologetics that characterized much early ecotheology; but it also gave impetus to the quest among many environmentally-concerned Westerners for ecospiritual

alternatives to Christianity. White himself referred to the affinity of the “beatniks” for Zen Buddhism as manifesting a “sound instinct,” while worrying that since Buddhism was “as deeply conditioned by Asian history as Christianity is by the experience of the West” it might not offer a viable alternative for Euro-Americans (*ibid.*). Be that as it may, much Western environmental philosophy would subsequently be informed by an engagement with Eastern thought and spirituality, from Arne Naess’s borrowings from Gandhi’s reformed Hinduism to Freya Mathew’s creative extension of Daoism, with different traditions of Buddhism, variously interpreted, a pervasive presence (e.g. Fox, Macy, Morton). In the meantime, Buddhist thinkers from East-Asia, such as Thich Nhat Hanh, have helped to globalize the ecospiritual conversation.

This eastward turn was manifest outside the academy in the ecologically-inclined counterculture that followed that of the beatniks. Here, though, ecospiritual inspiration was also being found elsewhere: namely in the indigenous traditions of colonized peoples. While many popular (and often lucratively marketed) manifestations of this enthusiasm for eco-indigeneity are unquestionably superficial, sentimental, and disturbingly appropriative, Native American voices, such as those of Linda Hogan, and scholars of Native American history and culture, such as Joni Adamson, have made a vital contribution to the development of the environmental humanities. In Australia, too, the emergence of the environmental humanities was informed by the teaching of traditional Aboriginal Elders, as well as by Indigenous philosophers, such as Mary Graham (see e.g. *Rose Wild Dog Dreaming* and “Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism”; Plumwood “Shadow Places”; and Mathews *For Love of Matter*, 179-83). Such endeavors to recover an indigenous understanding of the material world as communicative, agentic and ethically considerable respond to a yet deeper-lying dimension of the impact of the Christianization of Europe: namely, the extirpation of pagan animism, which, as White lamented, proclaimed “Man’s monopoly on spirit in this world” and “made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (1205).

This lament has a long pre-history in Western thought, dating back at least to the Romantic counter-movement to the “death of nature” (Merchant), beginning in the late eighteenth century (Rigby, *Topographies* 45-52). More recently, the German Critical Theorists, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, wrote ruefully of the “disenchantment” of the world in the baleful “dialectic of enlightenment,” whereby progress in the techno-scientific “domination of nature” was bought at the price of human self-alienation, fueling a desire for new forms of pseudo-belonging. Fascistic nationalism with its murderous

exclusions was the one of most immediate concern to these Jewish Marxist intellectuals in exile, but they also targeted the mollification of the masses effected by the capitalist culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer took the term “disenchantment” (actually “demagicification,” *Entzauberung*) from the German sociologist Max Weber, who stressed that this process, while initiated by Roman Christianity, was advanced by the Reformation, and completed only with the rise modern science (1920/1991). As Weber (1958) had previously argued in his *magnum opus* of 1905-06, moreover, it was no coincidence that the wedding of science and technology with capitalist economics took off in Europe’s reformed North-West, with its Protestant ethic of hard work, self-restraint, and the accumulation of financial wealth.

This brings me to a notable omission in White’s *Science* article (if not in his wider work, as Riley demonstrates in *Deeper Roots*): namely, the socio-economic drivers and ramifications of environmental degradation. While he was of course quite right to point to this as characteristic of the Communist East no less than the capitalist West, it was under the economically favorable conditions of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism that Francis Bacon’s ethos of techno-scientific mastery, conjoined with Cartesian dualism and Newtonian atomism, acquired widespread cultural traction, becoming a core constituent of modern thought: one that the political movements that subsequently sought unsuccessfully to realize the Communist project in Eastern Europe (as in China) failed adequately to critique. As Adorno and Horkheimer emphasize, moreover, the industrial capitalist mastery of nature has always also entailed the exploitation of human labor, as well as the domination of those other others, and dimensions of the self, that are ideologically aligned with that nature requiring mastering: namely women, animals, and the body. This critique has subsequently been taken further by ecofeminist historians (e.g. Merchant) and philosophers (e.g. Plumwood, Salleh), who also point to the incorporation of indigenous peoples into the subordinate domain of nature within what Plumwood terms the “logic of colonization” (see also DeLoughrey and Handley). In addition to being variously exploited and marginalized in the process of the domination of nature, many groups of socially subordinate humans (especially people of lower socio-economic status, African Americans, children, subsistence farmers, and Indigenous peoples) generally bear the brunt of its “slow violence” (Nixon).

Greening Religion: Challenges and Achievements

The interconnection between social injustice and environmental degradation has become a central matter of concern within the study of religion and ecology in recent years. However, it was broached considerably earlier by those who brought a feminist lens to this field of research and praxis. This was the terrain of my own first major venture into this arena with an essay on “ecofeminist reconfigurations of gender, nature, and the sacred” (2001) that focussed on post-Christian feminist ecospiritualities drawing their inspiration from Europe’s pre-Christian past (see e.g. Gimbutas). The “return of the Goddess” forms part of a wider revival (probably better described as re-invention) of the West’s own indigenous traditions of Earth-honoring. The first international academic conference devoted to contemporary paganism was hosted by the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1994, and was followed two years later by another (appropriately enough, given the Romantic precursors of this project) at Ambleside in the Lake District. Organized by the Religious Studies Department of the University of Lancaster, this conference on “Nature Religion Today” gave rise to a landmark book of that name (Pearson, Roberts and Samuel). Since 2004, Pagan Studies has boasted an academic journal, *The Pomegranate*, and a book series, beginning with *Researching Paganisms* (Blain, Ezzy and Harvey). Not all neo-pagans profess an ecological orientation. But Graham Harvey puts his finger on what is at stake for those who do: namely “the attempt to live respectfully as members of the diverse community of living persons (only some of whom are human) which we call the world or cosmos” (“Animism”).

Within the broad spectrum of contemporary paganism, feminist ecospiritualities are distinguished by their attention to the interlinkage of the patriarchal domination of women and the “anthroparchal” (Cudworth 8) domination of nature. Ecofeminist paganism draws on a variety of traditions and comes in diverse guises, from Melissa Raphael’s “thealogy,” through Carol Christ’s Goddess pantheism, to Starhawk’s queered Wicca. Rather than seeking to restore past cultural forms and social structures, though, feminist neo-paganism typically involves the creation of new narratives, rituals, and modes of co-becoming, in response to the insights and interests of contemporary collectives concerned with social injustice and environmental degradation. Whereas some forms of neo-paganism unquestionably construct their male and female deities along conventionally gendered and heteronormative lines, spiritual ecofeminists such as Starhawk (formerly Miriam Simos and of Jewish descent), deny that women are intrinsically ‘closer to nature’ than men, and critique gender stereotypes that erase salient differences among women and men pertaining to class, race, gender identity and sexual orientation (214-18).

While any kind of religious practice might become a substitute for social action, ecospirituality can also provide vital nourishment for ecopolitical engagement (see e.g. Spretnak). Many challenges nonetheless confront the new “dark green” (Taylor) spiritualities, no less than the established religions, tasked as they are with rethinking not only particular religious symbols, stories and rituals, but also the role of religion *per se* in an ever-more technologized, urbanized, globalized, anthropogenic, and ecologically imperiled world. Also cutting across the religious divide are two further risk factors. Firstly, there is the idealist assumption that wider socio-ecological changes can be effected by altering the way people think: that what we need is simply a “new story.” As White argued with the respect to the changes attendant on the invention of the iron plough, and Weber demonstrated in the case of the Protestant ethic, new stories become powerful only when they resonate with everyday practices and social relations. Moreover, within modern Western societies, characterized as they are to a high degree by the separation of distinct spheres of life, what goes on in the domain of religion, generally considered a cultural dimension of private life, is not necessarily correlated with what goes on in, say, the political or economic arenas (see Cudworth). While I do not subscribe to the view that these sub-systems are hermetically sealed from one another, the historical record suggests that the greening of religion will only take off, and strike longer lasting roots, if it is inter-linked with other societal changes, relating in particular to the political and economic drivers of continued environmental degradation, and the invention and deployment of technologies more consistent with environmentally sustainable and socially just forms of development.

The other over-arching hazard is the all-too-familiar one of claiming that one’s own story is the truest and the best. For eco-religionists to get into a fight with one another about who is the “greenest” would be highly counter-productive when what is most badly needed is a collaborative effort, ideally undertaken in consort with non-religious environmentalists as well. While the assumption of supremacy tends to be most common among proselytizing religions, notably Christianity and Islam, all belief systems, including apparently secular and indeed explicitly atheist ones, are liable to be mistaken by their adherents for the one and only truth. As Heather Eaton observes, “religions are like languages, and it is folly to ask which language is true or superior” (215). My own view, supported by a growing body of research in ecology and religion, is that virtually all faith traditions contain elements that can be drawn upon to shape a sturdy environmental ethic. However, given the unprecedented nature of our current geo-historical moment, in the midst of the “Great Acceleration” of human impacts upon all Earth’s natural systems, no pre-existing tradition has ready-made

answers to today's problems: all require some degree of re-interpreting and re-imagining, preferably, as feminist ecotheologian Rosemary Radford-Ruether puts it, by those who "claim community in them" (11).

Since the early 1990s, that work of re-visioning has been proceeding apace around the world, as can readily be seen from the website of the international, multi-faith Forum on Religion and Ecology. Now based at Yale University, FORE was founded in 1995 at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions. Under the directorship of Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, it has to date hosted twenty-five conferences and published numerous books and articles. In addition to a series of monographs on individual religions arising from the initial series of conferences held at Harvard (on Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Indigenous Traditions, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, and Shinto), several of which have been translated into other languages, the website provides introductory essays, bibliographies, sacred texts, official statements, and grass-roots projects for each of these traditions, plus Baha'i. Some 8,000 people around the world subscribe to FORE's monthly newsletter, and similar organizations have also been created elsewhere, including the Canadian Forum on Religion and Ecology, the European Forum for the Study of Religion and Environment, the Australia-Pacific Forum on Religion and Ecology, and the (US-based) International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture. These associations have a strong commitment to interdisciplinarity, fostering dialogue between religion and science.

This burgeoning of eco-religious scholarship finds a counterpart in the growth of both grassroots religious environmentalism and religious leadership on ecological issues (see Kearns, "Role of Religions"; Gottlieb, *Greener Faith* and *Oxford Handbook*). While the extent of the greening of religious practice across different faith traditions around the world remains unclear, there has been a rapid rise in the number of faith-based environmental social movement organizations in the US from the early 1970s (Haluza-DeLay). Meanwhile, secular organisations dedicated to animal welfare and conservation, such as the American Humane Society and World Wildlife Fund, have recognised the motivational role of religion by creating faith outreach programs. Among the activities indicating a growing ecological orientation among diverse faith communities are the 'greening' of worship centres through practical sustainability measures; local environmental initiatives, such as community food gardens; the inclusion of environmentally oriented prayers and songs into worship services; the creation of ecospiritual retreat centres, publications, and educational initiatives; and various forms of eco-political engagement, including participation in protest movements, for instance in favour of divestment from fossil fuels, or against mountain top removal mining

(see Elvey, “Homogenizing violence”). Many religious leaders have begun to take a stronger stand on socio-ecological concerns in recent decades. Among the first to do so was the Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios, then head of the Orthodox churches, who in 1989 released an encyclical on the environment, initiating the prophetic response to “Earth’s cry” that has been extended under his successor, Bartholomew, the so-called “Green Patriarch” (Chryssavgis). Similarly, John Paul II focused on the environment in his 1990 World Day of Peace message, and advocated an “ecological conversion” to promote better custodianship of the earth. The FORE website includes official statements from across the world’s religions, many of them directed towards major international bodies, such as the Hopi Message delivered to The United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York in 1992, and the World Council of Churches statement to the Third Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1997. The most significant of such statements thus far are Pope Francis’ May 2015 encyclical *Laudato si’* (“Praise be to you”) and the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change of August 2015, not least because of their timing: namely, with a view to putting moral pressure on the delegates to the UN Climate Change summit in Paris later that year.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, the papal encyclical is addressed not only to Catholics, nor even to all Christians, but to “every person living on this planet” (4). Similarly, the Islamic Declaration calls on people of all faiths worldwide to take urgent action to curb climate change and transition swiftly to a fossil-free economy. This reveals how socio-ecological concerns have opened up common ground for inter-religious dialogue, as can be seen also in the release of many interfaith statements, especially concerning climate change (see Rauterbach et al.), and in the formation of inter-religious environmental initiatives, such as the global Alliance of Religions and Conservation, Interfaith Power and Light (US), and the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (now allied with Greenfaith Australia). Counteracting sectarian fundamentalism, this trend was manifest also in the 2009 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Melbourne, addressed to the challenge of “Making a World of Difference: Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth.” Bringing together some 8,000 people from around 200 countries and dozens of faith traditions, this congress coincided with the UN’s climate summit in Denmark and many delegates chose to sign a petition urging those meeting in Copenhagen to take concerted action to limit global warming. This was followed in 2014 by an Interfaith Summit on Religion and Climate change in New York, organized by the World Council of

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<sup>2</sup> See also the “Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders” (October 2015).

Churches and Religions for Peace. Immediately preceding the UN climate change summit there on September 24 -25, it enabled delegates from around the world to join the People's Climate March and participate in an interfaith service at the Episcopal Cathedral of St John the Divine, where Terry Tempest Williams, Vandana Shiva and Al Gore were among the speakers.

### Earthing Christianity: Towards a Communion of Creatures

Considerations of Christianity and ecology can be traced back (at least) to the mid-1950s when Lutheran theologian John Sittler first proposed a "theology for Earth" (see also Kearns "Role of Religious Activism" 416-17). In the meantime, this has become a large and diverse field of research, reflection, and practice, of which I can only provide a glimpse here. As already indicated, climate change has galvanised religious environmentalism, as well as affording it greater visibility, and many Christians have joined the campaign for 'climate justice.' While the science continues to be contested by many on the right in Canada, Australia, and especially the US, both within and outside the churches, recognition of global warming as a matter of pressing moral and religious concern is growing even among American evangelicals (Kearns "Green Evangelicals"). Given the gravity of this problem and the urgency of its redress, this is a very welcome development. In one key respect, though, an engagement with climate change is but a short step for Christians who might not previously have been drawn to religious environmentalism: namely, in view of the specifically *human* suffering and mortality that it is already beginning to wreak, especially among those who have done least to cause the problem, along with its potential economic and political disruptiveness. Climate change concern thus sits comfortably with the preponderantly anthropocentric ethos of euro-western Christianity. Yet as Lynn White argued all those years ago, this anthropocentric leaning is itself ecologically problematic: what was needed, as he argued in a later essay, "Continuing the Conversation" (62), is "a viable equivalent to animism" to undergird a renewed appreciation of the intrinsic worth, autonomous agency, and indwelling spirituality of all creatures, among whom he also counted inorganic entities, such as rocks and mountains. As we have seen, some Western eco-religionists have looked to non-Western and pre-Christian traditions in search of a more immanent spirituality and inclusive ethos. But, as Riley has discovered, White himself hoped that this could be reactivated from within Christianity's "recessive genes," forgotten or suppressed dimensions of biblical and theological literature, which pointed towards what he called a "spiritual

democracy of all creatures” (“Continuing the Conversation,” 61). While this hope, as I indicate below, turns out not to have been unfounded, the belated opening of Christianity towards a wider communion with other creatures is occurring under the shadow of escalating extinctions (O’Brien).

In her 1996 overview of Christian environmentalism in the USA, Kearns distinguished three main approaches that had emerged by the early 1990s, based respectively on a stewardship ethic, an eco-justice ethic, and a Creation spirituality ethic, whereby “ethic” encompasses both worldview and ethos. As Kearns stresses in later re-evaluations, the picture has since become more complex and the approaches less clearly differentiated. In the US, moreover, since the discourse of stewardship has been captured by anti-environmentalist, climate change “sceptical” evangelicals, such as the Cornwall Institute, this terminology has been widely displaced by an ethic of “care for creation” (Kearns, “Role of Religions” 421). Nonetheless, Kearns’ typology is still helpful in distinguishing different tendencies within the spectrum of Christian environmentalism world-wide (see also Douglas).

The stewardship/creation care ethic provides a theocentric foundation for valuing Earth and otherkind, whereby humans are privileged accordance with their biblical mandate to “have dominion,” but also to “till and to keep” (Gen. 2.15). Whereas this position has had most appeal among political conservatives, including most evangelicals, the eco-justice ethic is generally favoured by left-liberal Christians. Emerging in the early 1970s, this predates, and is more inclusive, than the “environmental justice” movement. As William Gibson (28) explained in the December 1982 issue of their journal, *The Egg*, these early eco-justice advocates, inspired by the Hebrew prophetic tradition, understood that the “God of justice, engaged in deliverance from bondage and oppression, is also the God of creation, who cares for all creatures and engages in the work of protecting and restoring the earth as well as the poor”: work in which humans were called to actively participate both in their personal relations with more-than-human others and through collective endeavours to counter systemic forms of domination. Further biblical support for this position is found in the core Christian ethos of neighbour-love, based on the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), which, as the eminent Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>3</sup> was already professing in the 1950s, should be understood to extend also to more-than-human others: “the near one and the far one; the one removed from me by distances in time and space, in convictions and loyalties [... the neighbour is] man and is angel and his animal and inorganic being, all that

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<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps not insignificant, in light of his later thinking, that White studied with Niebuhr in the San Francisco Theological Seminary (Riley “Democratic Roots,” 940).

participates in being” (qtd. in Rasmussen 221; see also Elvey “Rethinking Neighbour Love”). An eco-justice orientation underpins the World Council of Churches’ “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” programme, initiated in 1983, which seeks alternatives to socially and ecologically destructive forms of corporate globalization. Theorisations of eco-justice have come to incorporate feminist, postcolonial and queer perspectives, intersecting with liberation and animal rights theologies, as well as with the predominantly human-centred concerns of the environmental justice movement.

Creation spirituality was initially inspired by the work of the Catholic “geo-logian,” Thomas Berry, and from the biblical vision of the “cosmic Christ” in John 1. In Niels Gregersen’s theology of “Deep Incarnation,” the Word made Flesh in Jesus of Nazareth discloses the participation of the divine in the entire realm of matter: an understanding partially endorsed by Pope John Paul II in his 1986 encyclical, “Lord, Giver of Life,” which affirms that in the Incarnation the “entire visible and material world” was “taken up into unity with God” (qtd. in Johnson 198). Whereas the first two approaches are more likely to be shared with Jewish and Islamic environmentalists, the third opens common ground between Christianity and Indigenous, East-Asian, and even neo-pagan spiritualities. It has been the most marginal among people in the pews thus far, but has found encouragement in FORE’s promotion of the legacy of Thomas Berry through the award-winning film, *Journey of the Universe* (2011), based on his collaboration with physicist Brian Swimme. Favouring Christian versions of animism and panpsychism, Creation spirituality has considerable potential to appeal to younger people in search of an ecological materialist modality of mysticism.

In my view, all three approaches are essential. Creation spirituality nourishes ecopolitical engagement by fostering experiences of deep interconnectivity and empathetic opening towards more-than-human others. Yet at a time when humans are required to shoulder ever-greater responsibility for shaping Earth’s possible futures, in keeping with our escalating environmental impacts and technoscientific capacities, we are surely called also to embrace a stewardship or Earth carer role. And in the assumption of that role, the bio-inclusive and inter-generational principles of eco-justice should guide our decisions, lest those wielding most power be left to act tyrannically in the interests of the few. Just such a synthesis is achieved in the “integral ecology” put forward in *Laudato si’*, which is informed not only by relevant physical and social science research, but also by decades of ecophilosophical and ecotheological reflection (especially as developed in consort with social justice teachings in Latin America). Into this mix, moreover, Pope Francis introduces a fourth

dimension, which accords strikingly with White's proposal for a "democracy of all creatures": namely, the biblical vision, found in Daniel 3:57-90 and Psalms 104 and 148, of all earthly beings, animate and inanimate, joined in praise for the creator. This was also the inspiration for St. Francis' beautiful Canticum of the Creatures, which is recalled in the opening paragraph of *Laudato si'*, where Earth is hailed as "sister" and "mother" (3). Before proceeding to his searing presentation of "What is happening to our common home," Francis honours his namesake as a "mystic" (9) who "communed with all creation" and sought "justice for the poor" (10). Rebutting the dismissal of St. Francis' sense of kinship with all creatures as "naïve romanticism," and his austere way of life as a "mere veneer of asceticism," the Pope insists that this was "something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled" (11). It is by joining St. Francis in this radical stance, that Christians might be called back into "communion with God, with others and with all creatures" (175).

The biblical motif of shared praise for the creator gave rise to the popular medieval notion that all creatures rejoiced also in the Resurrection of Christ. This informed the iconography of Easter, such as in this marginal scene in a prayer book produced by nuns in the Medingen convent around 1500, which depicts a donkey blowing the *shofar* (an ancient Jewish horn, referred to in Lev. 25:1 as announcing the Jubilee Year, when slaves and prisoners would be freed, debts would be forgiven, and the mercies of God made manifest), from which emerges a speech bubble declaring *Omnis spiritus laudet dominum* ("Let every spirit praise the Lord," Ps. 150:6, the last verse of the Psalter, in the Latin version of the Vulgate), while a monkey sings and plays the tambourine, in the presence of a curious dog and a squirrel excitedly standing on two legs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Copenhagen Manuscript K2 (Ms Thott 120-8°, ca. 1500), fol. 60r. I am indebted for this image to Henrike Lehnemann, Professor of Medieval German Studies at Oxford University, and co-creator of a website dedicated to the manuscripts produced by the Medingen nuns: <http://medingen.seh.ox.ac.uk/>



Similarly, popular depictions of the Nativity to this day recall one of many apocryphal narratives featuring animals (see Hobgood-Oster), according to which the first witnesses to the Incarnation were neither the timorous shepherds nor the wise potentates from the East, but the ox and the ass in the stable, where the Christ child was laid in the manger used to provide food for animals.

Such depictions intimate a view of the Incarnation and Resurrection as involving all creatures, rejoicing equally in the divine gift of life and sharing equally in the emancipatory promise of the peaceable Kin(g)dom (Isaiah 11:6-9; Rom.8:21-22). But they are clearly highly anthropomorphic. A contemporary account of creaturely communion, appropriately acknowledging alterity along with kinship, would therefore need to affirm that “all beings give glory to God simply by being themselves,” as the pioneering feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson puts it in her profound reflection on the relationship between Darwinian evolution and Christian faith in the “God of love” (276). This is consistent with process theological understandings of *creatio continua* (continuous creation), or as Catherine Keller (*Face of the Deep*) terms it, *creation ex profundis* (from the deep), according to which the Creator is not understood as an extra-terrestrial masculine designer deity, but as an indwelling divine mystery that “freely gifts the natural world with creative agency” (Johnson 160), and perpetually “lures” all things towards the fullest possible actualisation of their interactive becoming. This *calling* Keller terms the divine Eros. Its counterpart is the divine Agape, which graciously “*responds* to whatever we have become; in com/passion it feels our

feelings: it is the *reception*” (*On the Mystery* 99). This omni-amorous divine mystery, who, as Job discovered, does not orchestrate all things for exclusively human benefit, participates in the suffering of all beings within the evolving web of life, the cruelties of which were disclosed, with so much anguish, by Charles Darwin. According to this bio-inclusive view of divine compassion, “the pelican chick,” pushed out of the nest by its abler sibling, “does not die alone” (Johnson 206). Yet the pain and perishing that is an inevitable dimension of creaturely existence must be distinguished from all sources of distress and death, from factory farming to species extinction, occasioned by those of us in the communion of creatures capable of discerning that such ills could be averted. Sharing with other creatures in both praise and suffering, humans are called also to stand in prophetic solidarity with our Earth others in seeking (in the inadequately heeded words of the Anglican Marks of Mission) “to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation [...and] to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.”<sup>5</sup>

This bio-inclusive reconceptualization of communion invites a re-imagination of the central ritual of most Christian churches, the Eucharistic feast, along the eco-materialist lines proposed by Anne Elvey: “in the matter of bread and wine, the matter of women’s and men’s bodies and blood, and in the particular human communities gathered to celebrate, Eucharist brings into focus the reality of Earth-being as interconnected and interdependent” (“Living for the Other,” 186); as a kenotic “being-for-the other” (191), which, in a world where feasting and flourishing are inextricably linked with killing and consuming, entails both hospitality and sacrifice. Forms of more-than-human communion are also starting to be practiced outside the church, too. One example of this is the Chicago-based “Migration and Me” program.<sup>6</sup> An initiative of the “Faith in Place” organization, which seeks to inspire “religious people of diverse faiths to care for the Earth through education, connection, and advocacy,”<sup>7</sup> this project is designed to link socio-economically disadvantaged African American and Latino faith communities with local conservation initiatives. Veronica Kyle, Chicago Congregational Outreach Director for Faith in Place, realized that shared experiences of dislocation and migration could provide the key to engaging these communities with the predicament of other creatures on the move, since “human beings, monarch butterflies, migratory birds, and other migrating species all seek welcoming places

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<sup>5</sup> See “Anglican Communion” at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/identity/marks-of-mission.aspx>.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Laurel Kearns for alerting me to this project, and for her and Bob McCoy’s generous hospitality, convivial conversations, and access to resources in researching this chapter.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.faithinplace.org/who-we-are>.

to eat, rest, and live along the migration journey and at the destination.”<sup>8</sup> She therefore created a space for sharing stories of migration in conjunction with learning about the struggles of other species, inspiring the participation of hundreds of largely African American and Latino Christians in the creation and restoration of habitat for butterflies and other insects. Such practices of anticipatory hospitality towards more-than-human others, preparing a place of rest and sustenance upon the journey, or a new home in which to abide, will be increasingly called for as ever more communities and species are displaced and disoriented by the calamitous impacts of anthropogenic climate change.

This one small example is indicative of an epochal shift towards a multi-species sense of fellowship that is starting to occur among practicing Christians, whose vision has hitherto been veiled by a “tenacious anthropocentrism” (Johnson 261). In this, they join those of other faiths, who share Thomas Berry’s view of the world as “a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects,” as exemplified in the large anthology of this name (Waldau and Patton). While there is abundant evidence today of the havoc that can be caused by militant religious fundamentalism (as has been the case with any number of secular fundamentalisms, such as nationalism, fascism and Stalinism), it can only be hoped that, at this time of global socio-ecological imperilment, it is the voice coming from the 2015 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Salt Lake City that comes to hold sway: “The future we embrace will be a new ecological civilization and a world of peace, justice and sustainability, with the flourishing of the diversity of life. We will build this future with one family within the greater Earth community.”

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.faithinplace.org/our-programs/migration-me>.

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