8-12 July
Online

REA Annual Meeting 2024

Dear Earth

Innovating Religious Education Through the Lens of Climate Justice

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The Religious Education Association (REA) is an Association of Professors, Practitioners, and Researchers in Religious Education
We are an interfaith organization open to all

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Table of Contents

Author Index

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Savoring the Sacred:
Cultivating the Spiritual and Ethical Dispositions to Address the Climate Crisis through a Eucharistic Rule of Life

Abstract: The ecological crisis threatens to overwhelm people to the point of inaction. This disconnection requires spirituality of interdependence that motivates social change for the long term. Through theological reflection, ethical analysis, and example of community practices, this paper shows how a rule of life focused on eucharistic eating cultivates habits of gratitude, mindfulness, and generosity to contribute to a more just food system. This framework—applicable in classrooms, churches, and communities—responds to the overwhelm of the climate crisis with a loving attention to daily habits.

I. Introduction

A bird, whose name I do not yet know, chirps outside the second-story window where my desk overlooks the backyard of my family's new home. The pine trees there have stood tall and steady, holding their green needles through our first winter here. Tiny sprouts of green leaves are finally filling up the branches of the other trees, whose names I also do not know. We are surrounded by a new landscape, new neighbors (of human and creature variety), new water sources, and a new foodshed.

When facing the injustices abounding in the global food system and the devastating data about the climate crisis, overwhelm is a natural reaction. I, among others, find it difficult to know how and where to make an impact. Tuning into the natural world gives me a small place to start - my home. Looking around reminds me to simply start where I am. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the practice of seeking holiness, "My life depends on engaging the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them."[1]

Through a combination of theological reflection, ethical analysis, and examples from communities of practice, this project proposes that a rule of life focused on eucharistic eating can cultivate habits of gratitude, mindfulness, and generosity in one's food practices, and thus contribute to a more just and regenerative food system. First, I will briefly identify the problems of disconnection and overwhelm that inhibit our ability to address our ecological crisis. Second, I will highlight how Eucharistic theology, virtue ethics, and ritual studies offer support for this proposal. Third, I offer a rule of life example, utilizing the framework of "pray, eat, work, play" drawn from a community of practice. In churches, theology classrooms, and personal homes, creating a spiritually grounded and food centered framework of values and practices can motivate action toward social transformation in our global food crisis.

II. Problem & Proposal

There are two foundational issues hindering many U.S. churches' capacity to address the global food and ecological crisis. First, people are disconnected from food sources, including the land and people who produce it, and thus we fail to recognize food as a gift. This inhibits us from recognizing how our own food practices can either contribute to the injustices or the solutions. Second, people who do sense a need for change often operate from a space of fear and anxiety that fails to generate sustained energy for social transformation. To address both these concerns, I propose we need a spirituality of interdependence that grounds us in a posture of gratitude and motivates social change for the long term.

This proposal is informed and inspired by the work of Dr. Mary McGann and her book *The Meal That Reconnects: Eucharistic Eating and the Global Food Crisis*. She establishes the problem, claiming that "Eating today engages us in conflicting paradigms: food as gift or food as commodity."[2] Unfortunately, many people do not even *recognize* this paradigm when facing their food practices; eaters and shoppers often buy what is available or convenient and focus more on the price tag than ethics. Furthermore, economic inequality prohibits many eaters from engaging this paradigm; this system limits food choices through location, price, and access. [3] The pervasive culture of capitalism obscures the relationality embedded in our food system.

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[1] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), xvii.

[2] Mary E. McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects: Eucharistic Eating and the Global Food Crisis*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2020), 6.

[3] This is *not* to say that the spiritual practice of recognizing food as gift is limited to those with economic privilege.

Designating food as a commodity creates an emotional and mental disconnection that intentionally obscures the whole cost. A report on the true cost of food suggests that in 2019, American consumers spent an estimated $1.1 trillion on food, yet that figure is a fraction of the actual cost, when considering the health and environmental impacts not included on a grocery store label. This report attempts to place a dollar figure on the rest of the cost, writing:

> That price tag includes the cost of producing, processing, retailing, and wholesaling the food we buy and eat. It does not include the cost of healthcare for the millions who fall ill with diet-related diseases. Nor does $1.1 trillion include the present and future costs of the food system's contributions to water and air pollution, reduced biodiversity, or greenhouse gas emissions, which cause climate change. Take those costs into account and it becomes clear the true cost of the U.S. food system is at least three times as big—$3.2 trillion per year. [4]

Hiding this cost attempts to obfuscate the ethical implications of being an eater. This purposeful disconnection perpetuates the injustices that abound in the global food system and therefore promotes profits of such companies that exploit eaters, farmers, workers, and the land. Thus, everyday grocery shoppers, cooks, and eaters often fail to appreciate the complex web that brings food to their plates, being that those connections and costs are intentionally hidden.

A second, and related, underlying problem is the way the ecological crisis generates feelings of fear, worry, and overwhelm. "Climate anxiety" is a term rising in popularity to describe this emotional response and the crippling paralysis that can follow. In the wake of such large-scale issues, even choosing to take on personal environmental practices can be a challenge because the habits don't necessarily feel effective. When corporations and governments bear responsibility for a majority of carbon emissions and the destruction caused by industrial agriculture, trying to shop locally and seasonally can feel like a drop in the bucket. Furthermore, issues of privilege and access come into play when considering individual action steps. If the burden of change is placed on the wallets and tables of people with limited capacity and resources, we perpetuate the injustices of this system and create additional guilt and shame around food choices. Operating from a place of fear and stress does not sustain long-term social change. Instead, cultivating a spirituality that recognizes our interdependence is a crucial and foundational task.

In response to these underlying concerns, I propose that strategies for resisting the injustices of our global food system must be rooted in the recognition of food as a gift. From a Christian practical theology framework, fostering a deep sense of connection to God as Creator, to the created world, and to the land, animals, and people who play a role in our food sources can motivate not only personal habits but also further policy change and systems engagement. By cultivating habits of gratitude, mindfulness, and generosity, we can shift away from disconnect and overwhelm and toward eucharistic eating.

III. Foundations & Theories

Our table and eating practices are spiritually and ethically formative. Practical theologian Dorothy Bass argues that "Today, discerning how to live faithfully as Christians who have enough to eat must include attention to life-giving practices of producing and sharing food, both

[4] "The True Cost of Food in the U.S.," The Rockefeller Foundation, July 2021. https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/true-cost-of-food-measuring-what-matters-to-transform-the-u-s-food-system/.

for our own good and for the good of all God's creatures."[5] In giving attention to such practices, I draw together the disciplines of eucharistic theology, virtue ethics, and ritual studies, which all support a connected spirituality rooted in gratitude that can motivate social change. These disciplines, along with resources from Christian spirituality, inform a praxis-oriented pedagogical proposal that can be utilized in churches, classrooms, and homes.

Eucharistic eating is a life-giving framework that translates the theological depth of the church's liturgical practice into our everyday food habits.. McGann explores this way of eating, centering Jesus's table fellowship as a site for the in-breaking reign of God, which is then celebrated in the religious rite and can be embodied in our regular eating. Bridging the connection between Eucharist and daily eating can foster a spirituality of the table. McGann explains:

> A spirituality imbued with reverence leads us home to our true sources of nourishment, full of appreciation and amazement at what we behold. It invites a recognition of the gifts already on our tables, provided by the bounteous Earth and life-giving Spirit, and teaches us to take our place there with perception and discernment about who deserves to dwell there with us. And it invites a truthful assessment of the debt of costly love which occurs each time we dine. [6]

A spirituality full of eucharistic thanksgiving shapes us to receive food as a gift, rather than treat it as a capitalistic commodity.

Such a posture motivates us toward deeper learning—learning about our global food supply chain and its personal, social, and environmental impact. This engagement with our food helps us see the dynamic between gift and cost. McGann explains,

> In the alternative framework of Earth economics, food shared at table is first a gift rather than a product – a gift of costly love...Reckoning with the cost of the food invites deep humility in the face of gifts received that can never be earned; a clear-sighted awareness of the interdependent character of our human existence; and the motivation to ensure that the food shared at our tables is restorative, equitable and just.[7]

Rather than avoid the cost (hidden by the profit-oriented food industry), eucharistic eating fosters an honest recognition of how food comes to the table. This honesty, although we may initially wish to avoid facing it, actually can generate gratitude rather than alienation. Facing the issues can also bring one closer to finding solutions. Thus, such awareness has potential to lead eaters toward forming more just and sustainable habits.

Cultivating these habits relies not simply on "right ideas" but on nurturing the right dispositions, especially when it comes to the daily task of eating. The formation that happens through our food practices is not simply about choosing "green" technical solutions but forming virtues that sustain our participation in God's abundant way of life. Jennifer Ayres proposes an ecological model of discipleship she labels inhabitance. She writes:

> Faithful and responsible inhabitance is a way of life seeking to become loving, just, and responsible members of God's household. To define it according to a set of capacities and a way of life is to say that inhabitance comprises a set of dispositions or virtues that attune Christian consciousness to its ecological context, its ecological roots, and its ecological responsibility. Nurturing inhabitance requires the cultivation of theologically

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[5] Dorothy C. Bass, "Eating," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 54.

[6] Mary E. McGann, "Rediscovering a Spirituality of the Table," 1.

[7] McGann, "Rediscovering a Spirituality," 3.

> grounded ecological character, or virtues. Attending the cultivation of virtues shifts the environmental question from what Christians should *do* to how Christians should *be*.[8]

I propose that ecological virtue cultivation begin with gratitude, creating the groundwork for a spirituality of interdependence.

Gratitude is a foundational posture for seeking the flourishing of all creation. Plant scientist and Indigenous scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer suggests, "Imagine raising children in a culture in which gratitude is the first priority."[9] She beautifully illustrates the importance of starting with a posture of gratitude to the Creator, the world, and all our relations in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which nurtures an ecological consciousness through Indigenous wisdom. She writes,

> And while expressing gratitude seems innocent enough, it is a revolutionary idea. In a consumer society, contentment is a radical proposition. Recognizing abundance rather than scarcity undermines an economy that thrives by creating unmet desires. Gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness, but the economy needs emptiness…Gratitude doesn't send you out shopping to find satisfaction; it comes as a gift rather than a commodity, subverting the foundation of the whole economy. That's good medicine for land and people alike.[10]

Fostering this sense of gratitude is a subversive act that requires steady and constant cultivation.

By cultivating such dispositions through routine eating practices, we generate the capacity for engaging with structural injustice. When our tables are centered in gratitude, we shift to an abundance mindset. For those of us with material abundance, our food is a reminder that this gratitude must overflow into addressing the problems of our global food system.[11] Ethicist Julie Rubio, in discussing the importance of eating for ethical formation, writes, "Communal consciousness of undeserved abundance can then become a foundation for growth in solidarity."[12] By moving from gratitude and abundance, we can become equipped to address social injustice. However, such movement is not automatic; transformation requires attention and intentionality.

To translate these theological ideals into embodied understanding, we need creative rituals and practices. Kimmerer tells the story of her dad's practice of preparing coffee, where he poured out a bit to the earth in gratitude before drinking it himself. She says that "Ceremonies large and small have the power to focus attention to a way of living awake in the world"[13] because they are "vehicles for belonging—to a family, to a people, and to the land."[14] Forging

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[8] Jennifer R. Ayres, *Inhabitance: Ecological Religious Education*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 20.

[9] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 111.

[10] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 111.

[11] Technical solutions for the ecological crisis often place the burden of change on individuals and therefore ignore issues of access and privilege, assuming all individuals "should" take on a specific practice (such as "buying local" despite a potential lack of available, affordable, local food). Cultivating a disposition of gratitude can indeed apply across socioeconomic strata; the resulting actions steps need to be contextual.

[12] Julie Hanlon Rubio, "The Practice of Eating: Love, Justice, and Mercy," in *Family Ethics*: *Practices for Christians* (Georgetown University Press, 2010), 145.

[13] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 36.

[14] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 37.

new ceremonies and spiritual practices helps bridge the sacred and the mundane, bringing a sense of connection and gratitude into our daily habits.

Rituals, ceremonies, and spiritual attention can help communities develop new narratives, meanings, and practices around food that support justice and solidarity. Tom Driver, in his exploration of the liberating power of ritual, writes that "Religion is not about the elimination of desire but its *transformation* from lower to higher forms—the transformation of the suffering world into one more compassionate, loving, and just."[15] Under a capitalist mindset, desire leads to consumption and hoarding. Ritual (including Eucharist and other eating rituals) can transform this desire into forms of gratitude, abundance, and sharing within God's economy of grace. The desire for more becomes a desire for a just and equitable distribution of the world's gifts. Rituals serve as this vehicle for religious and social transformation, challenging dominant and harmful food systems and their reliance on disconnection from our food sources.

Eucharist is the central Christian ritual around food. We can extend the sacred treatment of food from the altar to our family tables, our coffee dates, and our community gatherings in order to more regularly instill a sense of gratitude and connection to our food sources. By creating spaces for reflection, connection, and action, rituals can help to promote a deeper sense of gratitude, mindfulness, and generosity. As Dr. McGann writes, "To be gathered around an abundant table, fed and nourished from common bowls and platters, is to recognize that Earth's plenty is a common good, belonging to all and requiring just distribution and radical care."[16] In turn, this sense of spirituality inspires and sustains us as we disrupt dominant narratives around food.

IV. Spiritual and Social Transformation Through Household Food Practices

Facing the disconnection and overwhelm that fuels the injustice of our global food system requires practices that replace alienation from our food sources with the disposition of gratitude. This way of eucharistic living is a holistic lifestyle characterized by spiritual connection and interdependence. Pope Francis says, "Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption."[17] In this project, I propose ways to embody this approach through food practices in the household for two reasons. First, food is a useful medium for addressing the ecological crisis as means of both delight and justice; second, focusing on the household as a place of formation gives a locus and structure for nurturing long-term dispositions.

In this proposal, I utilize "household" as a summative term for eating practices that happen outside of the Eucharist ritual, particularly those routine habits such as daily meals/snacks, grocery shopping, cooking, and gathering groups of people around food. "Household" is not dependent on a nuclear family arrangement; a household may be a single person, a group of roommates, a religious collective, a blended family, or any combination of people that routinely eat together in a home. The commitments that a household makes are likely to overlap with other people, namely neighbors, farmers, church groups, or schools, depending on location and affiliation. Building a rule of life around household practices allows the tool to

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[15] Tom F. Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (North Charleston, S.C.: BookSurge, 2006), 172.
[16] McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects,* 11.
[17] Pope Francis, *Care for Creation: A Call for Ecological Conversion,* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2016), 103.

be utilized pedagogically in communities, particularly classrooms or churches, without needing to have uniform habits across the group.

Eating practices should be sensory experiences that engender joy, delight, and generosity to sustain long-term social change. The table, when given proper attention, becomes an embodied experience of our spiritual interdependence. Food is not merely fuel, but a medium of love, conveyed through the miraculous process of growth, harvesting, preparing, and sharing. We know this deeply when we sit down at a friend's table, tearing open a warm loaf of bread, and clinking glasses of fragrant wine, or when we eagerly bite into the first strawberry from the garden patch. Breaking bread together fuels the prophetic life as we physically experience the delight of food and fellowship. Norman Wirzba writes, "The practice of thanksgiving defines people as creatures who not only ingest and digest their food but relish it as the medium of life and love… To eat is to see, smell, touch, and taste God's provisioning care."[18] By savoring the food, we recognize that it is sacred. By eating mindfully, we tune our physical senses to experience food as a gift of God as well as the collective product of the earth and the many hands that supported our food's journey to our table.

The household, as a space of regular eating, thus becomes an important location for forming gratitude and mindfulness at the table. Rubio writes, "When families are seen as the smallest Christian communities, their daily practices are acts of Christian discipleship."[19] The household (again, not dependent on a nuclear family arrangement) supports the repetitive nature needed for effective habit formation. Utilizing small home rituals as ways to foster this mindfulness, we begin to reshape our experiences of food. The practice of saying grace is simple, yet can be a profound reorientation for eucharistic eating. Wirzba explains,

> Saying grace, if it is authentic and not simply ornamental, is the expression of an inspired, faithful life and a reoriented desire, and so is something that must be worked out and practiced in the diverse dimensions of daily life. Said properly, it has the potential to redefine humanity by refocusing our imaginations and redirecting practices according to the graced character of the world. Saying grace turns people's attention and hearts to a world appreciated as gift and blessing. When we daily offer a benediction on the costly miracle of life, we bear witness to a wide-ranging set of intellectual, emotional, and practical dispositions that aim to receive the members of creation in a distinct, life-honoring way.[20]

Constant, small practices, given proper attention, can begin to cultivate the dispositions needed for seeking justice in our global food system.

Although such practices begin at home, this is not an individualistic effort or a narrow view of the nuclear family's well-being. Rather, this approach fosters eucharistic eating in which we become co-conspirators in seeking liberation, justice, and flourishing for all of creation. It also supports a view of the household (including its land) as sacramental, insomuch as it becomes a place of encountering the transforming love of God. When considered in this light, the care of the home and land demonstrates a commitment to caring for God's creation. John Hart's concept of creation as sacramental commons is useful here. He writes,

> When Christians regard creation as sacramental, as revelatory of the Spirit, then their understandings of the transcendence and immanence of God are integrated, and they have

[18] Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 180.
[19] Rubio, *Family Ethics*, 151.
[20] Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 192.

> an enlightened commitment to care for the Spirit's creation in its local manifestation, the commons in which they live and work. When Christians regard the commons as sacramental, and consequently care for and about it as sacramental, they become involved in practical projects to provide for the well-being of the commons and of the community of all life, and to ensure a just distribution among people of commons goods needed by all humankind.[21]

This form of Eucharistic living in the household can generate the practical habits for generosity and gratitude, which then extend beyond the individual home toward the well-being of the community.

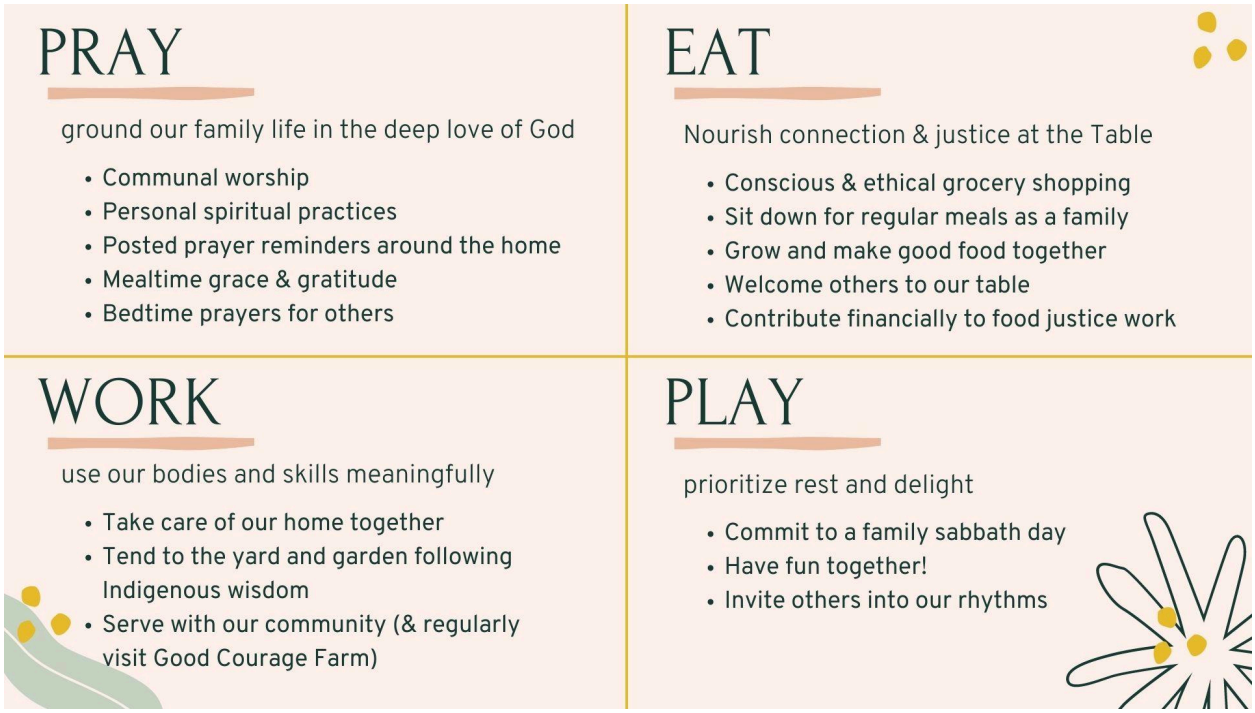
V. Rule of Life

A "rule of life" is a set of values and practices designed to support spiritual and ethical flourishing. The framework provides focus and structure for growth and transformation, aligning our days in relationship with God, the source of all love and life. Often utilized in monastic traditions for structuring community life, a rule can also bring rhythm and order to a household seeking to grow in love of God and neighbor. It can be taught in churches and classrooms as a personal practice or utilized for naming community commitments. At the heart of a rule of life is the willingness and desire to be transformed in the image of Christ, the one who welcomes all to an abundant table.

The sample rule of life in this project draws wisdom from a community of practice and models how it can be adapted for personal use. It is ordered around the general practices of "pray, eat, work, play." This example is a family rule of life, inspired by one developed at Heirloom East Bay, an intentional Christian community on a small farm near Oakland, California. Heirloom hosts a residential community as well as retreat space, practicing hospitality, sustainability, and creativity to bear witness to the love of God; the community shares a weekly Eucharist in the context of a full meal. I helped launch this ministry in 2019 and served as a co-pastor and residential member, before moving to Minneapolis a few years later. In this project, I adapt the overall framework from Heirloom with ideas that pertain to our new home, land, and community. These are also general Christian concepts that can be utilized as a framework for other families or communities to adapt to their specific households.

This family rule of life is focused on eucharistic eating in order to cultivate habits of gratitude, mindfulness, and generosity in our food practices, and contribute to a more just and sustainable food system. I have utilized the insights from eucharistic theology, virtue ethics, and ritual studies to structure these core concepts and accompanying action steps. The four areas are not completely distinct but rather, they are porous, feeding one another as they unite in a comprehensive vision of Eucharistic living. Abiding by this rule of life, we are utilizing the rhythms of our daily life to seek flourishing for all creation and foster a spirituality of interdependence that sustains long-term social change.

[21] John Hart. *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 4-5.



Pray: ground our family life in the deep love of God

- Communal worship
- Personal spiritual practices
- Posted prayer reminders around the home
- Mealtime grace, gratitude, mindfulness
- Bedtime prayers for others

Eat: nourish connection & justice at the Table

- Conscious & ethical grocery shopping
- Sit down for regular meals as a family
- Grow and make good food together
- Welcome others to our table
- Contribute financially to food justice work

Work: use our bodies and skills meaningfully

- Take care of our home together
- Tend to the yard and garden following Indigenous wisdom
- Serve with our community (& regularly visit Good Courage Farm)

Play: prioritize rest and delight

- Commit to a family sabbath day

- Have fun together!
- Invite others into our rhythms

VI. Conclusion

In this ecological crisis, disconnection and overwhelm hinder many people's ability to engage meaningfully with our food system. Therefore, particularly in Christian communities, we need to cultivate a spirituality that fosters reconnection with food as gift. By utilizing Eucharistic theology, virtue ethics, and ritual studies, the project demonstrates that cultivating gratitude for food as a medium of God's love, abundance, and care is a means to social transformation and essential for reshaping a more just and compassionate food system. By adopting a rule of life focused on eucharistic eating, households can foster a deeper sense of connection with God, the community, and the natural world and thus become agents of social transformation in their local contexts. Through the pedagogical and spiritual practice of crafting such a rule of life, churches, classrooms, and communities can contribute to the flourishing of the Earth and all its inhabitants.

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Pathways Into Teaching Ecological Engagement in Congregations

Abstract: This paper explores the challenges of cultivating ecological engagement in the context of congregations and describes pedagogical strategies for cultivating transformational approaches to care of the Earth. Working with data from clergy taking part in an online program for education and support on climate and environmental issues, we imagine what it might look like for preachers, leaders, and educators alike to be equipped and accompanied for teaching ecological engagement. We draw on social movement theory for rhetorical frames to catalyze change in congregations that may be hindered by narratives of inaction around climate and environmental issues. We also note the importance of context in terms of geography and a sense of place for shaping education and engagement. Two strategies emerge showing promise for future inquiry: framing ecological engagement as relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world, and theological framing for meaning-making and identifying shared values.

Introduction

Addressing our urgent ecological emergency is not simply the role of scientists, technological innovators, and policy advocates. Faith traditions have a unique role to play in helping society meaningfully engage with the climate crisis, re-envision its relationship to the more-than-human world, and seek justice for the oppressed human and other-than-human communities which disproportionately bear the burden of unfolding ecological devastation. As cultural critic Amitav Ghosh writes in The Great Derangement,

> If a significant breakthrough is to be achieved…then already-existing communities and mass organizations will have to be in the forefront of the struggle. And of such organizations, those with religious affiliations possess the ability to mobilize people in far greater numbers than any others. Moreover, religious worldviews are not subject to the limitations that have made climate change such a challenge for our existing institutions of governance: they transcend nation-states, and they all acknowledge intergenerational, long-term responsibilities…they are therefore capable of imagining non-linear change (Ghosh 2015, 160-161).

While Ghosh speaks powerfully to the potential for ecological engagement by people of faith, these aspirations meet a complicated reality present in the day-to-day life of most religious communities. Even the most committed preachers, teachers, and religious leaders frequently find that their best intentions frequently run aground when faced with the challenging dynamics of congregations, such as dwindling resources, shrinking attendance, divided political ideologies, and an aging membership.

In addition, preachers and other religious leaders encounter the struggle of framing the narrative around climate in ways that invite engaged action. This is largely due to the fact that there are competing frameworks – mental structures constructed to make sense of the world – that address climate and environmental issues. As we will discuss, preachers enter a contested space of competing discourses and rhetorical frames that vie for the hearts and minds of their listeners. Drawing on social movement theory, we will show how these frames are used to either hinder or urge action on climate using specific strategies.

All of this speaks to a need for teaching ecological engagement to congregations in ways that can both respect a congregation's geographic, political, and cultural context context and also bring out the best of its own identity in response to our current environmental predicament. In our research, we have found that there are numerous pathways for congregations to enter into ecological engagement with the pressing issues facing our global and local communities. We intend to test these pathways with preachers and congregations in different contexts in order to determine the variables that shape the effectiveness of preaching, ministry, and environmental advocacy and activism.

EcoPreacher Cohort Overview

The EcoPreacher Cohort, a program of The BTS Center and Creation Justice Ministries, involved over one hundred preachers from November 2022 to November 2023 in creating a covenanted space for preachers to learn, reflect together, and offer support to one another as they

regularly preach in a climate-changed world. The program consisted of monthly online gatherings that included presentations from theologians and homileticians, fostering community through geographically-based kinship groups, and suggesting opportunities for self-reflection and feedback on preaching strategies.

In March 2024, Lexington Theological Seminary (LTS) received a $1.25 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. for their project, "Compelling Preaching for a Climate-Changed World." LTS is partnering with The BTS Center and Creation Justice Ministries on the initiative that aims to equip preachers with training, resources, support networks, and research for addressing the urgency of the climate crisis and other environmental issues. The effort is being funded through Lilly Endowment's Compelling Preaching Initiative. The aim of the initiative is to foster and support preaching that better inspires, encourages, and guides people to come to know and love God and to live out their Christian faith more fully.

The grant will allow for building and expanding the EcoPreacher program over a period of five years through sermon coaching groups, peer networks, workshops and webinars, and an online digital resource hub with text studies, preaching helps, and model sermons. The project will also include a research component studying clergy and congregations to better understand how preachers are responding to the challenges of a climate-changed world and how the skills and resources provided by the program can be utilized throughout the church.

Literature Review: Using Tools of Social Movement Theory

We work with the premise that religion and the environmental movement inform, shape and influence each other. We use social movement theory to examine the role of religion in the environmental movement, specifically the ways in which preaching provides framing and rhetorical strategies for addressing climate and environmental issues. Several scholars inform our premise.

One is Doug McAdams who asserts that there are five fundamental needs for a social movement to emerge, gain traction, and have an effect on society (McAdam 1982). One element is a *grievance* – an acknowledgement that something is wrong and that change is needed. But this is not necessarily enough to motivate people to participate. A second element is needed – a *moral imperative* that frames the issue in a way that raises public consciousness and stokes a level of anger that energizes people to act. Such energy must be harnessed, however. This necessitates the third element of social movements – that of *resources*: leadership, networks, connections and institutional support to mobilize, fund and direct social change. A *shift in political opportunity* is the fourth element, whereby some event catalyzes a chain of events that enables the movement to capitalize on the grievances and moral imperatives that have been simmering. To use Malcolm Gladwell's term, this is the "tipping point" that spawns a wave of public outcry for change. But in order to keep this momentum from dwindling or losing its initial surge of energy, the fifth element is needed – that of a sense of *viability*. A short-term winnable goal must be achieved in order for movement participants to see that change is possible. This enables momentum to be sustained over the long haul with the hope that participants really can effect change, and that such change is within their reach.

What is the role of religion within social change? According to Johnston and Klandermans, it varies from being a change-inhibitor (preserving tradition) to change-agent (articulating the cry of the oppressed and critiquing the powers that enable oppression). (Johnston and Klandermans 2001). For eco-theologians and religiously-oriented activists within the environmental movement, the latter role is emphasized. In terms of the five elements of social change theory, religion can make important contributions on many levels. Holy scriptures often contain rich resources for articulating grievances about what has been done to the environment, lamenting unjust losses such as species extinction, and stoking righteous anger on behalf of the oppressed, such as impoverished communities who bear the brunt of the burden of the climate crisis while having contributed the least to the problem.

Religious leaders are often skilled in framing moral imperatives that connect potential movement participants to the core values of their faith, such as care for the least of these (Matt. Ch. 25), the imperative to "till and keep" God's Creation (Gen. 2:15), and Paul's assertion that Creation itself is redeemed by Christ (Rom. 8:18-25). They also have access to vast networks of people, funds, institutional support, and buildings to house meetings for the work of the movement. These can be seen in the numerous denominations that have environmental justice offices, faith coalitions such as Interfaith Power & Light, Creation Justice Ministries, Green Faith, and ecoAmerica's Blessed Tomorrow.

Religion can also be a catalyst for policy changes when clergy and people of faith engage secular leaders, such as visiting elected officials to advocate for climate policies that hasten the transition away from fossil fuels and prepare communities for the effects of the climate crisis. Finally, religion contains the potential to intensify and add a moral and ethical dimension to the goals of a social movement through the use of rituals, symbols, preaching, and teaching that elevate the movement to a transcendent level. For example, some pastors will emphasize the need to protect the land for making grapes and grain for holy communion as well as the water for the sanctity of baptism. Also, the Bible is replete with stories and symbols that center aspects of Creation such as trees, water, birds, soil, and wind.

Thus, the EcoPreacher project works with the premise of religion as a change-agent and ally for environmental social movement while also highlighting the expressive dimension of *preaching* in helping to interpret opportunities, mobilize support, and sustain commitment to the movement over time. For this project we especially focus on the importance of preaching's framing and micro-discourse for religious engagement in the environmental movement.

The Importance of Framing for Teaching Ecological Engagement in Congregations

Snow states that the function of a frame is to "define some existing problem, annoyance, or condition as an 'injustice' that demands correction or elimination rather than as a 'misfortune' that warrants only charitable consideration (Snow 2007, 383)." Frames give focus, articulation, and transformative power that convert and move a grievance into compelling motivation for action to address a situation that is unjust and ripe for change. A common complaint about the environmental movement is that it has been hampered by grievances that are too vague, too large, and seemingly too overwhelming to tackle. One guiding principle in our project is that when the environmental movement and people of faith work together, there is the potential for

increased traction in the public square due to the frame provided by religious values and ethics. Further, we contend that one of the rhetorical means to create this frame is preaching.

A key function of religious preaching for social change is through *meaning construction*. Johnston and Klandermans identify three processes of meaning construction: public discourse, persuasive communication, and consciousness-raising during episodes of collective action (Johnston 2001, 10). Because preaching involves all three of these processes, it has an important role in meaning construction. As Johnston and Klandermans explain, "[A]t each level the processes forming and transforming collective beliefs take place in different ways: at the first level through the diffuse networks of meaning construction, at the second level through deliberate attempts by social actors to persuade, and at the third level through discussions among participants in and spectators of the collective action (Johnson 2001, 10).

Rhetoric of Inaction v. Rhetoric of Change

What then are the frames that preachers use to urge action on climate when music of the social discourse is around inaction? Gamson and Meyer have noted that within the political realm of social movements, there is both a *rhetoric of inaction* and a *rhetoric of change.* Drawing on the work of Hirschman (1991), Gamson identifies three central themes in the rhetoric of inaction.

- *Jeopardy*: change threatens what currently exists
- *Futility*: change is a waste of time and effort and will be ineffective
- *Perverse effects*: change will make things worse

Those opposed to climate action will often use one or more of those themes. For example, a jeopardy frame might argue that moving away from fossil fuels takes away the jobs of workers who make their living in that industry. One use of the futility frame might be to insist that focusing on climate change will have no effect while taking away the limited attention needed for other issues. The perverse effect frame comes into play in an interesting way through the rhetoric of evangelical apocalyptic preachers who insist that working to improve the environment prevents the return of Christ and subverts the will of God for the end times.

Countering the rhetoric of inaction, "movement activists employ an optimistic rhetoric of change. Their job is to convince potential challengers that action leading to change is possible and desirable. . . . For each of the three themes, there is a corresponding counter-theme making the opposite point about political opportunity: urgency, agency, and possibility (Gamson and Meyer 1996, 286).” The three themes within the rhetoric of change are described in this way:

- Urgency: "If we do not act now, the situation will not remain the same but will become more and more difficult to change. Action may be risky but inaction is riskier still. One must weigh the risks of action against the risks of inaction."
- Agency: "Windows that are currently open will not stay open for long. While there is no guarantee of success, the present offers opportunity enough to keep hope alive. Action now will open the window wider and keep it open longer, allowing more room for future victories."

- Possibility: "The promise of new possibilities counters the threats of perverse effects, [including] a vision of better policies, greater justice, and more humane social life (Gamson and Meyer 1996, 286)."

Applied to teaching ecological engagement in congregations, we might see *urgency* in a sermon that raises awareness about the drastic increase in the number of weather catastrophes, wildfires, flooding, and heat-related deaths. Such a sermon would make the case that the church has a moral obligation to speak about this issue and work to ameliorate the worst effects of the climate crisis. Using *agency* in a sermon might take the form of encouraging congregants to take part in a climate march, join a denominational advocacy day at their state capital, or participate in a river clean-up to remove trash. *Possibility* could be used by a preacher in a sermon that seeks to deepen a congregation's sense of Christian vocation and connection with God through nature. Listeners might be invited to take part in a hike at a local nature preserve, prayer and meditation in a local garden, or a book or Bible study exploring the theological and scriptural basis for Creation care.

While there are certainly other frames that can be used to teach ecological engagement in sermons, the themes of urgency, agency and possibility offer solid pathways that we will be testing with EcoPreacher Cohort participants throughout the grant.

Methodology and Findings

This cohort involved an extensive research process using qualitative and quantitative methodologies to describe the lived context of the participants' ministries, to more deeply understand their processes of meaning-making regarding Christian vocation and the Earth, and to discover new ways of forming ecologically-engaged preachers and congregants. This included entrance and exit surveys for participants and leaders in their congregations and three rounds of focus groups with EcoPreacher participants at the beginning, middle, and end of the cohort. We made the decision to research both EcoPreacher participants and congregational leaders so that we would have a broader lens to understand a church's context than simply the experience of their pastors. Through these assessments, we identified emerging pathways into teaching ecological engagement that can speak directly to the hopes and struggles of communities of faith and inspire faith-in-action.

First, this research elucidated how the challenges and opportunities of day-to-day congregational life shape a congregation's capacity to become ecologically engaged, often in ways that preachers were not aware of. As part of the intake survey, both EcoPreacher participants (n=86) and leaders in their congregations (n=145) were invited to offer open-ended answers to the question, "In your assessment, what are the major reasons some in the congregation are willing to be engaged in environment/climate advocacy or activism? And what are the major reasons why others are unwilling?" Their responses can be analyzed using the frames with the rhetoric of inaction and the rhetoric of change.

Rhetoric of Inaction

Several EcoPreacher participants (n=17) identified potential conflict caused by political difference as the primary reason why congregations were unwilling to engage with environmental advocacy, sharing that church members would think "It's 'too political,'" "because environmental justice has become a trigger word for them," or "because it might drive some members away." One preacher described both the tension and the tenuous détente that she had established with her congregation:

> They tend to be very conservative politically, want less regulation, and want political matters to be left out of the pulpit and they very much perceive this as a political matter. But they know it is something I talk about and they have let the energy company come in and replace light bulbs to save money, not because they are better for the environment.

We can see aspects of jeopardy (less regulation) and perverse effects (a political matter) within the rhetoric of inaction in her statement.

In contrast, many congregational leaders who responded stated that the most significant reasons that congregational members were unwilling to engage in environmental advocacy were old age and lack of time, energy, and resources (n=68). One congregational leader shared that "our bandwidth is sometimes stretched thin." Another said they felt "hopeless and overwhelmed by the magnitude of other life challenges." A third noted that "most members are much older and dealing with health and/or life issues." One respondent described the challenge facing parents in the church who were invited to engage with climate advocacy by saying,

> [They are] unwilling due to time commitment. The pandemic, partisan politics, childcare and parents trying to help their children catch up academically from the year of zoom learning and the current mental crisis facing many Americans as a result of the pandemic…in these instances I think the current climate crisis takes a back seat.

This statement reflected the aspect of futility (unwilling due to time commitment, takes a back seat) within the rhetoric of inaction.

EcoPreacher participants shared that the second most-likely reason why their congregation would be unwilling to engage with environmental advocacy was because of apathy (n=15). They said that congregants saw it as "a distraction to the main work of the church," that they were "complacent," "apathetic," "blind," or "close-minded." One preacher decried how their congregants did not understand climate as an issue that had to do with their faith.

> The unwillingness generally comes from people who acknowledge that climate change is an issue but don't think that it's a church issue. They want us to focus on other areas of social justice (racial reconciliation, homelessness, etc.) or want us to spend more time in pastoral care and fellowship. They see it as a zero-sum game and are not filled with the urgency that many of the rest of us are.

Again, aspects of futility (don't think it's a church issue, not filled with urgency) and perverse effects (focus on other areas of social justice) are evident.

Meanwhile, while congregational leaders *did* cite lack of urgency as the third most-frequent reason why their congregation might be unwilling to engage with climate (n=20). However, their responses also articulated that many interested members simply "don't know what to do." One congregant described their sense of overwhelm by saying, "I think we struggle with what, how, where...there is so much to be done, I wonder if we are overwhelmed on where to start!" Here, we see a framework of inaction beyond the three that Gamson described. We might call this theme "Overwhelmed and disempowered."

Both pastors and congregational leaders acknowledged that sometimes basic issues of capacity would have to be addressed before any meaningful engagement with environmental advocacy could be possible. One preacher elucidated how his congregation's burnout was perhaps the primary impediment to his work.

> [The] enthusiasm and passion, just to gather on Sunday mornings is really low right now and so I think whenever I do bring up a topic such as eco-justice and such, right now most people just go, "Oh, there's pastor going off on his wild, wacky tangent." I've got so much I'm trying to wrestle with this congregation. I want to bring them on board and give them a reason to care for creation more. But I'm also stuck with [how to] get people just excited about being here. We've got thirty people, maybe, on a Sunday morning in a space designed for 200-250 people, and I can't even get them to sit close to each other. You know, they show up at the last minute, and they walk out as soon as I say "Go in peace; serve the Lord."

This statement would also reflect a theme of overwhelmed and disempowered. These varied responses and the distinction demonstrate how the day-to-day challenges that both congregations and their individual members face deeply affected their ability to engage with environmental issues, perhaps even more than political differences, to a degree that pastors were often not aware of. It also suggests that many communities of faith are not resistant to environmental advocacy, but rather that they need entry points that feel both feasible and compelling.

Rhetoric of Change

While this research describes the challenges faced by preachers, teachers, and other leaders, it also surfaced new possibilities. Throughout EcoPreacher Cohort, participants were invited to explore pathways for ecological engagement within the context of their congregations. The most commonly-mentioned pathway was helping their congregations attend to the watershed and communities where they were located. During focus groups held in May 2023 with EcoPreacher participants (n=15), ten named engaging place as a promising avenue into care for the Earth and environmental advocacy. In particular, some noted how their congregations derived part of their cultural identity from the land: whether how the bayou created a sense of "rugged individualism" that led to highly "tribal" behavior or noting how increased flooding had led to markedly increased communal anxiety. One participant articulated how attending to place helped start conversations around care for the earth in her conservative church:

> The idea of trying to preserve the land and care for creation, most of the time has to focus less on climate justice type of issues, and more on personal preservation type of issues,

> [like] “We can't lose so much land to sea rise, or you won't have a place to live.” We can argue all day about what causes that or what policies need to be in place. But the reality is that that's happening, and they can see it, and so we can just have that kind of conversation.

In this statement, we can see the aspects of both agency (personal preservation) and urgency (that's happening, and they can see it, and so we can just have that kind of conversation).

Other participants noted how engaging with a congregation’s shared geography enabled them to ask broader questions about mission and identity. One described how place changed the questions that his church was asking.

> I think that [place] definitely shapes our imaginations because we look a lot more here at the creation around us in terms of what it is presently [and what it was] in the past. [We also look] at what could be in the future: both in the face of what it means transitioning forest land in the face of climate change species, [and in terms of] different biodiversity. What is going to thrive and not? [We ask] “How are we able to be a part of that and become indigenous to this place as we work to kind of partner with creation?”

This statement reflects the frameworks of agency (how are we able to be part of that) and possibility (partner with creation).

The second pathway articulated by participants was to teach within the idiom of their own religious tradition, particularly through sacred text, as a way to bypass political polarization and to frame ecological engagement as religious practice. This began by teaching that scripture was inherently ecological. One participant described the challenges of reframing the Bible for his congregation by sharing:

> [I’m] trying to find in the Bible…and others resources to help them see that [ecology] theologically. Sometimes it's easy with Psalm 95, 96, that ‘the trees clap their hands’ but in many ways it is pretty limited, you know? It’s hard to pin it within the Christian experience. You know, in the Bible studies that they grew up in…they really didn't celebrate the earth and the animals and the bees.

However, when this reframing was successful, it opened up new possibilities. One shared how it helped them “expand the concept of who our neighbors are” to include their non-human neighbors. Another participant shared the invitation she offered those she worked with:

> I'm like, “Look in. Come in and see what this is.”…What I want, because this is my vocation, is to make it so enriching, so compelling: to show the treasure of scripture for this, which I think could have such a wide impact, theologically, for people who aren't eco-activist believers of whatever kind.

Thus, the frames of possibility (how the treasure of scripture for this) and agency (Look in. Come in and see what this is.) are utilized here.

Third, participants expressed the importance of cultivating ecological engagement through personal encounter with the natural world - whether that be through nature walks, worshiping outdoors, community gardening, or other means. EcoPreacher participants shared how encounters with the natural world shaped their own sense of call. They cited childhoods growing up hunting or fishing, going to church camps, attending nature centers, or gardening as primary reasons why they wanted to engage in environmental advocacy today. One described how her experience at church camp profoundly shaped her ministry.

> I just want to be the pastor at [location], which is the camp I grew up attending and working at in college…it was really the sacred space. I had always considered it my holy place and I really ended up feeling called to just be in more and bring people to more, knowing that as we bring people into these spaces, the urge and desire to care for them [those natural locations] will naturally grow in us.

Such a statement reflects the themes of urgency (the urge and desire to care for them) and agency (I really ended up feeling called to just be in more and bring people to more).

Participants noted that bringing their congregations into outdoor spaces also naturally increased their willingness to engage with climate and environment. For one mid-western congregation, worshiping in front of a 300 year-old oak tree provided the central metaphor for their ministry, "putting down roots, reaching out." Still another, who works in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood, takes her church to nature spaces as a way to begin conversations about environmental racism. Each of these personal encounters has the potential to utilize the frames of urgency, agency and possibility within outdoor spaces.

Finally, participants articulated connecting other justice concerns with the environment through an intersectional lens. Showing how environmental advocacy connects with other social justice issues, such as poverty, immigration, or racism, can help congregations understand how ecological engagement is not simply another isolated social justice concern competing for attention, but is intricately woven into the fabric of all justice-seeking. Such an emphasis can counteract the rhetoric of inaction by providing an alternative narrative to the frames of jeopardy, futility, and perverse effects. As one preacher said, her congregation is "well meaning," but "this choir [the congregation] needs to learn how to sing together."

The Importance of Context

Context matters when engaging all of these pathways. Geography, ethnicity, class, place, and politics all play a significant role in the ways which teachers and preachers can utilize these pathways. For instance, those in politically conservative congregations found that the term "climate change" was verboten, but reflection on occurrences such as the catastrophic weather events, shifts in growing seasons, or loss of flora and fauna in their region led to rich mutual encounters.

What we found from the intake information was that even across the cohort participants, where they lived mattered significantly. The context for people in the hurricane-ridden Southeast were different conversations from those experiencing drought in the Midwest. We particularly

recognized the nuanced differences that the location mad as we reviewed intake information from cohort members. Reviewing the United States in five regions—West, Midwest, Northeast, Southeast and Southwest—there were distinct variations in the topics discussed by the participants from the given locations.

West

The West has an expansive landscape that includes large mountains, volcanoes, rolling plains, fertile valleys, beaches, and deserts (Hayman & Chapel, 2023). The intake data reported cohort participants from the West (n=13) being concerned about water usage, ocean rise, and ocean pollution. These concerns make sense given the scarce water sources, wildfires, and rising sea levels (NOAA, 2023).

Midwest

The Midwest is more known for its lakes, mountains, plains, and upland areas. This landscape creates climate issues related to a combination of floods and droughts. We see the increase in urban heat islands and wildfires that are affecting the Midwest states (EPA, 2023). The Midwest participants reported human-related concerns connected to climate change. Addressing consumer habits and reversal of human causes of climate change were key concerns for Midwest participants (n=15). In addition to how people impacted the environment, cohort participants questioned ways to prevent and tackle environmental racism and the desire to increase the resilience of the community as climate conditions worsens.

Northeast

The extensive valleys, rolling hills, and lower-level mountains of the Northeast have aligned climate issues from flooding, water temperature increases, precipitation changes, rising sea levels, and acidic oceans. There were more emotional focuses noted from the cohort members from the Northeast (n=36). Requests centered on eco-spirituality and justice advocacy as well as eco-anxiety were the main focus for the cohort members of this region. Grief and spiritual practices helped to address the onslaught of angst experienced in their communities.

Southeast

The Southeast is expansive, and the upper part and the lower part of the region has varied landscapes. Upper parts of the region have larger amounts of rolling hills, river valleys, and high plateaus. Oppositely, the lower parts of the region are known for their beaches, swamps, and wetlands. Rising sea levels, intensified hurricanes, warming oceans, and increased water-related storms were prevalent themes for participants in the Southeast (n=17). As a result, the participants noted that their concerns focused more on severe weather and the related community-relocation efforts after severe weather events.

Southwest

The Southwest region with its deserts, high-elevation forests and mountain ranges, and coastal and marine ecosystems experiences arming temperatures, reduced snowpack, and severe drought. There were core concerns for participants in the Southwest (n=4) who talked about increased water competition as well as agricultural and energy production needs, population growth, and climate-related migration.

There is more room for discussions based on context. Like every city within the United States, there is a varied experience based on race, socioeconomic status, and community-centered resources. There is an opportunity to further curate region-specific approaches based on needs, experiences, and demographics, and then to utilize the themes of urgency, agency, and possibility within the rhetoric of change framework.

Two Strategies to Test with Preachers and Educators

In this paper, we've shown that there are numerous pathways based on social movement frameworks that offer a multitude of possible strategies for teaching ecological engagement in congregations. At the end of the cohort, both EcoPreacher participants and members of their congregations began to elucidate the strategies that were particularly effective for them which we intend to share with future EcoPreacher Cohort participants and test for effectiveness.

The first strategy, particularly named by EcoPreacher participants, was to frame ecological engagement within the context of how participants understood their *relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world*. Most particularly, this manifested in a growing shift from a framework of "stewardship," the idea that humans were given authority over creation and had to use it responsibility to the framework of "kinship," the idea that humans are supposed to enter into a non-hierarchical mutuality of care. One preacher reflected their new understanding during an exit survey as she wrote:

> Caring for God's creation means to take seriously the word of God to Adam and Eve to "till the earth and keep it."… It means treating the rivers, rocks, oceans, and mountains and their non-human inhabitants as our beloved and revered elder brothers and sisters from whom we can learn. It also means holding in deep respect the native peoples…who have for thousands of years and continue to this day to show us examples of how humans can walk in balance with the earth.

The second strategy was by offering *theological framing* to describe what was already happening in the communities where they were located, a strategy that emerged after a summer of extreme weather events that happened in the middle of the EcoPreacher cohort (2023.) The contrast was particularly seen in the intake and exit surveys with congregational leaders. During the entrance survey, conducted in November 2022, respondents characterized the impacts and responses to climate change largely in abstracts, such as "global temperature change" or "how climate change is important to us." They also expressed a desire for their preachers to offer sermons that encouraged certain consumer choices, such as reducing use of "plastic water bottles" or dealing with "consumption." In the Congregational Leaders exit survey in November 2023, however, this language had changed dramatically, with respondents describing the impacts of climate change in terms of what had happened in their local communities. They also now expressed a desire for their preachers to offer sermons that addressed the challenges of climate adaptation and what it means to practice hope. One congregational leader summed this up by sharing,

> I'm at a point where I'd like my pastor to make the argument that I have to do something even if I don't believe it will make an impact. I'm not in a place where I think individual actions can make a difference, and I don't think people in power are able to be persuaded

by people like me. But I am open to the spiritual argument that we have to act in accordance with our values even when there's no hope of success.

Conclusion

EcoPreacher participants constantly emphasized the impact of learning within a supportive community that allowed them to express their yearning for ecological engagement without being dismissed. This indicates that no matter what pathways are utilized for teaching ecological engagement in congregations, collegiality can support faith leaders in their work. For instance, one participant described the program as "like us being trees and our roots are going out seeking water...This is something that has provided some of that nourishment to us. But also, we found other routes along the way, other people and we're in community with others."

Finally, this experience of community offered opportunities for peer learning. One participant shared how she is being changed by encountering participants whom she identifies as farther along the path than she is. She said that she appreciates relating to others who are "way ahead of me on certain parts of it… they know the language, they know their watershed. They're activists, they're planting trees, they're cleaning up the plastic, and all this kind of stuff. Which isn't necessarily, you know, my story… but it helps me see what's possible when it comes to activism."

As we work with the next round of EcoPreacher Cohorts, we will share the framing strategies from social movement theory to provide a shared vocabulary for creating pathways of ecological engagement within congregations. Our hope is that these might open up even more pathways for teaching and preaching about the Christian vocation of Creation-care. This may, in turn, inspire more congregations to put their faith into action on behalf of preserving life, community, and flourishing in their communities and across the planet.

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REA

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Laudato Si' and the Call to Foster "Ecological Conversion" in Catholic Educational Modes

Abstract

Laudato Si', the groundbreaking 2015 encyclical by Pope Francis, promotes an approach called "integral ecology" in caring for the Earth, calling for holistic "ecological conversion" in the face of the climate crisis. The document and initiatives flowing from it illustrate valuable insights from Catholicism for ecologically attuned religious education. The paper will explore the *LS* vision of "ecological conversion," briefly situate it within the larger framework of Catholic social teaching and theology of conversion, and evaluate selected *LS*-informed curricular forms for their attempts to promote such conversion.

Introduction

> Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.[1]

Laudato Si' ("Praise Be"), the groundbreaking 2015 encyclical letter by Pope Francis, analyzes the causes of the current ecological crisis and promotes an approach called "integral ecology" in caring for the earth as our "common home." More recently, his shorter 2023 exhortation *Laudete Deum* ("Praise God") has brought even greater urgency, decrying world leaders' failures to address the deepening climate crisis and calling for redoubled efforts at the COP 28 occurring later that year. As reflected in the opening quotation, Francis frames his message as a call for a holistic change to confront the magnitude of the challenges—an "ecological conversion."

LS has received wide attention as the fullest explication of environmental teaching within the corpus of Catholic social thought to date, and for the depth and breadth of Francis's engagement with current scientific data, particularly on the climate crisis. Numerous organizations and networks have formed to generate educational and advocacy resources supporting the use of *LS* in schools, congregations, and other venues.

My own "ecological conversion" has deepened through encounters with *LS* and its related initiatives over the past several years, along with the desire to grow in my abilities as a religious educator to foster such conversion in others. In researching this paper, I have become convinced

[1] Francis, *Laudato Si':* Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home, The Holy See, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, 202; hereafter cited as *LS* with article number(s).

that ecological conversion is a concept with viable roots in Catholic social teaching and the theology of conversion; further, through studying it in *LS* and *LD,* I have formulated five key aspects that can be responsibly fostered through religious education. The paper will proceed by first, briefly situating Pope Francis's work within the trajectory of Catholic social thought; second, providing a short summary of *LS* and *LD*; third, describing five key aspects of "ecological conversion" from those documents in dialogue with prominent Catholic theological understandings of conversion and with an eye toward their educational dimensions; and fourth, showing concretely what it can look like to integrate ecological conversion within a religious education framework through studying a young-adult curriculum developed for this purpose. I hope to demonstrate the importance of religious education's contributions to these efforts from the context I know best—the Catholic world—and thus to stimulate conversations with religious educators from other backgrounds.

I. Catholic Social Teaching

Laudato Si', as a papal encyclical, follows within the trajectory of one hundred thirty-plus years of Catholic social thought/teaching (CST). Such documents are written to respond to critical political, economic, and social realities of their times, showing "steady growth toward ever-wider circles of social concern, reflecting the increase of awareness within the Church of numerous injustices that demand our attention, commitment, and action."[2] While understood to be grounded in God's revelation as expressed through Scripture and Church tradition, CST relies on human sources of knowledge and espouses the convergence of faith and reason. Social teaching is integral to the Church's evangelizing mission and aims at articulating and furthering a society characterized by reconciliation, justice, and love.[3]

A typical listing of the most prominent principles of CST as gleaned from its key documents is offered by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops:

- Life and dignity of the human person
- Call to family, community, and participation
- Rights and responsibilities of all
- Option for the poor and vulnerable
- Dignity of work and the rights of workers
- Solidarity: fostering attitudes and practices of one human community amid our diversity
- Care for God's creation[4]

[2] Thomas Massaro, *Living Justice*, 2nd ed. (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), ProQuest Ebooks, 46.
[3] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, The Holy See, 2004, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#The%20environment,%20a%20collective%20good, 72-86.
[4] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching," accessed June 12, 2024, https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching).

As will become evident, Pope Francis's writing on ecology and the dynamics of "ecological conversion" in Catholic modes cannot be understood outside this CST framework.

Another key to unpacking the significance of the ecological turn in *LS* and *LD* is CST's growing emphasis on the category of "social sin." While relatively recent in official documents, social sin is a prominent assumption in liberation theology and other approaches in social ethics that can help inform Christian in analysis of their participation in unjust socio-political-economic structures that block the common good. While Catholic teaching insists that sin is ultimately the responsibility of individual persons, nevertheless their actions can accumulate within the attitudes and structures of societies and perpetuate evils that hamper everyone's ability to live virtuous and flourishing lives. Racism, colonialism, the military-industrial complex, and the climate crisis are named in our times as prominent examples of social sin.[5] Pope Francis's exposition of the "technocratic paradigm" (to be further elaborated below) and "throwaway society" offer vivid metaphors for sinful patterns that perpetuate the ills besetting the earth and its creatures in our times.[6]

II. *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*

With this context, then, let us turn to *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum* as offering both continuity and change within CST, as Pope Francis elaborates on the ecological theme of care for our "common home" and, with increasing urgency, the imperative to respond to the climate crisis. These documents are addressed, as appropriate for the magnitude of the crisis, to all people of good will regardless of their religious orientation.

Francis was not the first pope to raise the topic of ecology, but *LS* is by far the most consequential contribution to date. It follows an approach labeled in Catholic social teaching as "See-Judge-Act," in which a problem is first described (See), then subjected to thoughtful analysis (Judge), followed by the recommendation of strategies to address the issues (Act). In *LS,* Chapter One is the locus for the See phase of reading the "signs of the times," with Francis overviewing the critical problems of climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity, global inequality, and the insufficiency of human responses. He introduces here a key theme of his "integral ecology": we must always listen and respond concurrently to "*both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*"[7]

In Chapter Two, the Judge phase begins with resources offered from the "Judeo-Christian tradition," as Francis draws upon Scripture for themes such as creation as God's gift, humans' covenantal responsibility to care for creation, the harmony and connectedness of all things, and God's incarnate presence in the world in Jesus to reinforce our relationship with the natural environment as "a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone."[8] Chapter Three continues to deepen the analysis by drawing on the human roots of the ecological crisis, emphasizing what *LS* calls the "technocratic paradigm." While technology

[5] See Massaro, *Living Justice,* 129-131.
[6] See *LS* 22, 106-114.
[7] *LS* 49; emphasis in original.
[8] *LS* 95.

has brought many helpful advances to human society, this paradigm of "possession, mastery and transformation"[9] has come to dominate society, economics, and politics, reducing their goals to the gains of the powerful and promoting destruction of the environment and exploitation of impoverished and marginalized people. The alternative to this paradigm and its related ills is outlined in Chapter Four's description of "integral ecology," in which the givenness of creation's interconnections is translated into care for creation at all levels, just social relationships, clean air and water, respect for human cultures in their diversity, and so on.

Chapter Five, "Lines of Approach and Action," takes on the Act phase with recommendations, grouped within sections framed as "dialogues." These are large-scale and ambitious, including initiatives to reduce drastically fossil-fuel emissions and disrupt prevailing models of endless economic growth cycles aimed solely toward "production and consumption."[10] "A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress."[11] Chapter Six offers a meditation on action in the realm of "ecological education and spirituality," and provides an explicit elaboration of Francis's understanding of ecological conversion—to be considered more fully below. He urges the cultivation of sustaining spiritual habits in family, civic, and ecclesial realms, and closes with two prayers, one that could be shared among all people who hold belief in a Creator God, and another particular to Christians.

Laudete Deum (*LD*) was issued in 2023 and timed for impact on the COP 28 talks. Its tone conveys the pope's exasperation that many, especially political and economic leaders, have failed to heed his warnings regarding the need for rapid action to avert climate catastrophe and other critical ecological crises. Despite their denials of clear scientific findings and self-interested inertia, it is not possible to wait any longer. In language evoking the need for an ecological conversion away from the technocratic paradigm, Francis asserts: "Consequently, a broader perspective is urgently needed, one that can enable us to esteem the marvels of progress, but also to pay serious attention to other effects that were probably unimaginable a century ago. What is being asked of us is nothing other than a certain responsibility for the legacy we will leave behind, once we pass from this world."[12] In the spirit of integral ecology outlined in *LS* (which is liberally quoted in *LD*), we must embrace the disposition that "Everything is connected" and "No one is saved alone."[13] While endorsing the efforts of individuals to live in personally sustainable ways, Francis emphasizes that the gravity of the current crisis can only be adequately addressed through large-scale, national, and international political decisions—and that the inequities in suffering and loss from climate change between rich and poor nations must be faced through such decisions.

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[9] *LS* 106.
[10] *LS* 191.
[11] *LS* 194.
[12] Francis, *Laudete Deum:* Apostolic Exhortation to All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis, The Holy See, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html, article 18; hereafter cited as *LD* with article number(s).
[13] *LD* 19.

Let us move now to an explicit focus on Pope Francis's understanding of "ecological conversion" in his writing and its further theological elaboration by scholars as a foundation for exploring it in a religious education curriculum. In my analysis, five key aspects emerge.

III. Ecological Conversion: Key Aspects

Francis's understanding of what comprises "ecological conversion" is woven throughout *LS* and *LD and* articulated most explicitly in *LS* 216-221.[14] What can we glean from it in dialogue with other Catholic theological approaches that helps to deepen both our overall understanding of conversion in Christian sensibility and its distinctively ecological dimensions? First, as in the normative sense of *metanoia* characterizing Christian conversion, one is confronted with one's personal sinfulness and called to a *radical change*. "In calling to mind the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi, we come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change."[15] Having repented and formed the desire to change, the person seeks to live a transformed life guided by Christ and the Gospel in the Church, redressing any wrongs done and building right relationships with others in an ongoing process. Ecological conversion, of course, entails that such relationships are nurtured within the entire web of life of planet Earth.

Second, assumptions about the *nature of the human person-in-relationship* shape Francis's conversion presentation within the ecological imperative—in other words, such conversion is understood within a well-established "theological anthropology." Catholic social teaching's assumptions about the dignity of the human person created in God's image, fundamentally relational, and charged to care for all of God's good creation, exercising freedom and responsibility, suffuse the documents.[16] Sin, however, has always been an impediment to the realization of this freedom. As already discussed, in our modern era the technocratic paradigm and its drive toward a "throwaway society" have not only undermined the inherent goodness and dignity of human and nonhuman life; they have constrained people's freedom to embrace ecological conversion and live in harmony with the natural world and one another. Indeed, sin—personal and social—has ruptured the three "fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself," which now must be repaired.[17] Addressing the cumulative effects of "social sin" thus becomes important to increase people's freedom to embrace their fullest flourishing, to allow their "interior deserts" the chance to bloom—and thus to create the possibilities for them to act for greater ecological justice.[18]

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[14] Francis's predecessor, Pope John Paul II, was the first Catholic pope to use the term "ecological conversion" in a 2001 address reflecting on how humans had turned from being the stewards of God's creation to its despoilers. His immediate predecessor Pope Benedict XVI notably connected the ecological crisis with humanity's spiritual crisis in a phrase quoted in *LS:* "The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast," quoted in *LS* 217.

[15] *LS* 218.

[16] See the CST principles summarized in my Section I.

[17] *LS* 66, referencing the Gensis accounts of Creation and Fall.

[18] See Pope Benedict quote in note 14.

Third, just as human persons have *multifaceted* capacities, so does conversion touch all aspects of ourselves. Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan developed a theory of three types of conversion—intellectual, moral, and religious—and Robert Doran built upon this work to add a fourth type, psychic conversion. Neil Ormerod and Cristina Vanin offer a close analysis of *LS*'s ecological conversion vis-à-vis these four types.[19] *Religious* conversion, typically primary in the believer's journey, involves self-surrender into a love relationship with God. For Ormerod and Vanin, this will naturally translate from the Divine to other relationships with ecological relevance: if God created and loves the world, and I am in love with God, I too will love the world. In *moral* conversion, the person turns from preoccupation with self-satisfaction to a self-transcending focus on a hierarchy of values. The authors correlate Pope Francis's analysis of the deleterious effects of human actions on planetary life and how these sets of values are violated, highlighting the need for transformed values relative to creation. For *intellectual* conversion, a complex shift that includes moving from merely descriptive to explanatory modes of thought, Ormerod and Vanin note how the latter mode is more adequate for understanding the interconnectedness of things and the functioning of responsible scientific investigation, and to avoid dominative modes of thought. Their use of Doran on *psychic* conversion highlights the need to reintegrate our two types of consciousness, the first that attends to data, forms judgments, and makes decisions—Lonergan's foundational approach—with the second type that apprehends affectively our continual stream of sensate data. Doing so with aesthetic appreciation of the beauty and integrity of nature clearly is akin to ecological conversion. In its affective depth, such psychic attunement circles back to the self-transcendent love sparked by religious conversion and deepens the spirituality that characterizes Francis's entire project. In a similar vein, Lucas Briola focuses on the praise-centered, "doxological" nature of *LS* while incorporating the work of both Lonergan and Doran:

> Lonergan speaks of how "God's love poured onto our hearts" (Rom 5:5), God's invitation to participate in God's triune life, catalyzes religious conversion and makes our very "being in love in an unrestricted fashion." . . . If religious conversion elicits the self-transcending nature of the human spirit, then it restores, however precariously, the human vocation to praise.[20]

The religious and emotional character of ecstatic love language blends with praise language in sacramental worship per Briola's work, and of course, in creation-centered spirituality—as evident in Pope Francis's ample references to St. Francis of Assisi's joyful celebrations of creation and the title *Laudato Si',* "Praise Be."

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[19] Neil Ormerod and Cristina Vanin draw on Lonergan to define conversion first as "a radical shift of one's fundamental orientation, one's horizon, an ongoing process toward consistent self-transcendence and authenticity," in "Ecological Conversion: What Does It Mean?" *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (2016): 330, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916640694.

[20] Lucas Briola, "Praise Rather Than Solving Problems: Understanding the Doxological Turn of *Laudato Si'* through Lonergan," *Theological Studies* 81, no. 3 (2020): 709, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563920956990.

Fourth, ecological conversion, as with any conversion experience, is shaped by the *language and other symbol systems of a community* that itself is culturally shaped. We make meaning of our experiences of self-transcendence according to the terms available to us—which makes the formative educational processes within which conversional opportunities are encouraged extremely significant, as we will explore below in more detail. On a closely related point, *communities themselves are called to conversion and to educating and forming members toward conversion*. No matter how powerful one's own transformational experience, it is not likely to be sustained without others' support—and is unlikely to allow a single person to be efficacious without joining together with converted others, no matter the depth of one's conversional zeal. *LS* quotes Romano Guardini, a key intellectual influence on Pope Francis, in an apt passage:

> Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds. This task "will make such tremendous demands of [humans] that [they] could never achieve it by individual initiative or even by the united effort of [people] bred in an individualistic way. . . ." *The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion.*[21]

Fifth, *conversion is expressed through action*; to use a Lonerganian framework, each type of conversion will be characterized by its appropriate form of integrity or authenticity issuing forth in the "decision" that follows from attending and judging, though the process is ongoing and lifelong. Drawing on the moral categories of Thomas Aquinas and recent analysis by Cathleen Kaveny, Martha Shulski and Daniel DiLeo also discuss how the concepts of moral goodness and evil, rightness and wrongness, culpability and non-culpability enter into our contemporary situation of environmental degradation. The morally "evil" person needs exhortation toward conversion so as to be challenged toward goodness and "right" rather than "wrong" actions; however, the morally "good" person also is called to act in morally "right" ways, and must cultivate the key virtue of prudence to do so.[22] In today's situation of ecological degradation and climate emergency, the ecological education called for in *LS* is urgent in order to spark conversion and spur right actions. While moral culpability of individuals is difficult to assign, given the complexity of interconnected systems and the social sinfulness frequently inherent in them, the authors see Kaveny's approach as valid:

> Although the traditional category of cooperation with evil may be limited in its ability to discern individuals' moral culpability for actions related to modern social structures, Kaveny writes, "Does it mean that actions raise no moral problems? Absolutely not. Rather, it means we need to develop new ways of analyzing the involvement of individuals in systemic structures of complicity."[23]

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[21] *LS* 219, emphasis added.

[22] Martha D. Shulski and Daniel R. DiLeo, "What is Happening to Our Common Home? Considerations from a Catholic Climate Scientist and a Catholic Theological Ethicist," *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 1 (2020): 80-81.

[23] Shulski and DiLeo, "What Is Happening?" 82.

Organizations and movements related to *LS* and *LD* have typically advocated that participants adopt multifaceted action responses in living their ecological conversion. A recent example from Catholic Climate Covenant called "My *Laudete Deum* Action Pledge," for example, offers a checklist of possible actions in categories labeled "Personal/Family Actions," "Advocate for change within the U.S. Catholic Church," and "Advocate for change at national/global level (systemic change)."[24]

IV. Religious Education and Ecological Conversion: An Exploration of the *Wholemakers* Curriculum

Having considered five key dimensions of ecological conversion and cognizant that Pope Francis advocates "ecological education" to foster it, we now turn to consider the role of religious education. However, sponsoring authentic and lasting conversion is no easy task. According to religious educator Patrick Manning, most of us do not change our customary meaning structures readily. Drawing on the work of social scientists, philosophers, educators, and theologians, he reminds us that our deeply embedded worldviews are resistant to transformation and unlikely to shift simply through someone seeking to persuade us: "Radical change in the way people make sense of reality does not occur primarily on the intellectual level but rather at the level of the preconscious operations of the imagination."[25] In *Converting the Imagination*, Manning proposes a pedagogical approach based on working with students' imaginative capacities to facilitate conversion and help them cultivate new "habits of interiority" more appropriate to living in our complex, pluralistic society. Manning lays out a three-phase process called "SEE" to encourage young people's development from precritical to critical, and from critical to postcritical consciousness.[26] Ecological ethicist Erin Lothes Biviano has studied individuals committed to environmental activism and identified the key characteristics of their green spirituality, as well as the obstacles they encounter in fostering such spirituality in others with whom they work.[27] Her insights also will help us discern what is most necessary for viable religious education for ecological conversion—and what tends to block such attempts.

Laudato Si' has been extraordinarily generative in Catholic and interfaith ecological initiatives throughout the world. Especially notable are the efforts of the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform (from the Vatican), *Laudato Si'* Movement, and the US-based Catholic Climate Covenant.[28] All have worked on various forms of ecological education for different age groups and settings as well as

[24] Catholic Climate Covenant, "Laudete Deum Action Pledge," accessed June 12, 2024, https://catholicclimatecovenant.salsalabs.org/LaudateDeumActionPledge/index.html.
[25] Patrick R. Manning, *Converting the Imagination,* Horizons in Religious Education (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 8.
[26] Manning's three movements in SEE are Stimulating the Imagination, Expanding the Imagination, and Embracing a New Way of Imagining.
[27] Erin Lothes Biviano, "Inspiring the Ecological Mission of the American Catholic Church: *Laudato Si'* at a Moment of Crisis and Hope," *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 1 (2020): 48-70. She draws on her book-length study, *Inspired Sustainability: Planting Seeds for Action* (Orbis Books, 2009).
[28] *Laudato Si'* Action Platform, accessed June 12, 2024, https://laudatosiactionplatform.org/; *Laudato Si'* Movement, accessed June 12, 2024, https://laudatosimovement.org/; and Catholic Climate Covenant, accessed June 12, 2024; https://catholicclimatecovenant.org/.

supporting the development of action groups such as "Creation Care Teams" in congregations, schools, and related organizations. Many evocative products have emerged; one especially worth noting is the widely viewed film *The Letter,* in which a group of climate activists are invited by Pope Francis to meet one another and him in Rome and, in forming a kind of community of ecological conversion, invite the viewers into their own conversion experiences.[29]

I will focus for the remainder of the paper on one Catholic ecological program, *Wholemakers*, a free curriculum produced by Catholic Climate Covenant. While *Wholemakers* has a series for high schools as well as college campuses, I will only examine here their version designed for young adults in "small group settings within parishes, among friend groups, and in other settings."[30] The full program track has ten sessions, each envisioned as about ninety minutes' duration; these can also be offered as sub-unit tracks titled Spirituality and Ecology, Sustainability and Simple Living, and Social Action and Civic Love. Each has a facilitator's guide, slide deck, and links to recommended musical selections. Each session's guide offers clear goals and instructions for the facilitator for preparations and necessary materials.

Working with selected sessions, I will draw upon the five key aspects presented in Section III along with Manning, Lothes Biviano, and other sources to highlight *Wholemakers'* substantive contributions to ecological conversion through religious education.

First, conversion as *radical change*. Significantly, *Wholemakers'* introductory session holds a concluding ritual in which participants are invited literally and figuratively to "*cross a threshold* toward becoming *protagonists of transformation* in bringing about God's dream for creation"—to commit themselves to a process of conversion. [31] As they pray, the prayer space is co-created with objects representing air, fire, water, and earth, along with other sacred objects contributed by participants. Manning's emphasis on stimulating and expanding the imagination is clearly honored through such practices. *Wholemakers* makes the call to "ecological conversion" explicit in its second session's title and defines the term as "a moment when you felt connected to creation and *fundamentally changed by that experience*."[32] At the same time, however, it is evident that such transformation is to extend far beyond a "moment." The session offers excerpts from *Laudato Si'* that encourage participants to shift from a "throwaway culture" to a "culture of encounter." The process is supported by prayer and song, pair sharing, and the story of St. Ignatius of Loyola—the session's designated "Holy Mentor"—with his dramatic story of religious conversion following a serious combat injury.

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[29] Much more can be said about *The Letter*; I strongly recommend viewing it on Youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rps9bs85BII and accessing further information at *The Letter*, accessed June 12, 2024, https://theletterfilm.org/. The five activists were chosen to represent specific groups: the poor, youth, nature, and Indigenous people.

[30] Catholic Climate Covenant, "Wholemakers," accessed June 12, 2024, https://catholicclimatecovenant.org/programs/youth-and-young-adults/wholemakers/. As explained at the website, the program is a collaborative venture of Catholic Climate Covenant and Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. Access is provided at this site to the full *Wholemakers* curriculum via Google Docs. Hereafter I will refer to elements from the Google Docs by session number, element type (either Facilitator's Guide or Slide Deck), and page or slide number.

[31] *Wholemakers* Session 1, "Introduction to Wholemakers," Small Group Facilitator's Guide, 7; emphasis added.

[32] *Wholemakers* Session 2, "Ecological Conversion," Slide Deck, 5; emphasis added.

Second, *nature of the human person-in-relationship*: *Wholemakers* takes seriously the theological anthropology that undergirds Catholic social thought on themes such as human dignity, freedom, rights and responsibilities, participation, solidarity, etc. In considering how these connect with ecological conversion and facilitating this connection educationally, a striking example is found in Session 3, "Rooting in Place, Rooted in Love." Its focus is Indigenous peoples, and its "Holy Mentor" is Native American Black Elk. This session could be pedagogically challenging, especially for US participants with little awareness of Indigenous peoples and their history, as they are brought simultaneously into engaging with historical information and reflections about colonization while learning how Indigenous peoples have also been on the front lines of ecological activism. *Wholemakers* is working to foster what Manning would call postcritical capacities to hold complex realities together; notably, the dignity, freedom, and resilience of the people amid the violence and dehumanization of colonization's social sinfulness, and how all these realities call us today to ecological conversion.[33] As some of the slideshow points express it:

- As we learn about [Indigenous peoples'] land, it is important that we also root ourselves in the experience and wisdom of indigenous communities, and seek to correct systems that disproportionately offload negative environmental impacts on those communities
- Yet we must do so carefully or we risk replicating dynamics of colonization[34]
- Indigenous peoples' vulnerability to climate change cannot be separated from a history of violent colonization and displacement . . .
- Colonization was driven by the same impulses toward extraction and consumption that have fueled the climate crisis
- Indigenous peoples' stories also demonstrate remarkable resilience, courageous resistance, and generative creativity—not just tragedy[35]

Third, we turn to how *Wholemakers* offers resources for the *multifaceted* dimensions of conversion denoted by Lonergan and Doran—religious, moral, intellectual, and psychic—in which "ecological conversion" participates. In discussing the obstacles named by her "green activists" in their work to foster ecological conversion, Erin Lothes Biviano identifies three gaps, starting with "knowledge":

> The knowledge gap is a function of not knowing critical information or not consistently thinking about its implications. It is perpetuated by limitations in scientific literacy and cognitive capacities, personal inclinations that may decrease one's encounter with the rest of creation (e.g., proclivity for indoor as opposed to outdoor recreation), willful ignorance

[33] See Manning, *Converting the Imagination,* 42-25, and his summation of several other scholars' work on comparable stages or levels of consciousness.
[34] *Wholemakers* Session 3, "Rooting in Place, Rooted in Love." Slide Deck, 7.
[35] *Wholemakers* Session 3, "Rooting in Place, Rooted in Love." Slide Deck, 8.

> that produces moral blindness, and a desire to avoid the pain that comes from sober acknowledgement of our present ecological crises.[36]

The "knowledge gap" contrasts with the alternatives described by Lonergan as *intellectual* and *moral conversion*, and *Wholemakers* facilitates both conversions in multiple ways. Participants are encouraged to do on-the-spot phone searches as well as "homework" in various sessions to learn more about various ecological topics—but beyond what Lonergan would call simply descriptive information (e.g., the rate of global warming), they are led into reflection on moral and faith-based implications of their knowledge to come to personal, value-based judgments through activities such as journaling, prayer, and pair sharing. Thus, they are challenged away from "moral blindness" and "willful ignorance" with trustworthy knowledge within a trustworthy community. Consistently woven through the sessions is attention to the psychic/aesthetic conversional dimension promoted by Robert Doran, often using recorded song and visual images to evoke awe and emotional attachment to natural beauty.

A second obstacle identified by Lothes Biviano's research subjects is the "caring gap," which "arises from a disconnect between cognitive apprehension of facts and interior empathetic solidarity."[37] Here we see a clue to the lack of Lonergan's *religious* conversion—the failure of love for God, that love which spills over into empathetic love for all of God's creation. *Wholemakers* seeks to arouse empathy and spark this conversion in multiple ways. Session 4, "The Breath of Life and Love," begins with a video on greenhouse gases with information on how their effects and attendant policies disproportionately harm poor and Indigenous people. It then provides another video presenting the theological concept of *kenosis*: reflecting on Jesus' self-offering occurring within his relational love for all, then moving to challenging questions for participants: what are we willing to do for those with whom we're in relationship? How can we deepen our relationship with others, with creation? How are we called into kenosis/restraint for the good of those we love?[38] Calling participants to an expanded sense of empathy, *Wholemakers'* pedagogy here effectively weds multiple dimensions of Lonergan's conversion in a rich form of invitation to ecological conversion.

Fourth, *Wholemakers,* as with any curriculum, works with *communal images, symbols, language, and rituals* that allow participants some basic entry points of familiarity and continuity. Since it is designed for young adults, it must strive for engaging ways of familiarizing them with *traditional* Catholic "classics" and introducing them to *new* sources to spark ecological conversion. With this both/and imperative in mind, a particularly striking feature is the incorporation in each session of a "Holy Mentor"—typically a Catholic saint chosen for consonance with the theme—artistically rendered in unexpectedly modern garb and youthful appearance by Gracie Morbitzer.[39] As Manning comments, "Engagement on the level of the imagination is the necessary precondition for conversion of worldviews."[40] Bringing these

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[36] Lothes Biviano, "Inspiring the Ecological Mission," 59.
[37] Lothes Biviano, "Inspiring the Ecological Mission," 59.
[38] *Wholemakers,* Session 4, "The Breath of Life and Love," Slide Desk, 9.
[39] See the collection at The Modern Saints, accessed June 12, 2024, https://www.themodernsaints.com/.
[40] Manning, *Converting the Imagination,* 101. Douglas Sloan's explication of the functioning of imagination is apt here: "When we begin to attend fully to the imagination it becomes increasingly clear that the adequacy of our

images, with related information about the saints and their connections with environmental themes, to participants' awareness helps to cultivate what he calls "habits of a new interiority," including attention and anticipation, critical self-reflection, and the ability to interpret symbols with greater depth.[41]

As *LS, LD,* and numerous other sources make evident, our individual ecological conversions are largely ineffective without collective strength. Thus, as part of the fourth aspect, *community conversion* is a priority for ecological education. In *Toward an Adult Church,* Jane Regan follows the work of Jack Mezirow to push toward what Mezirow calls "emancipatory learning" as a critical work of faith communities, and states: "My contention is that there is a significant intersection where evangelization, transformative learning, and adult faith formation cross paths. And it is at that intersection that the framework for forming an adult church is to be found."[42] Her book proposes a model for parish-level communities of practice in which sustained, critical conversations can nurture emancipatory learning. *Wholemakers* presents the potential for such learning in an ecological vein. Opportunities for group discussion are woven throughout the sessions, along with pair sharing. In some sessions, when individuals are asked to discern a personal action, this is followed by verbally sharing it within the community to strengthen one's commitment, and implicitly the community's—a critical aspect of conversion, leading into my fifth aspect.[43]

Ecological conversion presumes that transformation results in *action.* In Lothes Biviano's study, the third obstacle is called the "action gap," and it "stems from unwillingness or inability on the part of a person or community to concretely respond to ecological information and/or corresponding interior empathy."[44] Building on the kenosis exercises of earlier sessions, *Wholemakers'* Session 7, "Seeing by the Light of God's Eyes," emphasizes the power of story to build interior empathy. After encouraging participants to note their own stories and the intersection of their various identities therein, they listen to the stories of various others impacted by climate injustices and are confronted with the reality, continually repeated in *LS and LD,* that environmental degradation most negatively and consistently affects poor, marginalized, and Indigenous people. With this turn to the other as a conversional "push" building on all that has come before, the final three sessions of *Wholemakers* then proceed as in-depth social justice advocacy and action training units directly based on the principles of Catholic social teaching and the See-Judge-Act model. Thus Lothes Biviano's "inability . . . to concretely respond to ecological information" obstacle is effectively addressed. The assumption is that ecological conversion is underway and will be enfleshed as participants work to identify a particular action priority, target those in power positions to approach for advocacy, plan and execute the action,

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knowing depends both on what we bring from within ourselves together with an openness to all that the other—nature, the other person—stands ready to reveal. Both are apprehended together." Sloan, *Insight-Imagination: The Emancipation of Thought and the Modern World,* 2nd ed. (San Rafael, CA: Barfield, 2008), 157.

[41] Manning, *Converting the Imagination,* 79, 106-108.

[42] Jane E. Regan, *Toward an Adult Church* (Chicago: Loyola, 2002), 80.

[43] In Session 4, "The Breath of Life and Love," participants are invited to make an "Air Commitment" and then read it aloud during the closing prayer (Slide Deck, 10). In Session 6, "Know That You Are Dust," participants make a "Ground Commitment" and then share it in pairs (Slide Deck, 10).

[44] Lothes Biviano, "Inspiring the Ecological Mission," 59.

evaluate and consider new actions, and so on. The practices of prayer and appreciation for "holy mentors" continue, but within a project now being pursued by a community of ecological "protagonists."

The concluding Session 10's mentors are Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi, and the opening prayer follows the familiar structure of Francis's "Lord, make me a channel of your peace . . ." However, it is rewritten to begin: "Lord, make me a ripple of disruption . . ." and proceeds in that vein.[45] After detailed tips for tactics and strategizing as the participants make final plans for their advocacy and action, the session concludes with a reflection on Jesus' interaction with those accusing the woman caught in adultery. Reminding participants to treat with humanity those whom they will confront during their planned action, the text concludes with hope: "Even if we are not able to facilitate the ecological conversion of people in power, as disciples of Jesus we need to approach it in a way that keeps that possibility alive; we never know what seeds we are planting."[46] One's own conversion, then, is perhaps most fully realized in desiring the transformation of others—especially of those on the "other side."

Conclusion

As the previous review makes evident, I believe *Wholemakers* is an extremely rich resource for fostering ecological conversion through religious education, and offers many generative ideas for religious educators working with other age groups and from different faith traditions. However, an obvious limitation of this research is that I have not taught *Wholemakers* in a real-life setting. Rather than make direct recommendations related to this curriculum, then, I will simply conclude with a few reflections on directions that religious educators might consider for fostering ecological conversion based on the confluence of themes considered in this paper.

First, as religious educators have long known, a variety of learning methods are important for all age levels and contexts—and this is all the more evident for fostering ecological conversion. Addressing the "gaps" noted by Lothes Biviano, as well as entrenched power interests and political polarization, we cannot assume that simply providing scientific facts will change minds and policies, however compelling and chilling those facts are. We have great gifts to offer in the many pedagogical strategies we know how to create to spark religious, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic transformation for the sake of ecological healing.

Second, faith communities could give more attention to forming "communities of practice" dedicated to fostering ecological conversion by drawing on the expertise of religious educators. "A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something

[45] *Wholemakers,* Session 10, "Tactics and Strategies to Act and Advocate," Slide Deck, 4. The entire prayer is also accessible at Franciscan Action Network under the tab "Franciscan JPIC Prayer/Justice Prayer of St. Francis," accessed June 12, 2024, https://franciscanaction.org/prayers/.
[46] *Wholemakers,* Session 10, "Tactics and Strategies to Act and Advocate," Slide Deck, 20.

they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."[47] The many initiatives flowing from *Laudato Si'* have offered Catholics numerous resources not simply for study but to form and sustain "creation care teams" that hold great potential for helping their congregations grow into what Jane Regan proposes as communities of practice or "learning communities," evangelizing and engaging in transformational learning for the good for the earth.[48]

Third, religious educators must seek out sources and collaborators for sustaining themselves in their journey of ecological conversion and the difficult work of fostering such conversion in others. My deep admiration for *Wholemakers* was tempered by my apprehension at imagining the challenges of actually engaging young adults with it! I could anticipate not only obstacles and "gaps" I might encounter in my hypothetical audience, but in myself. Cultivating skills and intuitions for developmentally- and contextually-appropriate pedagogies are vital, of course, but as *LS* makes evident, educating for spiritual habits that we ourselves are modeling is also key.

> Environmental education has broadened its goals. . . . It seeks also to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God. Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.[49]

May we grow in hope and be signs of hope through our efforts in religious education for ecological conversion.

[47] Etienne Wenger, "Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction" (2011), https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/11736/A%20brief%20introduction%20to%20CoP.pdf.
[48] See Regan, *Toward an Adult Church,* especially Chapter Four.
[49] *LS,* 210.

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Telling the Truth: Writing Love and Hope in a Time of Climate Collapse

Abstract (Revised Slightly)

Aldo Leopold once lamented that "one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds." Given the crises and losses we face, how can religious education possibly aim to cultivate hope, with integrity? Drawing on theories of place, place-based pedagogy, and theological readings of narrative, this paper argues that practices of place-based creative nonfiction writing (particularly, connectional place-based digital storytelling) can nurture a life of inhabitance and hope in the context of climate change, climate injustice, and climate emergency. Such practices can invite us into deeper truth – not a propositional truth, but the truth of ecological belonging.

In 1968, Senegalese forestry scientist Baba Dioum told the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, "In the end we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. And we will understand only what we are taught." The decade that followed saw the birth of an international movement in environmental education. In the fifty years following, however, the environmental education movement has not elicited the scale of change in public consciousness necessary to stem climate change globally. In the United States, an emphasis on individual action, culpability, and guilt has dominated environmental education, omitting attention to the construction of ecological identity or collective political action. These efforts have been misguided at best and misleading at worst. And the outcome has been tragic: individual and collective ecological despair and denial, individuals and communities frozen in ecological grief, guilt, and alienation. Aldo Leopold worried about this possible outcome, that "one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds."[1]

The wounds are real. Apocalyptic images of desolation, conflict, and humanitarian crises abound, rendering optimism naïve. Perhaps theological education ought to get down to the business of preparing the planet's hospice chaplains.

And yet, there is still living to do.

In theological terms, God is still breathing life even into suffering communities and bio-regions, breathing life into God's own body, the planet.[2] Religious education must offer learners an open-eyed understanding of the ecological and social crises pressing upon us, but it must *also* inspire and encourage them, offering a wellspring of theological wisdom for a future with hope, a future of living in harmony with an aching, dying planet. Concretely, this means that theological education must nurture two particular ecological virtues: (1) love and a spirit of care and justice for the particular places in which they live and work, and (2) an understanding of the self as embedded in and responsible for global ecological flourishing.

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[1] Aldo Leopold, *Round River: From the Journals of Aldo Leopold*, ed. Luna B. Leopold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 165.
[2] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Nashville: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

This essay proposes a perhaps surprising pedagogical practice as one site for the formation of this theological and ecological imagination: *connectional place-based digital storytelling*. In digital storytelling, students write very short memoirs which they record and pair with images, creating a micro-documentary. When creating digital stories about a place of significance and then locating and connecting those stories with classmates' stories using an online map, students' place-consciousness, imagination, and participation in global ecological networks can be fortified.

In what follows, I will summarize key claims in an eco-eschatological framework for considering the source and cultivation of Christian hope in the context of ecological crises, with particular attention to the role of theological and ecological imagination. Then, I will demonstrate how place-based and narrative pedagogical practices can nurture a grounded Christian hope and strengthen ecological identity and commitment. Finally, I will describe and evaluate a connectional place-based digital storytelling assignment I have developed and revised over the last several years, considering both its potential and its limitations as an exercise in eco-theological imagination and a bridge pedagogy between intensely localized place-based approaches and the need for transnational movement for ecological protection and flourishing.

I have been assigning place-based digital storytelling for the last ten years or so in my course, "Religious Education in our Ecological Context." After a couple of rounds of making and assessing the assignment, I wrote about its potential to support students in theological education in the formation of ecological identity. In that essay, I wrote optimistically, and perhaps somewhat naïvely, about the power of digital storytelling to nurture among theology students a sense of place, drawing on some basic and familiar theoretical frameworks of place.[3] In this essay, I revisit that work, expanding and complicating its conceptions of place (and displacement, fragmentation, and global networks) and narrative, and describing an intervention I have made to the pedagogical practice in the interest in helping students not only develop a and narrate a sense of place, but to locate the particular in the broader context of the ecological challenges facing us globally.

Christian Hope and Ecological Crisis

In 2019, Greta Thunberg forcefully told the World Economic Forum: "I often hear adults say: 'We need to give the next generation hope'...But I don't want your hope. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I do. Every day. And want you to act. I want you to behave like our house is on fire. Because it is."[4] To speak of Christian hope in the context of ecological crises is fraught.[5]

People are justifiably anxious about our ecological future. Far from a niche concern, ecological threats and vulnerable futures now dominate news headlines and popular imagination. Students in our classrooms, especially those identified as members of "Generation Z," are deeply concerned about climate change: A recent Pew Report found that among social media users,

[3] Ayres, Jennifer R., "Memories of Home: Theological Education, Place-Based Pedagogy, and Inhabitance," in *Grounding Education in the Environmental Humanities: Exploring Place-Based Pedagogies in the South*, ed. David Aftandilian and Lucas Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2019), 50–68.

[4] https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/our-house-is-on-fire-16-year-old-greta-thunberg-speaks-truth-to-power/

[5] I have written elsewhere about the necessity of reframing Christian eschatology in light of our ecological context, some of which is summarized here. To read a more extensive treatment, see Jennifer R Ayres, *Inhabitance: Ecological Religious Education* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019); Jennifer R. Ayres, "Cultivating the 'Unquiet Heart': Ecology, Education, and Christian Faith," *Theology Today* 74, no. 1 (April 2017).

around 70% reported that they felt anxious when reading climate change-related content online.[6] A transnational study of 10,000 young adults aged 18-25 found that "three in four young people said the future is frightening, while nearly half said their feelings about climate change negatively impact their daily life."[7] Some students arrive not only concerned about the future, but having already experiences the effects of climate change and environmental injustice in their own communities. These experiences issue in no small share of ecological grief. We already are losing so much.

Too often, thin Christian theologies of hope promise a land of milk and honey, of the free-flowing river of life, while making no mention of the planetary climate crisis or the local environmental disasters threatening the way of life and very survival of vulnerable communities. At best, such thin theologies of hope sound irrelevant or fantastical. At worst, it uses escapist imagery to discourage environmental action while also excusing and even fueling environmentally destructive behaviors. In either case, the language of hope has become abstract, pointing with vague optimism toward a good future that is not only unknown, it is under threat.

In contrast, authentic and realistic Christian hope remains keenly attentive to the crises we face, both the particular and the planetary. It attends to these matters in the specific. As Jurgen Moltmann has so poetically argued, "(Hope) does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in us. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it."[8] That is to say, Christian hope might actually amplify ecological and human suffering, prompting feelings of grief even as it motivates ecological commitment and action. At the same time, as a *theological* disposition, the unquiet heart also attunes human consciousness to a divine presence in and beyond the world. Hope requires that we lean into our relationship with a creating God whose work of creation is unfinished.[9] With a clear-eyed and informed understanding of the challenges we face, resilient hope is spacious and still open to the future, recognizing that our best knowledge and understanding is inadequate to describing the reality and future of God's work in the world.

Hope and Imagination

Hope thus requires a creative reach for an unrealized truth, a leap into the unknown. This is the work of theological and ecological imagination. Trevor Hart argues that hope is an "imaginative disposition," an "imaginative reckoning with the future."[10] Hope is the realm of the "not-yet-possible," calling forth the imagination to reach beyond the constraints of present realities, even as we come to terms with and grieve the present and imminent losses before us.[11]

Like thin Christian theologies of hope, imagination is often colloquially associated with an escape from reality, with the fantastical. Historically and theologically speaking, some have even worried that imagination is a kind of delusion, a distraction from true and right knowledge

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[6] https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/05/26/gen-z-millennials-stand-out-for-climate-change-activism-social-media-engagement-with-issue/

[7] https://e360.yale.edu/digest/young-people-are-experiencing-widespread-anxiety-about-climate-inaction-study-finds

[8] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch, 5th ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1967), 21.

[9] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 197.

[10] Trevor A. Hart, "Why Imagination Matters," in *Imagination in an Age of Crisis: Soundings from the Arts and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 64.

[11] Hart, 63, 65. Hart borrows the language of the "not-yet-possible" from Ernst Bloch. See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 144–48.

of God.[12] Maxine Greene, however, argues that perhaps it is better to think about imagination as disclosive: "(The role of the imagination) is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, or unexpected."[13] In other words, imagination is, in part, how we see, hear, feel reality *more deeply.* Callid Keefe-Perry defines imagination as "the human capacity to bring into consciousness things that are not observably present," an interior activity in which we bring into mind our own memories, realities not personally encountered, novel concepts or perceptions of objects and situations, or attributions of meaning.[14] These "things" that are brought to consciousness are not dreamed *ex nihilo*, not divorced from reality, but born out of it. The creative leap of theological imagination always begins from the everyday, from *lo cotidiano*, argues Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz. [15]

An imagination appropriate to an ecologically-grounded Christian hope thus is always reaching *from* a place *toward* something new, something more.[16] That "something more" may indeed be a transformative experience of *recognition*: Through imagination we might apprehend the interconnected web in which we live, something that without imagination, we might not see, or perhaps more to the point, *feel*.[17] Ross Gay describes this recognition of interdependence powerfully:

> Though I didn't yet have the words for it, planting that orchard—by which I mean, you know this by now, joining my labor to the labor by which it came to be—reminded me, or illuminated for me, a matrix of connection, of care, that exists not only in the here and now, but comes to us from the past and extends forward into the future. A rhizomatic care I so often forget to notice I am every second in the midst of. By which I came to be, and am, at all. Despite every single lie to the contrary, despite every single action born of that lie—we are in the midst of rhizomatic care that extends in every direction, spatially, temporally, spiritually, you name it. It's certainly not the only thing we're in the midst of, but it's the truest thing. By far.[18]

Here is another way of telling the truth, ecologically speaking. Imagining—bringing to mind—a web of "rhizomatic care" that, most days, remains invisible to us, makes possible a new self-understanding, a sense that we are woven into the fabric of the universe, the planet, our bio-region. That we, at our core, *belong.* This truth, alongside the hard truths of ecological and human suffering, must be told and retold.

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[12] L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Sense of the Possible: An Introduction to Theology and Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023), 57–60. Alternatively, others have worried that religion itself, as a product of the human imagination, severs the human consciousness from reality. See Keefe-Perry, 60–64.

[13] Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass: A Wiley Company, 1995), 28.

[14] Keefe-Perry, *Sense of the Possible: An Introduction to Theology and Imagination*, 24.

[15] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 10, no. 1 (2002): 11. See also Keefe-Perry, *Sense of the Possible: An Introduction to Theology and Imagination*, 91.

[16] Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*, 20.

[17] Environmental education scholar Gillian Judson has described ecological imagination as "a flexibility of mind oriented toward interdependence and pattern, to the diversity and complexity that characterize natural- and human-world relationships. This type of imaginative process is inspired by one's emotional connection to the natural environment." Gillian Judson, *A New Approach to Ecological Education: Engaging Students' Imaginations in Their World* (New York: Peter Lang, Inc., 2010), 5. Maxine Greene, too, argues that imagination pricks the emotions – particularly, she argues, empathy. Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*, 31.

[18] Ross Gay, *Inciting Joy: Essays* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2022), PAGE.

Educational practices that nurture both theological and ecological imagination have the power to reframe identity and nurture Christian hope even in the face of ecological crises—perhaps especially there.

Education for Ecological Belonging: Identity, Place, and Narrative

Ecological identity is a way of understanding the self to *belong* to an ecological context, to the natural world, just as we might belong to a family, social group, or other collective.[19] We understand ourselves to be formed by that context, even as we also influence that context. This self-understanding shapes both our values and our actions.[20] It also frames what we imagine as a hopeful future.

Yi-Fu Tuan observed that the thrust of the environmental movement, in its early stages (and to some degree, I would argue, even now) was organized around scientific theories and on the application of science, failing to attend enough to the "formation of attitudes and values."[21] Now, scholars in the humanities, ethics, and pedagogy seek to augment the necessary and urgent scientific discoveries with attention to cultivation of ecological identity, affections, and commitments. This work necessarily requires attention to place and the narratives that give places meaning.

Place(s) Particular and Contested

A renewed attention to and affection for particular places is essential work for re-establishing human identity as one of ecological belonging. "Place" here refers to not only a geographic location, but also the stories, cultures, and relationships that give that location meaning.[22] Environmental scholars who attend to place are united in their sense that ecological identity and commitment are not born out of abstract principles, but out of relationship and affection. David Orr has argued that to have a "sense of place" is to have a "competent and

[19] Susan D. Clayton, "Environmental Identity: A Conceptual and an Operational Definition," in *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature*, ed. Susan Opotow and Susan D. Clayton (Cambridge, Mass: [MIT Press], 2003), 46. Aldo Leopold famously argued that human beings ought to understand themselves as belonging to the "land community." Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac and Other Writings on Ecology and Conservation*, New (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2013), 171.

[20] Susan Clayton has argued that *environmental* identity is "one part of the way in which people form their self-concept: a sense of connection to some part of the nonhuman natural environment, based on history, emotional attachment, and/or similarity, that affects the ways in which we perceive and act toward the world; a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are." Clayton, "Environmental Identity: A Conceptual and an Operational Definition," 45–46. By calling it *ecological* identity, I here mean to highlight the principle of interdependence, of "belonging" to an ecological context, as one belongs to a household. For a more extended argument about this word choice, please see Ayres, *Inhabitance: Ecological Religious Education*, 9–10. Clayton, too, emphasizes that an environmental identity "locates us within… an interdependent system." Clayton, "Environmental Identity: A Conceptual and an Operational Definition," 60.

[21] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values*, Morningside Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 1.

[22] Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 35. Indeed, I am indebted to Cresswell's careful assembly of an excellent bibliography of place, some of which appears in these footnotes.

knowledgeable affection for a specific locality."[23] Yi-Fu Tuan coined the term *topophilia* to describe the "the affective bond between people and place or setting."[24]

Contested and Critical Readings of Place. There is a shadow side of valorizing a sense of place as a virtue, however. Without critical readings of place, an analysis of who has the power to determine what constitutes place and the proper way to relate to it, "place" can become pathologically parochial, romanticizing the rural and delegitimizing the experiences of millions of people whose relationships to place are complicated.[25] Experiences of displacement and dislocation are central to the lived experience of many persons and communities, whether those experiences be chosen, a byproduct of broader political and economic changes, or the designs of a deliberate program of forced migration and alienation. Likewise, conceptions of place might be forcefully socially engineered, so as to bestow identity on some while excluding others.[26] So, with apologies to place-based writers and town planners who paint beautiful but occasionally monocultural portraits of place, it is more complex and complicated than that.

Place is a contested category and its very limitations and misuse perhaps serve as an indication of its ongoing relevance to human identity. Mitchell Thomashow argues that "(p)lace still matters" because it is important to nurture feelings of rootedness and stability, even and perhaps especially in a world of dynamic change: "Fidelity to place is a response to globalization and all it entails."[27]

From the Particular to the Specific: Place and Global Environmental Crises. An emphasis on place is an important antidote to what many are describing as "eco-anxiety," born out of an awareness that the planet is in peril, a set of problems too complex and far-reaching to address effectively. An appeal to place in the face of global ecological challenges is rooted in the

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[23] David W. Orr, "Foreward," in *A Natural History of Place in Education*, by David Hutchison (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), ix–x.

[24] Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values*, 4. Tuan believed that *topophilia* is usually nurtured in long-term, ongoing relationships with a place, rather than in the ecstatic mountaintop experiences of travel, although the latter is not without its benefits. Tuan, 95. For Tuan, "place is about stopping and resting and becoming involved. …(P)lace is amenable to discussions of such things as 'value' and 'belonging.'" Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 35.

[25] Mitchell Thomashow points out that one of every twelve human beings is a migrant, a fact which ought to challenge and shape how we understand the human-landscape relationship. Mitchell Thomashow, *To Know the World: A New Vision for Environmental Learning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 140. Counter-narratives of place help us to recognize that many places or bio-regions have been disrupted and even dismembered by changing political and national borders. Thomashow, 143–44. Indigenous communities, for example, whom Thomashow calls the "original bioregionalists," were historically hyper-placed, but as political incursions and border determinations have disestablished and displaced them, they too find their own relationships to particular places to be contested and fluid. Thomashow, 142.

[26] Appeals to place are not solely naïvely nostalgic paeans to familial, cultural, or natural history. Sometimes, they are more obviously reactionary, a fearful and defensive posture in response to change and particularly globalization. In such cases, an appeal to place weaves such a tight relationship between a group of people and a particular location that "place" becomes exclusionary, built along a sharp divide between "us" and "them." A gated community, for example, protects a rather fixed community and place from "outsiders" perceived to be threatening. Harvey, "From Space to Place and Back Again," in *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997), 326. Other more ostensibly place-based communities are planned, designed, and implemented with an anti-urban or anti-suburban ethos, where an "idea of an authentic place with an authentic past is being manufactured as an image for consumption." Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 138. This movement in town planning, called "neotraditionalism," capitalizes on a desire to belong to a place, to a community. Karen E. Till, "Neotraditional Towns and Urban Villages: The Cultural Production of a Geography of 'Otherness,'" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11, no. 6 (1993): 709–32.

[27] Thomashow, *To Know the World: A New Vision for Environmental Learning*, 148.

assumption that rather than attempting to hold in mind the panoply of ecological dilemmas facing people of faith and conscience (a mode of thinking that leads quickly to overwhelm, despair, and subsequently, numbness), we would do better to attend to the particular places, the neighborhoods, and the bio-regions in which we find ourselves. As Sallie McFague wrote in *Super, Natural Christians,* "We cannot love the whole earth if we do not first love a piece of it."[28]

Importantly, McFague here says we must *first* love and attend to the particular. Myopically focusing on the places we know best and most intimately is not, however, a long-term strategy for responding to global ecological crises. Global flows have complicated simplistic understandings of place, where place is determinative of identity and fixed. As noted above, people are on the move, whether by choice or by force, yielding for many a sense of belonging to multiple places, or to no place. Places, themselves, are changing, too, as a result: boundaries, histories, cultures of those places are dynamic and changing as a result of frequent arrivals and departures of persons.[29] To accommodate these complexities, place must become intersectional, "about forming connections with the many sites of our lives."[30] It must also attend to the ways in which we engage in "place-making," recognizing that place is not something that happens to us, but a process in which we participate.[31]

Is nurturing a sense of place up to the task of cultivating religious and public leaders for the transnational environmental movement? Is it sufficient to fuel effective resistance to the most destructive forces of globalization that have impoverished communities, depleted resources, and made an increasing portion of the planet uninhabitable for human and what David Abram calls the "more-than-human" world?[32] In the age of globalization, is an appeal to "place" naïve? Arturo Escobar argues that attention to place is actually deeply necessary in this context. In fact, he argues, insofar as capitalist forces of globalization either flatten (or harness for profit) difference, particularity, and local indigenous knowledge, a reassertion of place and "localization" is a process of self-determination and resistance.[33] Embedding place-based, place-conscious communities in transnational networks is an essential component in any pedagogical intervention that seeks to link the hard work of loving a particular place with the expansive and

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[28] Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 43.

[29] Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 83.

[30] In addition to global flows of people and cultures, the emergence of "digital place" disrupts any simplistic assumption that places unilaterally shape identity. Malcolm McCullough, as cited in Cresswell, 147. For the theology students I teach, for example, a multi-sited reading of place and its formative role in constructing identity is essential, if we are to talk about place at all. Many of them have moved to Atlanta (and in some cases, the United States) for theological study, sometimes at great personal sacrifice. Any discussion of place with them must consider how they relate to this new place, to the places that figure prominently in their own stories, to the places to which their theological education will send them.

[31] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 155. See also Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 117.

[32] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human-World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).

[33] Arturo Escobar, "Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization," *Political Geography* 20 (2001): 147–48. Without resorting to an atavistic and reductionist reading of place "as pure and local and in opposition to a dominating and global space," however, Escobar proposes a strategic and complex appeal to local knowledge, "a mode of place-based consciousness, a place-specific (even if not place-bound or place-determined) way of endowing the world with meaning." Escobar, 147, 153. Such "subaltern strategies of localization" do two things: (1) in a hyper-local sense, they attend to the particularities of a bioregion or territory and (2) they serve to link communities in coalition with other place-based struggles around the world. Escobar, 161.

amorphous work of addressing global ecological challenges. Herein is the challenge for educators: linking the particular and the global.

Place-Based Pedagogy for Planetary Belonging. This emphasis on place–in all its complexity–has implications for how we understand teaching and learning. The idea at the heart of place-based pedagogy is that learning to love and attend to a particular place nurtures in us capacities to love and attend to other places new, familiar, or seemingly distant. These capacities help us to be "good inhabitants," as I have argued elsewhere, and also help us to recognize, relate to, and support others as they seek to know and live in their places well.[34] The turn to place in environmental education summons the affections to this work, acknowledging that inhabitance is not only about doing the right thing, but it is about the relationship—one of mutuality and connection—that can be established between human beings and the rest of the natural world.[35] The context in which I teach, theological education, due to its transitory character, can be a challenging context in which to incorporate place-based pedagogy for inhabitance. One way to expand and make the concept of "place" compelling to this particular set of learners is to invite them to recall places of significance from their past and places to which they might go, as well as the complex and intersectional ways in which such places "matter" in their lives.

Acknowledging the multiplicity of place, Thomashow argues that local senses of place must be enhanced by "constructive connectivity," an awareness and cultivation of social and ecological networks. Thus, placed-based pedagogical interventions should also aid in the ontological recognition that each of us are embedded in a network of particular places. The kind of environmental learning that is up to the task of fueling a global ecological transformation "promotes learning that enhances an understanding of social and ecological networks, demonstrates the relationship between the two, and promotes creativity and innovation by building relationships among diverse clusters."[36] In other words, our practices, even those that are intensely place-based, must also in some way help us build relational networks with both humans and the more-than-human world.

Narrative, Place, and Connection

One of the ways in which we learn—and re-learn—how to relate emotionally to particular places is through narrative. After all, if place is a location layered with meaning, we largely know the meaning of that place through the personal, familial, or even cultural stories that we tell and hear about it. Such stories not only form and reinscribe our relationships to particular places, but they also contribute to self-understanding and the construction of identity. As Thomashow notes, we need narratives because they "tell the story of your life, integrating coherent themes by coordinating and interpreting the process of developmental change."[37] In writing and telling stories, we begin to understand something of who we are, and how we have changed. These narratives do not dwell in the realm of grand ideas or theories, either: the raw materials for personal stories are the ordinary stuff of life. Conceiving and developing these

[34] Ayres, *Inhabitance: Ecological Religious Education*, PAGES.

[35] Place-based pedagogical approaches turn on two assumptions: that we (individually and collectively) are formed by the places in which we live and that education should be accountable to the places in which learning happens and the places where learners will go. David A. Gruenewald, "Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education," *American Educational Research Association* 40, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 620. Much of place-based pedagogical theory and practice focuses on the context in which education is happening: the creek behind the school, a walk of the neighborhood, identification of trees and birds.

[36] Thomashow, *To Know the World: A New Vision for Environmental Learning*, 111.

[37] Thomashow, 25.

stories, as an imaginative practice, "help(s) us to see and to value parts of ourselves that we have ignored or that we do not know well, and they help us to know ourselves differently from the way oppressors define us," Isasi-Diaz poignantly and powerfully observes.[38] Attending to these stories of *lo cotidiano* "carries with it subversive elements that can help us to question the reality in which we live."[39] Narrative as a practice of personal agency and imagination has the power to do this: to imagine otherwise.

In the field of religious education, Anne Wimberly's landmark book, *Soul Stories*, proposes a practice of story-linking, whereby participants in small groups link their personal stories not only with the Christian Story as told through Scripture, but also with the heritage stories of African American ancestors. Wimberly argued that in recalling and sharing personal stories with one another, we encounter the narratives of Scripture and heritage with a new depth, but, importantly, we also cultivate "liberating wisdom, they say—a wisdom that frees within us the essential integrity and courage needed for us to form wholeness-producing life perspectives, as well as to make choices and take actions resulting in holistic liberation."[40] In other words, recalling and sharing personal stories is about the future as much as it is about the past.[41]

One can hardly conceive of the theological, cultural, and political power of personal and cultural narrative without honoring its centrality in womanist thought. Katie Cannon wrote powerfully about the Black women's literary tradition's comprehension of the "'real-lived' texture of Black experience," which is the site of "communion with one's own truths."[42] Whether folklore, memoir, fiction, or other genres, Black women's literary contributions are recognized, in womanist thought, as a central site of theological, ethical, and spiritual truth. The emphasis on the personal and collective spiritual significance of Black women's experience and the literature emerging from those are an unparalleled methodological contribution to any discussion of the ways in which narrative says something true. This methodological principle is the scaffolding upon which Yolanda Pierce weaves an exquisite tapestry of personal narrative and what are too often treated as abstract theological or religious concepts. Of her method, she writes, "All theology is contextual, because it emerges from the lived realities of those who are writing, reflecting, and creating language for understanding who God is."[43]

Narrative is revelatory. Its revealing, however, is not linear, or didactic, or obvious. They can host a provocative set of paradoxes: the spiritual is held in the earthy, the whole in the

[38] Isasi-Díaz, "Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology," 11. See also Keefe-Perry, *Sense of the Possible: An Introduction to Theology and Imagination*, 91.
[39] Isasi-Díaz, "Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology," 8.
[40] Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 22.
[41] Scholars in practical theology and its subfields have contributed a great deal to the theoretical and theological implications of narrative for identity formation. For example, in pastoral care, echoing Ed Wimberly, Karen Scheib has argued that individual and communal spiritual formation happens, in part, by narrating our lives and identifying God's presence in those stories. Scheib reframes pastoral care as a process of "story companionship" whereby we enter into another's life story, thereby helping them to craft their own lifestories. In religious education, Tom Groome has argued that it is in reflecting upon and interpreting our own lives in light of the larger Christian Story (capital S) that Christian faith is nurtured.
[42] Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, Rev. and Exp. 25th Ann. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 44, 64.
[43] Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 27.

partial, the divine in the human, truth in uncertainty.[44] Our personal stories can hold elements of self-discovery, experiences opening up to mystery, or even mystical knowing.[45]

The conceptualization, recall, crafting and sharing of stories are opportunities for the expansion of human capacities for memory, grief, love, humor, and even hope. In the creative production of a story, imagination is expanded and deepened, "bring(ing) into consciousness things that are not observably present," whether those "things" be memories of the past, the experiences of another person, or anticipations of a not-yet-known future.[46] Insofar as the practice of writing, sharing, and hearing stories calls upon and strengthens our capacities for imagination, it is essential for the cultivation of hope. In short, storytelling simultaneously *depends* upon the interior work of imagination and, conversely, *exercises and fortifies* the imagination.

Writing. Sometimes, we think of writing (whether it be expository or creative writing) as the thing we do after we have thought; after we have discerned the truth to be written. The practice of writing, however, is itself revelatory. It is a kind of play—with words, images, memory, and anticipated futures—where self-understanding, awareness, and theological insight emerge in the midst of creative activity.[47] That is, in writing we discover something true about an experience, about ourselves, even about God. This is especially the case in practices of free writing. Natalie Goldberg writes that "first thoughts," which are the ideas, images, and words that come unedited and often unanticipated in the process of free-writing, can often bring students to tears: "That is okay... I encourage them to continue reading or writing right through the tears so they may come out the other side and not be thrown off by the emotion. Don't stop at the tears; go through to truth."[48] In writing, we find our way to the truth.

Hearing. We learn not just by writing and telling stories, but also by hearing them. Human brains are, as Kendall Haven observes, "evolutionarily predisposed to story thinking," relying on stories for at least 100,000 years.[49] We know that stories improve comprehension and logical thinking.[50] But also, they help hearers make meaning as they relate the story to what they already know.[51] Stories create motivation and enthusiasm for learning, and they also create involvement and a sense of community: Stories can communicate a shared meaning that includes all members of a community, and they also encourage members to share stories and build a set of

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[44] William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Clear Faith Publishing, Inc., 2015), 65–82. Originally published in 1985, Bausch's categorizations remain remarkably useful. The book does, however, reflect a rather limited set of conversation partners and falls into some unfortunate dualisms, exemplified by statements like, "The revival of storytelling may well be the novel use of the feminine side by a Church which has, at this point in history, exhausted its masculine side. …Systematic theology engages the intellect; storytelling engages the heart…" Bausch, 21.

[45] Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, 191–203.

[46] To call storytelling a *creative* practice is to highlight its production of something outside of oneself, inspired and fueled by the interior work of imagination. Callid Keefe-Perry argues that imagination and creativity are related, but not synonymous. Keefe-Perry, *Sense of the Possible: An Introduction to Theology and Imagination*, 24.

[47] For more on the revelatory power of play, see Courtney T. Goto, *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning into God's New Creation*, Horizons in Religious Education (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

[48] Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, 30th anniversary (Boulder, CO: Shambahala Publications, 2016), 12–13.

[49] Kendall F. Haven, "Story Proof: The Science behind the Startling Power of Story," 2007, 3–4.Haven has reviewed research across fifteen fields, from neural biology and cognitive science to anthropology and organization theory and interviewed or surveyed 1300 practitioners on the power of story in processes of learning.

[50] Haven, 90–104.

[51] Haven, 104–8.

common stories.[52] When people hear stories, they are more likely to feel a sense of personal involvement with what is being learned than they might if being presented with sheer facts or data. Isasi-Diaz writes, "People do not live or die for a creedor a belief. They need narratives… (that) have the capacity to move hearts."[53] When we are moved by a story, we get invested.

Sharing. Finally, given what we know about writing and hearing stories, we come to the relational aspect of narrative. In writing a story or hearing a story, without explicitly looking for connections, communication flows in one direction: from storyteller to story-listener. The meaning of the story for both writer/teller and hearer remains individually determined. Beyond hearing a story from a stranger or writing a story for an unknown audience, however, shared stories have the potential to forge connections between us. In sharing stories in community either gathered or dispersed, we build an interdependent web—a rhizomatic network of memory, love, and commitment. Our stories intersect in deep and sometimes surprising ways, challenging and strengthening each other. Thomashow argues that telling stories "should be a collaborative effort. What are the ways our experiences are shared and different? … You can't know the world just by knowing yourself. …The most interesting learning opportunities unfold from your personal experiences, especially when they are shared with others."[54] As noted above, sharing such stories nurtures "constructive connectivity," an awareness and cultivation of social and ecological networks.[55] Sharing stories, while profoundly particular and local, also makes visible how one person's story relates to another. The integration of new narratives expands the heart and mind. It is thus an emotional and intellectual practice that expands our conceptions of place, and helps us to see our particular places in a broader ecological landscape, from perspectives different from our own.

To summarize, critical place-based pedagogical practices that make room for powerful memories of significant places, alongside experiences of displacement, movement, and transience, have the potential to nurture in theological students a love and a spirit of care and justice for the particular places in which they live and work. Narrative pedagogical practices are another path toward inviting complexity and diversity of experience and perspectives, through which students might discover truth about themselves, about their relationships to social and ecological worlds, and even about God. Through sharing stories, students can understand themselves to be embedded in and responsible for the tending of social and ecological networks, a deep ecological and, I would argue, theological truth. At the intersection of place-based and narrative pedagogies sits "place-based storytelling," where students share stories with geographically dispersed co-learners who hold diverse and dynamic conceptions of and relationships to "place." In conclusion, I offer a brief case study of connectional, place-based digital storytelling, a practice that both nurtures students' complex relationship to place and spins global webs of connection and ecological care.

Connectional, Place-Based Digital Storytelling: A Pedagogical Case Study

A digital story is a personal narrative of a moment or experience in the storyteller's life, shared in video form. It has seven basic characteristics, according to the StoryCenter: It is self-revelatory, uses a personal or first-person voice, focuses on lived experience as told in scenes,

[52] Haven, 113.
[53] Isasi-Díaz, "Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology," 11.
[54] Thomashow, *To Know the World: A New Vision for Environmental Learning*, 25.
[55] Thomashow, 111.

relies on still images rather than video, includes music or ambient sound to convey meaning, is restrained in length and design, and privileges the process of creation over the product of the digital story, itself.[56] A story is a narrative account in which a character undergoes some sort of material, emotional, or cognitive change. Digital stories come together over many *hours* of free-writing, revising, and sharing drafts with each other in story circles. In other words, although the use of various media in producing the story offers the storytellers a way to creatively layer the sensory aspects of a story, the literary task of writing and revising the story is at the core of the work.

The finished product of a digital story, with its smooth transitions and clear aid from computer apps and software, might introduce some doubt that such a "digital pedagogy" has anything to do with place-based pedagogy. Place-based digital storytelling, however, offers students an opportunity to not only engage the places immediately accessible to them in their campus learning contexts, but also places which they recall with dog-eared photographs and family stories.

Place-Based Digital Storytelling as a Course Assignment

I assign the creation of a digital story in a course called "Religious Education and Our Ecological Context." In this assignment, students develop two written stories over the course of the semester, one of which they will develop in a digital story, in response to two distinct writing prompts:

1. For your first story, tell a story about a place that is significant to you. It might be about your current home, an ancestral place, a town, a park, a mountain or forest, a restaurant, a gathering place.
2. For your second story, tell a story about a place that has challenged you in some way. As much as you are able, welcome the emotions that memories of this place prompt. Stories of being lost, grief, fear, and anger all are welcome.[57]

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[56] Joe Lambert and Hessler, Brooke, *Digital Storytelling: Storywork for Urgent Times*, 6th ed. (Berkeley, CA: Digital Diner Press, 2020), 40–41. In developing this assignment, I have been guided by the work of the StoryCenter, my first exposure to which was a one-day workshop organized by Mary Hess at the annual meeting of the Religious Education Association in 2010. Joe Lambert and Dana Atchley founded StoryCenter (then called the San Francisco Center for Digital Media), a nonprofit focused on the process and practice of generating digital stories, in 1994. Over the last thirty years, StoryCenter has trained more than fifteen thousand people in the digital storytelling methodology (https://www.storycenter.org/history). Lambert, himself, has launched the StoryMapping project, inviting storytellers to link narrative and place, locating their stories in GIS-driven maps (https://www.story-mapping.org/).

[57] The instructions for both assignments were as follows:
Deming and Savoy write, "The events of one's life 'take place.'" (See Alison H. Deming and Lauret E. Savoy, eds., *Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2011), 10.)
…Remember to focus on the specific, the material, the sensory. You are invited to consider any of the following questions as a prompt (but don't answer all of them!):

- How would you describe the place?
- With whom did you share this place?
- What general experiences do you relate to this place?
- Was there a defining experience at the place?
- What lessons about yourself do you draw from your relationship to this place?
- If you have returned to this place, how has it changed? (See Deming and Savoy, *Colors by Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*, 6.)

The written and digitally produced stories the students created demonstrated the power of place, and experiences of displacement or fragmentation, in students' senses of belonging and identity. Students wrote stories about a road trip through the desert, conjuring memories of a father; a visit to a gravesite of a grandmother never met; a Florida family sugar-cane farm, now turned car dealership; a cabin in the woods. They also wrote about fear of creatures and of water, and about the search for places of belonging. The stories were funny, and poignant, and sometimes sad. When asked about the process of writing the story, many students, perhaps unsurprisingly, spoke poignantly about the sense of loss, grief, or nostalgia that these places carried for them. This perhaps demonstrates the affective power of narrative in learning how to love the planet. But this dynamic also reveals some limits to story-telling as an ecological practice.

While some students knew immediately the "place" they wanted to write about, the choice of a place about which to write was not a straightforward process for many of the students. Some students found themselves surprised by what their stories revealed themselves to be about. In other words, they set out to write one kind of story and in the processes of free-writing and revision, another story demanded to be told. For example, Megan, a white second-career student, was surprised when her story, initially about being afraid of heights while visiting the Grand Canyon, instead became a story about her father's deep connection to the arid desert landscape through which she was driving on that roadtrip. The invitation to tell a story about a place is thus neither simple nor without problems.

A perhaps more pernicious problem presents itself, as well: At first hearing, an invitation to tell a story about place can sound parochial, tied up in the privilege of land ownership, of familial lines traceable for generations. As Mary Hess has noted, it also often refers to a dominant story, which might conceal other stories, presenting a romanticized image of a place undisturbed by the human experiences of economic struggle, violence, migration, or forced separation.[58] Lauret Savoy and Alison Deming noticed that what constitutes "nature writing" often excludes such stories:

> "Why is there so little recognized 'nature writing' by people of color?" ...What if one's primary experience of land and place is not a place apart but rather indigenous? What if it is urban or indentured or exiled or (im)migrant or toxic? To define "nature writing" as anything that excludes these experiences does not reveal a "lack" of writing, but reflects, instead, a societal structure of inclusion and exclusion based on *othered* difference—whether by 'race,' culture, class, or gender.[59]

Deming and Savoy's edited collection, *Colors of Nature*, disrupt monolithic readings of "place," offering to readers a whole ecosystem of stories about warehouses, ancestors, hazardous waste, moss, and fundamentally, seeking belonging and purpose. With a similarly expansive and fulsome concept of place-based writing, some students wrote and told stories of *dis*placement, and stories of place-making in times of transience. They wrote and told stories of family members who died before they were born, of moving from one place to another, of deep longing for a place left behind. Jun, a Malaysian student, noticed that some (especially white) students had stories at the ready stories of particular places held in their families for generations. Stories that sounded "placed." In contrast, she noticed that many of the students of color, including

[58] Mary E. Hess, "Shifting Epistemologies, Shifting Our Stories—Where Might We Find Hope for a World on the Brink of Climate Catastrophe?," *Religions* 13, no. 7 (2022): 5, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070625.
[59] Deming and Savoy, *Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*, 6.

herself, had stories that sounded more like "fragments," not neatly fitting into tidy narratives. Her own story, very precisely focused on walking her family dog in a public park, was a portrait of love and grief and even guilt wrapped up in the process of leaving her home and her family in pursuit of higher education.

As described in the assignment instructions above, I had initially offered two kinds of prompts, in an effort to keep the assignment open-ended: students could write stories about places that are significant, or places of challenge or struggle. What these stories reveal, however, is that many—perhaps even most—students took liberties with these prompts, and wrote powerful stories about experiences of being displaced, being in unfamiliar places, or the struggle to establish a sense of place. As Hess noted, "Such complex storytelling is not only joy-filled storytelling about the outdoors, but rather storying that recognizes the dangerous, anxiety-provoking, anguished lives of those on the margins of our economies."[60]

For even our most ecologically-attuned students, place is a dynamic and fluid category. Their stories reflected this. One student, for example, wrote a poignant story about her first visit to the gravestone of a grandmother she had never met: "Land holds memory. And sometimes those memories are reserved for when we need them the most. I needed to know that my grandmother was there for me, even if we never shared physical space. …I didn't know I needed it. But she knew. Creation knew. And it opened itself to me."

Making it Connect: Place-Based Stories Beyond the Particular

For years, I have assigned place-based digital stories in this course. Through their stories and their own reflection on the process of creating them, students demonstrated a deepening of their understanding of the human-place relationship. I began to worry, however, that this inward-looking practice of writing stories of place might not be *enough* for the task of transforming how human beings relate individually, but more importantly collectively, to the life of the planet. They didn't, quite, tell the whole truth. One limitation of place-based pedagogy is that it often and perhaps even necessarily is centered in the places we know well: the places in which we live (or, poignantly, the places we have loved in the past). Ken Hiltner argues that nostalgia, as a preoccupation with places of the past, might issue in a longing for another place or time (an "Eden," if you will), to the exclusion of loving the world *as it is*.[61] How do we make the leap from loving (or grieving, or even wondering about) one particular place in the world to loving the whole of it, which is needed to sustain a global ecological movement in the face of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene? Perhaps the answer lies in Thomashow's concept of constructive connectivity, whereby we develop awareness of and concern for the networks that bind us together across time and space.

The seeds were already present in the digital storytelling process. The students met regularly in "story circles," where they would share drafts of their stories. They were familiar with each other's stories and the revisions made to them. Importantly, they also had already been thinking about how their stories connected with their classmates' stories. Building upon this structure of story sharing, I added two elements to the assignment, asking students to explicitly tend the rhizomatic network linking their stories: As students heard the final versions of each other's stories, they were asked to make notes about thematic linkages they saw between that story and their own: generative themes, locations, even shared feelings or relationships. They

[60] Hess, "Shifting Epistemologies, Shifting Our Stories—Where Might We Find Hope for a World on the Brink of Climate Catastrophe?," 11.
[61] Ken Hiltner, *Writing a New Environmental Era: Moving Forward to Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 30.

then located their own stories on an online map, and then were required to link their story to at least two other stories in the class, showing what they understood the link to be.

In terms of the relational, connectional goals of the assignment, one student noted that when students connected their stories to hers, they sometimes saw themes or resonances that she did not see. These unanticipated connections are an important aspect of building a community of stories: a living community of empathy and love for particular places, dispersed. Interestingly, save for three stories set in Niagara Falls, Malaysia, and the Southwestern United States, all of the stories are clustered in the Southeastern U.S. This regionally-oriented web of stories is perhaps unsurprising in a course in an Atlanta theological school. The promise of establishing more transnational strands of care remains, however. For example, the exercise of mapping the stories evoked in Jun, who had moved to the US from Malaysia to attend school, a recognition that as the only student with a story outside of North America, that "I am really alone in this," a feeling she described as a sense of dislocation. As she listened to other students' stories, however, she says she began to hear echoes of her own, noticing that although she felt alone, everyone seemed to have some sense of dislocation, some experience of grief or loss. Megan noticed this, too, observing that many of the stories shared "carried a sense of loss." Teaching this assignment requires pastoral sensitivity to the pain borne by such stories.

(Totally Insufficient!) Conclusion

None of what appears above, of course, should be understood as a simple or naïve path to healing the ecological wounds that endanger the planet, our shared home. However, I have tried to argue that religious and ecological imagination, itself a necessary capacity for the theological disposition of hope, can be expanded and deepened through creative practices of connectional, place-based narrative. Sharing stories, while profoundly particular and local, also makes visible how one person's story relates to another. Sharing stories is an emotional and intellectual practice that expands our conceptions of place, and helps us to see our particular places in a broader ecological landscape.

And that is the "truest thing, by far."

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Lament 'With' Dear Earth: The Complexity of Hope in the Dynamic of Interemptying and Intergiving

Abstract
This study examines the role of religious education in fostering commitments to the health and responsibility of the entire Earth organism, especially in the context of inhabiting a damaged land. It delves into the concept of sympoiesis and the Korean concept of *yeomul*, defined as 'making-with' and 'staying-with' as a life attitude to respond to Earth's suffering. It posits that the awareness and practice of sympoiesis, rather than providing sustainable or developmental solutions, emerges from a dynamic interplay of intergiving and interemptying. Drawing on various studies about sympoiesis, this research advocates for lament as an empathetic and epistemological performance that not only emotionally connects with all Earth's suffering but also fosters a community of mutual engagement. It also interprets Romans 8 as a biblical narrative of 'lament-with.' As a part of religious education, preaching is considered as a potential catalyst and platform for the practical passion to share knowledge and nurture response-ability, while facilitating the creative perpetuation of this inherently unstable process across various contexts.

Introduction: Need for Ability to Lament

In choosing to grieve actively, we choose life.[1]
–Thomas Attig

The ongoing environmental crisis, which poses a significant threat to the entire earth has already commenced. The crisis is the most important reason why billions of humans need to be increasingly connected.[2] Nothing exists in isolation as an autonomous entity: everything is interrelated with the 'other.'[3] Engaging with the concept of other in relation to ecology involves contemplating how life interacts with non-life becasuse Life itself is composed of elements of non-life, and even the boundaries between them become blurred when considering the relationship between DNA, CO2, and life.[4] Thus, understanding the relationship with 'other' based on the Anthropocene needs to be reinterpreted and expanded to include a broader thinking of relationality that responds to the needs of different non-human beings, including the marginalized.

Haraway interprets the lack of thought and abandonment as an insensitivity and a refusal to respond to the 'world,' which contributes to the catastrophe of the Anthropocene.[5] It is a failure

[1] Attig, *How We Grieve*, 61.
[2] Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization*, 594.
[3] Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization*, 596.
[4] Morton, "Ecology," 42.
[5] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 36.

to meaningfully consider the multiple relationships and dependencies between ourselves and vanishing others, reflecting our inability to understand multiple ways how to share the world.[6] This also means an unwillingness to see the reality of the suffering that has befallen multispecies, including humans, or a refusal to lament and respond to the beings who have disappeared. This reflects a broader erosion of a shared sense of grief.[7]

We need lament because it is a relational thinking that connects the life and death of the inhabitants who have lived, are living, and will live on Earth. As we lament, "we appropriate new understandings of the world and ourselves within it. . . .We reshape our interactions and connections with others. And we change understandings and interpretations and alter spiritual perspectives."[8] In this sense, Haraway suggests that lament is essential in cultivating "response-ability."[9]

Through lament, religious education may adopt an approach that resists the urge to 'fix' the wounded planet's situation. Beyond acquiring insights and skills to 'manage' or cope with earth's suffering, we do relearn how to cultivate a vision and lifestyle–a will–that transcends these challenges. This approach, process-oriented and practical, fosters a desire to share knowledge and assume responsibility, moving religious communities beyond mere acknowledgment of interconnectedness.

Relearning Ecological Sensitivity

Haraway insists on staying with the complexities of life and death with response-ability on damaged land, where the agents are not only humans but also the beings of the land (khthôn in Greek)— both organic and inorganic.[10] This interrelational way of thinking is open, with no clear center or edges; making a decisive distinction between outside and inside can lead to violence.[11] To relearn ecological sensitivity beyond human-centric understanding of ecology, considering sympoiesis (making-with) and *yemul* (staying-with) is helpful.

1. Sympoiesis (making-with)

Haraway's work underscores the importance of confronting problems and sharing in suffering, advocating for a kinship with all beings. Haraway's concept of the "Chthulucene," advocating for a multispecies "making–with" beyond "living-together" and that transcends various dichotomies, is employed to explore relational ways of understanding and cohabiting.[12] This concept finds resonance in Karen Barad's notion of 'entanglement,' where in Barad views the universe as interconnected within a single, living nature.

For Karen Barad, this entanglement is fairly specific and changes with each action, and it is based on "intra-actions" that do not move from one moment to the next, but rather reconfigure the internal entanglemen; space, time, and matter do not exist prior to an intra-action.[13] we are not external observers or located in a particular place within the world, but rather, we become part of the world through its ongoing intra-actions.[14] The ontology of this entanglement is an

[6] Van Dooren, *Flight Ways,* 140.
[7] Bak, "A Pedagogy of Mourning," 126.
[8] Attig, *How We Grieve,* 107–108.
[9] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble,* 37.
[10] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble,* 2.
[11] Morton, "Ecology," 41.
[12] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble,* 2, 58.
[13] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 74.
[14] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway,* 184.

understanding that we are not contained "in" nature, but that our identity is itself unstable, differentiated, and dispersed.[15] This understanding generates a dynamic of constant entanglement across different domains that seemingly cannot amalgamate. For instance, neither the material nor the discursive is given priority, and neither exists outside the other: creating knowledge is not merely about making facts but involves configuring the world, being part of it, and materially participating in giving it concrete form.[16] This dynamic causes phenomena to be continuously "reenfolded and reformed."[17] Thinking, then, is not an alternative form of nature. Epistemology and ontology are inseparable, as we gain knowledge not from an external world but because we are inherently part of it.[18] In understanding ecology, thus, decentering-human and -organismal entities can be a concrete, 'material' participation in the "(re)configuring" of the world through practice.[19]

2. *Yeomul* (與物, Staying-with)

Traditional Korean philosophy posits that humans, nature, and all entities are fundamentally identical under natural laws. In other words, it goes beyond anthropocentrism and emphasises that the rhythm of life is carried out according to *Saengsaengjiri* (生生之理, the heavens constantly give birth to people and things).[20] This concept was articulated by Lee Kyubo (1169~1241), a scholar from the middle *Goryeo* period, through his *manmul-il-ryu* (萬物一流) thought, or the *yeomul* (與物) philosophy. This philosophy seeks to perceive beings and things as belonging to the same category, implying that our existence and life are intertwined with all things on the Earth. Lee believes that the fundamental equality of all things stems from a shared mindset toward life and death and the intrinsic similarity in the essence of life.[21]

Many scholars from the *Goryeo* and later *Joseon* dynasties also noted the fundamental homogeneity of the phenomenon of life. For example, Kim Si-seup (1435~1493) says that humans and all things are equally nurtured by *saengui* (生意, meaning of survival) of heaven and earth.[22] Kim understands the ecosystem as a magnificent field of life, embodying harmony and symbiosis.[23] Thus, humans, heaven, earth, and all things are interconnected and interdependent. Kim's ontological insight suggests a perspective that regards all beings as subjects, not solely humans.[24]

What is distinctive about Lee's understanding, however, is his consideration of extending emotional literacy, defined as "[t]he ability to find our humanity in one another."[25] By connecting love, compassion, and respect for life for *mul* (物, things), with the thought that all things are essentially equal, Lee expresses a profound empathy for the unseen and the vulnerable.[26] Lee is pained by the situation of a louse thrown into a fire, a fly drowning in alcohol, and a mouse caught in a trap, and he reflects on it and acts to spare the lives; this sensitivity is not only

[15] Vicki Kirby, private communication, 2002. Cited from Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway,* 184.
[16] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway,* 91, 177.
[17] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway,* 177.
[18] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway,* 185.
[19] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway,* 91.
[20] Park, *Korean Ecological Thought*, 16.
[21] Lee, "Sulgyeonseol" in *Dongkukyisangkukjib* 21.
[22] Kim, "Gwishinje-pal" *Maewoldangmunjip* 17, a013_354b.
[23] Kim, "Gyeinseol" *Maewoldangmunjip* 20, a013_385b.
[24] Kim. "Bumuljaneungmulmulseol" Seolbongyugo 23, a103_241c.
[25] Gordon, *Roots of Empathy*, 8.
[26] Park, *Korean Ecological Thought*, 49.

directed towards animals but also towards people whose voices were unheard at the tim.[27] This is evident in Lee's actions as a governor, where he refrains from punishing people for stealing and chastises officials who exploit the populace.[28] This empathetic attitude extends to inanimate objects as well. For instance, when the leg of his desk broke, he wrote a poem expressing his existential solidarity and symbiosis with the desk, suggesting they were co-sufferers and saved each other.[29] This notion of humans and things collaboratively creating and preserving life may be more radical than merely "staying-with."[30] It transcends verbal or theoretical dimensions, embodying a dimension of life and view.

Lee's *yeomul* emerges from the human mind of no-attachment, or self-reflective emptiness, characterized by an absence of self-centeredness.[31] This attitude of no-avarice is integrated with an understanding of the equality of life and death between oneself and other beings, along with lament for those who do not experience this equality, whether human, animal, or inanimate objects. This fundamental solidarity of existence is an incarnated solidarity of being: a fusion extending from the self to other entities and encompassing cosmology.[32]

Thus, addressing the ongoing suffering of the earth based on sympoiesis and yeomul is closely linked to performing lamenting 'with.' This is not a human-centred view of the salvation, but rather a realization that the whole creation is suffering and that salvation encompasses all entangled beings, including humans.[33]

Lament in Roman 8:18–30

The Bible does not appear to make direct claims about the planet's crisis, nor does it explicitly command a commitment to nature conservation.[34] However, Romans 8:18-30, when interpreted through the lens of lament, provides insights into the Bible's ethical relevance to the suffering of the earth, a perspective that has gained importance in today's context. Humans have primarily used lament as a word for human suffering and divine response but lament is not limited to humans. Romans 8 does not assert human superiority; instead, it presumes the equality of humans and nature and teaches that both should grieve together for freedom.[35]

1. Lament of the Invisible, through Interemptying and Intergiving

We need to acknowledge a way of interpreting Genesis has contributed to the understanding of humans as agents of relationships and action. However, we need to move beyond simply pointing out the way of understanding to acknowledging the limitations and uninterpretability of what we cannot perceive.[36] Lament calls us moving beyond mere emotional attachment when empathizing with the suffering of another being. This is crucial as lament that excludes the 'unknown other' can impede our ability to coexist with all beings.

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[27] Lee, "Munseul" and "Jeungtajuseung" in *Dongkukyisangkukhujip* 4; "Bangseo" in *Dongkukyisangkukhujip* 16.
[28] Lee, "Mungunsusuinijangpijoe" in *Dongkukyisangkukhujip* 10.
[29] Lee, "Yeonjeoljokgoemyeong," *Dongkukyisangkukjeonjip* 19, a001_494d.
[30] Park, "Theology of Things," 248.
[31] Lee, "BuksanJabje" *Dongkukyisangkukjeonjip* 5; "Jaijabeon" *Dongkukyisangkukjeonjip* 9.
[32] Park, *Korean Ecological Thought*, 126.
[33] Park, "Theology of Things," 243–44.
[34] Refer to Rodd, *Glimpses of a Stange Land*, 249; Keesmaat and Walsh, *Romans Disarmed*; Moo and White, *Let Creation Rejoice*, 101–14; Tonstad, *The Letter to the Romans.* These studies highlight the profound ecological interconnectedness found in Romans 8. Rossing suggests a method of reading the Bible that incorporates exegetical, hermeneutical, and homiletical praxis. See "Climate Change," 579–92.
[35] McGinn, "Feminists and Paul," 27.
[36] Derrida, *The Animal*, 12

By questioning the hypothesis that animals do not comprehend death, Thom Van Dooren challenges human exceptionalism—the notion that humans understand death fundamentally differently from the rest of nature and other animals.[37] Citing various studies on the highly developed empathy of crows as an example, Van Dooren highlights the rich and varied expressions of grief for loss that have evolved on Earth over millions of years. These range from the simple recognition or sharing of the emotions of other beings to complex forms of empathy and targeted assistance.[38]

Organisms, too, may seem to act self-defensively and conservationistically in their efforts to protect their own identity.[39] However, Holmes Rolston III argues that nature's action of interemptying and intergiving needs to be understood through non-anthropocentric values.[40] Organisms commit to the survival and preservation of their species by sharing and distributing their information in a changing environment—they are empowered by sharing what is theirs.[41] In other words, the natural flow of what appears to be selfish survival involves self-abandonment for the sake of future generations, allowing us to imagine individual organisms as emitting, flowing, and contributing to the larger system of lineages and species.[42] The life of all creation, whether plant or animal, exists within the ecosystem that supports it. As part of this ecosystem, it must contribute by becoming part of other organisms or through sharing.[43] The interwoven threads of life that characterize an ecosystem demonstrate "anastomosing."[44]

Non-human beings cannot be seen as moral agents, yet Romans 8:21, which describes creation as bearing its own burdens, longing, and lamenting for its own liberation, elevates them to an equal status with humans before God.[45] Romans 8:22 states that the interdependence between humans and all members of the created order implies a shared experience of helplessness and suffering, a common fate of death, and a shared hope for salvation from that state of bondage. Thus, Romans 8:18-30 portrays all creation as alive, active, and striving toward a goal shared with humanity. These verses indicate that Paul's vision of the world to come encompasses more than just the redemption of human life, suggesting that the scope of Paul's concern and hope for salvation is truly cosmic.[46]

2. Lament of God, through Interemptying and Intergiving

The lament described in Romans 8 intertwines not only the lament of humanity and all creation but also God's lament. Romans testifies to the Holy Spirit as a God who laments with inexpressible sigh over the suffering of all creation (8:26). God "suffers loss when the world suffers catastrophes, and laments human and ecological destructiveness."[47] Here, lament can be expressed as God's pathos and solidarity with beings who suffer, with the Holy Spirit acting as a

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[37] The prolonged interaction of the elephant community with the bones of deceased elephants, which they cover with leaves and branches; foxes burying other members of their species; gorillas exhibiting profound grief; and the high-pitched cries of crows mourning the death of their partners all illustrate complex mourning behaviors in various animal species. Van Dooren, *Flight Ways,* 132–33.
[38] Van Dooren, *Flight Ways,* 136–37.
[39] Rolston III, "Kenosis and Nature," 45.
[40] Rolston III, "Kenosis and Nature," 50.
[41] Rolston III, "Kenosis and Nature," 47–48.
[42] Rolston III, "Kenosis and Nature," 50.
[43] Rolston III, "Kenosis and Nature," 51.
[44] Rolston III, "Kenosis and Nature," 52.
[45] Wegter-McNelly, "Between Text and Sermon," 82.
[46] Wegter-McNelly, "Between Text and Sermon," 81.
[47] McFague, *A New Climate*, 153.

force that encourages beings to lament, thereby linking whole creation's lament with divine lament.[48] Divine lament calls to confront the unjust and unsustainable Capitalocene and to participate in the lament of the Holy Spirit, who gives life and birth beyond the groaning of creation, akin to the pain of childbirth.[49]

Creation shares in the ongoing labor of God and is sacred because of its struggle.[50] Creation does not originate solely from nothing; it involves creation "from effort (ex nisus)" and creation "through labor (per laborem)"— Care is added to cause, interest to movement, and effort to energy.[51] Some things are endangered and require protection; there are successes and failures; there is death; but life continues through labor and regeneration.[52] The suffering of God, the Creator, who entered into creation to bear the life of human beings and of creation, is intertwined with the suffering of humanity and creation.[53] This suffering illustrates that all life is obtained through a recurring struggle, paid through giving, emptying, and loving passion. Thus, Jesus is the pinnacle of the natural order, as, since the beginning of time, many creatures have given up their lives as a ransom for others.[54]

Another critical role of lament is not merely to express sorrow and testify to pain but to act for a better tomorrow and embody earnest waiting. With divine lament, the earth's lament fosters a transformative sense of collective belonging and endurance. This operates as a communal sense of life and future, serving as an empathic act that sustains both. Paul's vision is that creation is not to be destroyed but liberated to fulfill its potential, revealing a reality that has already begun.[55]

In this respect, reading Romans 8 as a call to embody reciprocity through interemptying and intergiving responds to the need within some parts of the Bible for an open view of humanity, life, the world, and the relationship between God and all things, allowing for questioning, reaffirmation, and the construction of new understandings.

Religious education, thus, needs to devote to how intertwined God, humanity, and the things are in the rites of community, through participatory lament to influence the new creation. We have the opportunity to think about what it is like to live well together, by implementing lamentations in the liturgy as a communal practice and attitude that establishes an epistemological justice for the groan of all creation and cherishes the hope for a new tomorrow that enriches each of us in the organic relationship of God-nature-human.

Preaching Lament as Relearning in the Complexity of Hope

As Paul Ricoeur points out, "the work of narrative constitutes an essential element of the work of mourning understood as the acceptance of the irreparable."[56] Preaching is one of the elements in the liturgy that can create space for revealing and grieving death and loss through narrative, since "[lament] meant something to state and show the name, to put together some

[48] Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 144.
[49] Bergmann, "The Spirit and Climate Change," 506.
[50] Rolston III, "Kenosis and Nature," 60.
[51] Rolston III, "Kenosis and Nature," 58.
[52] Rolston III, "Kenosis and Nature," 58.
[53] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 69.
[54] Rolston III, "Kenosis and Nature," 60.
[55] McGinn, "Feminists and Paul," 37.
[56] Ricoeur, "On Stories and Mourning," 8.

remnants of a life, to publicly display and avow the loss"[57] The space of preaching can also serve as a place, where individuals and communities confront death and loss collectively, and reflect on our role in addressing the suffering of the planet: epistemological and empathic performance.[58]

1. Epistemological Performance of Interemptying

One way to understand and practice lament as interemptying is to recognize "a particular kind of shared world or shared life" as a way of being, involving a conscious process of learning and change to accommodate a transformed reality.[59] This is possible through emptying what we had recognized because lament is about realizing the need to renew our perceived relationships.[60]

a. Emptying Human-centric Linear Epistemology

The deeply ingrained ideological idolatry of the human species as the center and natural masters of the world has been coupled with social injustice and environmental abuse.[61] The roots of anthropocentrism are deeply intertwined with narratives of violent "domination" by those who consider themselves the superior species. Slow and complex structures of violence reveal that environmentalism is an indispensable ally of the socially and systematically deprived.[62] We cannot address the climate crisis without considering the effects of colonial legacies or the consequences of racism and sexism, not to mention poverty.[63] We also nedd to recognize the relationship between climate change, the creation of large numbers of ecological refugees, and the heightened vulnerability of poor women and children.[64] This is because the daily horrors such as desertification, which turns agricultural land to sand; the gradual onslaught of climate change through deforestation; the anxiety of not knowing where tonight's dinner will come from; unsafe drinking water; and so on, all plague the lives of hundreds of millions of people who have been marginalized, abandoned, and humiliated by authoritarian rule and the post-colonial New World Order.[65] Intentional lament for ecosystems can therefore help the participants of preaching perceive the climate crisis in a "multifocal way," blurring the boundaries between categories of power and privilege.[66]

b. Emptying Passive Listener-centric Epistemology

In data from a multi-year survey of mainline Protestant clergy in the United States, the percentage of preachers addressing climate and environmental issues has been steadily increasing.[67] Ninety percent of preachers reported delivering at least one sermon on creation in the past 12 months, but only 31% of participants said they remembered hearing such a sermon during the same period. According to a 2022 study by the Pew Research Center (PRC), 63% of American adults who regularly attend services of a major Protestant denomination reported

[57] Butler, *Frames of War,* 39.
[58] Van Dooren, *Flight ways,* 143.
[59] Van Dooren, *Flight Ways,* 139.
[60] Van Dooren, *Flight Ways,* 125–44.
[61] Hessel, "Introduction." 14.
[62] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 148.
[63] Kim-Cragg, "Earth-Bound Preaching." 5.
[64] Rakoczy, "God as Father," 532.
[65] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 149.
[66] Kim-Cragg, "Earth-Bound Preaching," 5.
[67] Schade, "What Happens After," 213.

hearing little or no discussion of climate change in sermons.[68] Based on his own research and that of the PRC, Schade hypothesized that the reasons for this gap are related to differences in perceptions of actual interest in climate and environmental issues and varying levels of concern.[69] One of the reason is climate issues tend to be perceived more as a political issue than a religious one. Interestingly, a 2022 survey by The United Christian Churches of Korea (UCCK) on perceptions of climate change and the role of churches found similar results—when asked which social actors are most important in addressing climate change, religious organizations had the lowest expectations, among ten categories.[70]

Religious education can help bridge this gap, which is often widened by differences in expectations and understanding of environmental concerns within religious communities—by providing more learning opportunities, raising awareness through campaigns, encouraging group sharing, facilitating community dialogue, conducting book studies, and fostering personal reflection.[71] Inviting individuals into sacred spaces to lament for the eartht, our communities, and the future of our planet can be transformative.[72] Awarenes of God's providence over the fate of creation calls us not to passive patience but to lament as a resilient mode of action.[73]

Korea Christian Environmental Movement Solidarity (KCEMS) has been selecting Green Churches annually since 1999 and practicing environmental activism as a form of social movement.[74] The 2024 Green Churches connect religious communities with the environment in various ways. For example, one church's pastor is certified in Photovoltaic Equipment and personally manages maintenance and repairs; another church collects waste cooking oil from the local area and recycles it into laundry soap; and another organizes an ecology and environment committee to provide ecological education to church school children.[75] These places—the faith communities' sacred altars outside churches—become points of connection with the local community. Sermons that are specific, detailed, and use familiar language about these cherished places can help participants expand their sense of connection to their place in God's creation.[76]

c. Emptying Intimateness-centric Epistemology

Emptying intimateness confronts us with epistemic challenges, leading us to encounter hope we have never considered, never expected, and even never desired. This act of emptying is giving meaning to anger and confrontation with all that is destroyed, wounded, suffering, and lost, rather than taking refuge in neat discourse, elegance, reason, rationality, or familiarity.[77] Preaching can disrupt familiarity to recognize and lament-with the state of 'death in life'[78] in creation, which has been deprived of protection and subjected to 'derealization,' thereby revealing its existence.[79]

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[68] PRC, "How Religion Intersects."
[69] Schade, "What Happens After," 213.
[70] UCCK, "Climate and Environment."
[71] Kim-Cragg, "Earth-Bound Preaching," 6.
[72] Schade, "What Happens After," 216.
[73] Pearson, "God's Continued Providence," 404.
[74] KCEMS, https://greenchrist.org/our_activity/
[75] Yoo, "A Pastor."
[76] Schade, What Happens After,"
[77] Townes, "Just Awailing and Aweeping," 87.
[78] Butler describes the state of being alive but considered dead as being "condemned to a death within life." Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxi.
[79] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33.

For the suffering of the earth and of beings as it struggles doggedly to continue living in a condemned to a death to be recognized as 'alive' in the Christian pulpit, the concerns of preaching guilds, the encyclopedia of practical theology, and the Revised Lectionary need to be systematically adjusted to actively include ecology.[80] Also, traditions that have neglected ecological sensitivity can be revisited, or familiar and fundamental doctrines—such as covenant, the Holy Spirit, incarnation, love of neighbor, and creation—can be brought into dialogue with new ecological understandings in light of the ecological crisis.[81]

In her sermon on Leviticus 25, Barbara Brown Taylor challenges our conventional notions of land ownership by asserting that the land has never truly been 'ours.'[82] We may use the land, but in the seventh year, we must let it to rest. This commandment is not merely about productivity; it is about boundary.[83] Taylor describes that in the seventh year, neither the owner of the land, nor the servants, nor the plowing oxen, nor the wild jackals are bound to their roles, and everyone is free to forage to their hearts' content and walk through the garden in the cool of the evening without toil. No one chases away strange animals, nor harvests anything to one's own barn; the land is open to hungry wildlife. Taylor envisions a world where there is no distinction between haves and have-nots, where forests, vineyards, and fields are respected as God's creations, equal to the humans who have traditionally held control.

Without ecological sensitivity, we may fail to recognize that the earth possesses its own dignity, holiness, and life in God. Thus, there is a significant difference between viewing the ecological crisis as an additional concern for Christians and revisiting the fundamental human-earth-divine relationship with ecological sensitivity.[84] In this sense, the hope is not a simplistic; the complexity of hope which is a state of "tense and anxious openness" towards a future that is different from the current state, an openness to sharing in the sufferings of creation and participating in the all-encompassing communion of suffering that is inherent in the ongoing process of annihilation that all creation must experience.[85]

d. Emptying Christianity-centric Epistemology

Ecological sensitivity calls us to be an ethical community, defined in broader terms than religious community, and requires us to rethink the boundaries of community in innovative, ecologically more holistic ways.

The Yeoju Eco-Forum, held in South Korea in 2019, brought together international figures from politics, academia, and religion to explore ways to engage in and promote environmental activism. John B. Cobb, a key speaker at the forum, called for more interfaith dialogue to build an ecological civilization, noting that, despite extensive international religious dialogue, further efforts are needed. The Yeoju Eco-Forum Manifesto declares that we can envision an ecological civilization together, learning from each other through our unique traditions. It calls for developing the qualities of interfaith leaders, forming regional networks, and opening our minds

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[80] Kim-Cragg, "Earth-Bound Preaching." 7. For more about ecological-sensitive preaching, refer to the internet platform "Sustainable preaching," https://sustainable-preaching.eu/. The Season of Creation Steering Committee, supported by an ecumenical steering committee, aids the global church with theological and liturgical expertise, along with project and program experience from its partners, including initiatives like Greening the Lectionary. https://seasonofcreation.org/about/

[81] Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 71.

[82] Taylor, "Rest for the Land," 280.

[83] Taylor, "Rest for the Land," 280–81.

[84] Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 72.

[85] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 39.

to the wisdom and inspiration of many religions. It emphasizes the need to recognize that every living thing has its own voice and to expand our spiritual horizons by listening to the voices of other living beings and the earth. All this, the manifesto asserts, can be achieved with mutual support.[86]

Most world religions address the interrelationship between humans, nature, and the divine, and all have the potential to positively influence ecological practices.[87] Religions possess both direct and indirect resources, such as prophetic voices, claims to justice, notions of revelation, rituals, symbols, and sacred language, which can be directed toward ecological sustainability.[88] In some traditions, particularly indigenous spiritualities worldwide, the earth is experienced as sacred and revelatory.

By engaging with a variety of dialogue partners—such as science, feminism, postmodernism, cosmology, interfaith insights, and spirituality—Christian discourse can rekindle a religious experience of the earth and adopt a broader perspective to resist further ecological destruction.[89] Through these diverse dialogue partners, Christianity can also relearn the sacred dimension of the earth community, utilize all available resources, and develop a deeper understanding of itself.[90]

2. Empathetic Performance of Intergiving

Schade highlights a lack of theological and spiritual practice and connection to nature in addressing climate and environmental issues within congregations.[91] This suggests that congregations may struggle to confront the suffering of the planet and articulate their Christian vocation, as people may not perceive and interpret action on climate change within the theological framework of their religious tradition, but rather as a matter of social justice. In other words, faith and practice are not converging in terms of ecological sensitivity, but remain separate. This gap implies that religious cohorts may make sacrifices and deprive themselves to care for the survivors of natural disasters and respond to ecological crises, yet they may not recognize how their own way of life, influenced by their faith, contributes to the root causes of these crises.[92] Therefore, lamentation as an empathetic practice is crucial because it integrates practice and spirituality, enabling them to work together.

a. Giving Vulnerability

We need to seeks an ontology that overcomes the illusion of the autonomous subject, advocating for an ethics enabled and performed by the Other—an ethics that does not rely on coercive regulation or laws but makes all life 'mournable.' This approach resists the meritocracy of self-growth by fostering an understanding of ourselves as inherently vulnerable and interdependent. This painful confrontation with our vulnerability offers hope for a global community of interdependence: all beings are vulnerable.

Peter Bakken reflects on the loggers, paper mills, and car factories that cut down the forests of the north to build Chicago and other cities where he lived. While these enterprises significantly contributed to the region's prosperity and well-being, he laments their profound

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[86] Song, "Interreligious Discourse."
[87] Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies,* 68.
[88] Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 72.
[89] Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies,* 72.
[90] Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies,* 72.
[91] Schade, "What Happens After," 214.
[92] Inglis, "Working with Anabaptist," 317.

impact on the global community's health.[93] Bakken mentions the "the horrendous wildfires that swept through cutover timberlandsand devastated the town of Peshtigo; the sewage that suckedthe oxygen out of the lake water and fed huge, smelly algae blooms;the invasion of exotic species like alewives and zebra mussels" and confesses that confronting and lamenting this vulnerability has led to a relearning: "life on earth mustbe a matter of giving as well as taking"[94] Bakken preaches that when we understand all of life as a place of shared past, present, and future, we recognize that we are in community with others, both human and non-human. The gift of community is the gift of relationship, the gift of care and nurturing, the gift of giving and receiving, and the gift of working together to leave a better place for those who come after us.[95]

This understanding is closely linked to reimagining relationships that transcend traditional notions of difference and discrimination.[96] Lamenting the vulnerability of all beings provides an opportunity to rethink relationships between diverse beings based on shared vulnerability and interdependence.[97]

b. Giving Sensitivity for the Struggles of Spirit

Lamentation resists closing our ears to the groans of the earth since it is not merely a choice; it is a longing for life that bursts forth at the very edge of existence. It is not a flight to God, but an energy to face, participate in, and move through the suffering of the whole creation.

In terms of an apocalyptic motif, lamentation is not merely a product of sacred pietism but a fundamental expression of the eschatological transition of the age.[98] As the opening of Romans 8:18 indicates, Paul was particularly interested in the connection between suffering and the glory to be revealed.[99] This is not a reference to ecstatic spiritual escapism. The struggle of the Spirit between the struggling creation (8:18–22a) and believers (8:22–25) redefines the relationship between suffering and glory.[100]

This struggle is linked to birth. The Holy Spirit is given for all of creation, including humanity, and offers God-self as a comforter in radical solidarity with us and all of creation as it endures the futile final assault of the old order (Rom 8:35–39).[101] Lamentation represents 'intergiving' in the struggle for new creation: "Divine Lamaze—If we breathe into our pain, breathe through ourpangs, the birth of the new becomes possible."[102]

The connection of this pain to the pain of birth is crucial in emphasizing that the pain in Romans 8 is not the pain of judgment but the struggle for the birth of new creation.[103] The woman in delivering, gives her body to life and is sensitive to the cry of life. This resonates with the intergiving within the circle of life in the entire universe and longs for the apocalyptic new creation. This struggle is not wordless chaos but the creation of the Holy Spirit. Thus, lament is not despair, but a longing that draws hope. This hope, however, is not a comfortable consolation but a struggling consolation.

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[93] Bakken, "Landscape of Grace," 21.
[94] Bakken, "Landscape of Grace," 21
[95] Bakken, "Landscape of Grace," 21.
[96] Yoon, For a "Livable Life," 26.
[97] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33.
[98] Jacobsen, *Preaching in the New Creation,* 96.
[99] Jacobsen, *Preaching in the New Creation,* 97.
[100] Jacobsen, *Preaching in the New Creation,* 98.
[101] Jacobsen, *Preaching in the New Creation,* 100.
[102] Keller, *On the Mystery,* 174–75.
[103] Jacobsen, *Preaching in the New Creation,* 102.

c. Giving the Vision of the Body

Lament gives imagination that enables us to envision a different world. We can dream of a harmonious existence on the earth where all beings thrive together in God's love. To recognize that religious spirituality is not only vertical but is also interwoven with the entirety of nature and existence. If we acknowledge that the whole earth is the body of God, "our spirituality. . . must be grounded in our relation to the human and more-than-human world that we inhabit. It must involve a capacity for horizontal (as opposed to vertical) transcendence, namely, our ability both to transform experience and to be transformed ourselves by something that transcends us: the whole ongoing, ever-developing natural process of which we are a part."[104]

Horizontal transcendence refers to the capacity to transcend the present situation and engage in transformative acts that change both the world and ourselves— faith is relevant not only at the human level but also in fostering genuine, positive change that promotes richness of meaning, harmony among species, and prosperity.[105] Here, hope can be understood as the undeserved experience of transformative growth despite the shortcomings of our personal and communal efforts to improve the world.[106] Hope represents a commitment to the living-with of others, opening up the potential to move beyond self-centered needs and desires towards respecting and caring for others and the environment.[107] The vision of the Body of God thus envisions religious spirituality as living out vertical transcendence through horizontal transcendence.

d. Giving Empathy for the Network of Mutuality

Biblical scholars have long noted a pattern of call and response in the creation story of Genesis 1. Throughout the six days of creation, God says, "Let there be . . ." more than a dozen times. The 'let-be' form implies 'empowerment' rather than command. Rhetoricians observe that this language invites the created order to participate in creation with God.[108] God did not make the light and place it there but empowered it to exist of itself; Similarly, God did not directly cause the earth to produce plants but empowered the earth to bring forth plants on its own accord.[109] In this sense, being in the likeness of God involves empowering the beings around us to act freely. It is an act of empathy, participating in other beings' desires. Intentionally empathizing with the desires of others enables the development of another self-structure in which 'I' ego is transformed—trained empathy is not "self-dissolving," but "self-opening."[110] If the empathy of other beings flows through 'I,' and I relativize myself to include their empathy, the grief of existence, including that of the Earth, is not repressed but integrated into a broader and richer tapestry of lamentation.[111]

In this sense, lament as empathy bonds all things in the earth's suffering. Lament catalyzes a relearning process that embraces a dynamic mode of thinking and expands our perspective on life. It allows us to transcend rigid boundaries and unveil the invisible realms that exist beyond them, ultimately restoring the interconnected lives of countless creatures that often remain

[104] Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 14.
[105] Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body,* 281.
[106] Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body,* 281.
[107] Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body,* 281.
[108] Graves, "Rhetorical Criticism," 164.
[109] Park, "Theology of Things," 250.
[110] Keller, On the Mystery, 117.
[111] Keller, On the Mystery, 117.

unnoticed in our daily existence.[112] In this empathetic lament, hope is "commitment to the possibility of realizing some of this growth—not in some final eschatological transformation of the world, but rather locally, in our day-to-day struggles and joys."[113]

Conclusion: Lament-Driven Life within the Complexity of Hope

Regarding the suffering of the earth, religious communities may not lack resources or the ability to recognize the situation. Instead, what we may lack is 'lamenting-with'—the unavoidable outburst of shared suffering rooted in deep empathy—and 'response-ability' to use this lament to reset our lives towards interemptying and intergiving. As religious educatior, our thinking, writing, and speaking need to be "by a hyperresponsibility, a responsibility to the complexities of the moment, of history, and the history to come, and to the discourse in which we think and judge, all the while committed to resisting some of the suspect and exhausted modes of thinking we have inherited."[114]

By starting with seemingly insignificant and small actions, we can progress toward a way of living driven by lament that holds the pain of all beings. If all life is truly interconnected, then pursuing justice for others is a form of self-care, both spiritually and internally.[115] The hope in this complex interconnectedness will only arise through agape persistence. "Without thepersistent stretch of our relationality there is no sustainable motion fromeros to justice. It is not a matter of shifting from love into justice, likechanging gears, but rather of letting passion grow into the justice of com/passion"[116]

Hope may seem difficult and even unpleasant, yet we can hold hope in its complexity because God will surely liberate all beings. If we believe that the world ultimately resides in the Creator who continues to create, then Paul's counsel to do good and not lose heart encourages us to persist in the struggle amidst ecological crisis and despair.[117] "God's passion flows into us—and our response, responsible or not, is met by God's com/passion."[118]

[112] Ku, "Towards an Asian Decolonial Christian Hospitality," 248.
[113] Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 281.
[114] Ian Balfour, "Introduction," in Late Derrida ed. Ian Balfour, 205–217, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (2007): 207. This quotation is Balfour's saying about Derrida's thinking, writing, and speaking.
[115] Keller, *On the Mystery*, 116.
[116] Keller, *On the Mystery*, 115.
[117] McFague, *A New Climate*, 161.
[118] Keller, *On the Mystery*, 107.

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REA

Inter-Religious Common Values Charters History High-School Syllabus

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What is the Inter-Religious Movement

America is a multi-religious continent since its colonization, since when the various different religious and belief traditions have continuously improved their diplomatic relations to develop better cooperations for the common good. This caused a part of the ecumenical movement, that is the gathering of Christian denominations, to further its efforts of non-pluralist interfaith dialogue in the organization of the 1893 First Parliament of World's Religions of Chicago.

Since its birth the inter-religious movement gifted us a legacy of hundreds of higher education religious studies and inter-religious studies faculties along myriads of institutions that develops humanitarian social services, philanthropy, civil rights advocacy, solidarity economies, peacebuilding initiatives, harm-reduction programs, social marketing of causes, data-analysis research, faith-based-organizations sustainable development green logistics, science and religion promotion, multi-religious literacy courses, faith-inspired and faith-based cultural natural heritage safeguard ecomuseology curatorship theopoetics. I have mapped a large part of these for many organizations databases if you might need.

• *Some possible questions for this module:*
- Why is America multi-religious?
- What were the religious diplomatic issues in American collonization?
- What are the differences of the ecumenical, inter-religious, interfaith, and interconvictional movements?
- What was the role of the inter-religious movement in the defense of freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of consciousness, and freedom of expression?
- What was the role of universities faculties of divinities in the inter-religious movement and of these in those?
- What are the local inter-religious institutions and social services?
- What are the local inter-religious artistic, cultural, and natural heritage sites and assets?
- What common values are between the inter-religious institutions and heritage?

Why the Inter-Religious Movement Needs Principle Charters

Apart from their theologies and theopoetics differences, distinct religions present singular systems concerning their social practices and services. So, to allow them to cooperate better, under international rule-of-law of the democratic constitutional secular state, the inter-religious movement has been co-developing a continued iteration of experimental dialogues between different religious and belief traditions representatives, audited by the civil society and scholars, in order to diplomatically establish universal common values regulatory compliance of conviviality conduct to facilitate the, urgently needed, improvements it proposes,

This challenging process, that ocurred during the whole twentieth century, gifted us a well-documented, but still unkown of the general public, legacy of principle charters and guidelines, from the ever-expanding ecosystem of inter-religious institutions, each with varied vocabularies that include philosophical concepts, such as: nonviolence, golden rule, compassion, respect, socioal economic justice, consensus decision-making, gratitude, values, virtues, fundamental moral attitudes, trust, consciousness, social responsibility, duty, global ethics, interdependence, peace culture, joy, and reconciliation ecology.

• *Some possible questions for this module:*
- What are the studants religions theologies and theopoetics values?
- What are the studants religions social services?
- What are the overall studants religions inter-religious common values?
- What is the local rule of law?
- What is the democratic constitutional state?
- How did the secular state laicity developed?
- How do civil society and scholars audit religious and inter-religious institutions?
- What are the common values of the studants, school, city, country, and planet?

Common Values Data-Analysis in Universities and UNESCO

Although we won't use it on our course, which will recur to a more qualitative research approach, I find it important that professors understand the role that common values have in students formation when the world most respectable universities are working in compliance with UNESCO recommendations for open education and open educational resources (OER) so that their laboratories that work with open science may keep up with the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) semantic web metadata ontology standards of library information science, imprescindible for the development of algorithms and artificial intelligences (AI).

This requires, in parallel to the critical pedagogy sociologic understanding of communitarian necessities, the data literacy in big data data-analysis for the implementation of controlled vocabularies that will be organized in upper level ontologies with dependent domain-specific ontologies, that merge through ontological alignment of concurring ontologies on the same subject, via common values diplomatic cross-cultural communication, which includes the need of inter-religious dialogue. Although this may seem, at first, as a complex process it is only the well-documented hierarchization of ontogenic conceptualizations in philogenetic trees of concepts and the dependencies logics used to establish them.

• *Some possible questions for this module:*
- Is your school ready for semantic web ontologic data-analysis or is the sociologic qualitative research a better option? Why só?
- Do students and the school staff agree with this decision?
- What are your school's pedagogical common values?
- Is your school in compliance with UNESCO open education recommendations?
- How common values diplomacy establish ontologies and their alignments?
- How would students develop a semantic web of inter-religious common values?

Inter-Religious Common Values Charters Qualitative Research

With all we have learnt from the evolution of the inter-religious movement with its ecosystem of institutions, why and how it developed its common values charters, and how it is being researched and used in instructional design I propose teachers to, collaboratively with students, to analyse the following inter-religious and secular international rule-of-law charters of common values, listing the concepts used in their ontological controlled vocabularies, their divergences and complementarities, and how they may assist the local and planetary community.

Interfaith Common Values Charters:
(1989) Interfaith Dialogue Principles & Guidelines by the WCC Scarboro Missions
(1993) Manifesto for a Global Ethic by the Parliament of the World's Religions
(2000) United Religions Initiative Charter for Secular Interfaith Organizations
(2005) Geneva Convention Protocol III on Red Crystal International Protective Sign
(2009) Universal Code of Conduct on Sacred Sites by Search for Common Ground
(2021) Call to G20 Leaders: Priorities and Action by the Davos Interfaith Forum
(2022) Declaration on Common Values Among Religions by Religions for Peace

Secular Common Values Charters:
(1839) Anti-Slavery International Charter
(1948) Universal Declaration of the Human Rights by the United Nations
(1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child by UNICEF
(2001) Earth Charter by the Club of Rome
(2004) Convention on Cultural and Natural Heritage Safeguard by UNESCO
(2015) Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations
(2023) Universal Declaration for Values in Education by World Values Day

• *Some possible questions for this module:*
- What are the relations of inter-religious dialogue and common values?
- What are the common values and divergences between the different inter-religious charters? How did these got developed historically?
- What is the need of inter-religious common values for intercultural communication?
- What are the feedbacks and possible mutual assistances inter-religious common values and secular common values have?
- How can we use the studies in this course for the common good glocally?

Inter-Religious Common Values Charters Promotion

If this syllabus is of benefit, I have detailed historiographical databases and data-based evidence-based OER syllabi on “Solidarity & Art Comparative Historiographies”, “Peace Culture & Interfaith Movements Comparative Historiographies”, “Interfaith & Sexuality”, “Contemporary Sacred Art & Music Cyber-Theopoetics”, “Pan-American Progressive Christianity Historiography”, “Quaker, Unitarian, & Universalist Theologies & Heritages Historiography”, “Open Source Culture and Education Historiography”, “Wikipedagogy Historiography”, and many others. Please consider following me on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook; supporting my internationally awarded charity, works, researches as you may; and collaborating for inter-religious common values charters promotion.


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REA Annual Meeting 2024
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Dear Earth: Innovating Religious Education Through the Lens of Climate Justice

Religious Education in Encountering Water Crisis

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Introduction

The water crisis is an ecological problem. Not only that, the water crisis is also part of climate change.[1] This crisis occurred and was debated conceptually and empirically.[2] The water crisis is also intertwined with humanitarian issues.[3] Water is a source of life whose existence becomes scarce due to drought and capitalization.[4] This problem also causes conflict.[5] This conflict can be understood as the intersection of the water crisis and wars.[6] Isn't it true that this water crisis needs to be managed wisely to encourage more effective water use and discuss water culture?[7]

Various efforts to encounter the water crisis have begun to be carried out. Technological developments became the first alternative that began to be implemented.[8] Women also play a role and contribute to overcoming the water crisis problem.[9] Striving for water ethics with an interdisciplinary approach in the form of ethics of agricultural water use,

[1]Colin Chartres and Varma Samyuktha, *Out of Water: From Abundance to Scarcity and How to Solve the World's Water Problems* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2011), 59–70.
[2]Asit K. Biswas, "Water Crisis: Current Perceptions and Future Realities," *Water International* 24, no. 4 (1999).
[3]Malin Falkenmark, "Global Water Issues Confronting Humanity," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 2 (1990).
[4]Brahma Chellaney, *Water, Peace, and War: Confronting the Global Water Crisis* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 1–30.
[5]Bellie Sivakumar, "Water Crisis: From Conflict to Cooperation - An Overview," *Hydrological Sciences Journal* 56, no. 4 (2011).
[6]Asit K. Biswas and Cecilia Tortajada, "Water Crisis And Water Wars: Myths And Realities," *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 35, no. 5 (2019).
[7]Andy Opel, "From Water Crisis To Water Culture," *Cultural Studies* 22, no. 3–4 (2008).
[8]Elena Lopez-Gunn and Manuel Ramón Llamas, "Re-Thinking Water Scarcity: Can Science And Technology Solve The Global Water Crisis?," *Natural Resources Forum: A United Nations Sustainable Development Journal* 32, no. 3 (2008).
[9]E. Allen, I. Maria Morazan, and E. Witt, "Actively Engaging Women Is Helping Solve The Global Water Crisis," *Journal of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Development* 8, no. 4 (2018).

ethics in urban and domestic water use, the ethics of water governance, indigenous water ethics.[10] The culmination of efforts to overcome the water crisis is sustainable water use.[11]

Religious education is part of the field of theology that is present in real struggles. Religious education requires theology as a foundation and is integrated with the context.[12] One of them is the water crisis. Reflecting on the context of the water crisis and various efforts to encounter it, the question used as a reference in this article is: how does religious education encounter the water crisis? Encounter means religious education offers an alternative to encountering the water crisis through practical discourse. Religious education operates at the foundation and method level.

In terms of foundation, the author offers construction from a discussion of water crisis mapping, analysis of the water crisis, water spirituality, and religious education models for encountering the water crisis. In the process of decomposing the discussion, I used the library research or literature-based review for related books and journals. Various kinds of literature have been tried to be analyzed, synthesized, and designed constructively. This conceptual research is expected to provide a conceptual contribution and proposed praxis encountering water crisis.

Mapping of The Water Crisis

Water is a global crisis. Eric H. Oelkers, Janet G. Hering, Chen Zhu show that expecially sanitation.[13] Limited water availability show that in many areas, clean water sources are decreasing due to climate change, pollution, and excessive water use. This makes it difficult for many communities to get clean water. Some areas have abundant access to clean water, while others suffer from shortages. This inequality is often seen in poor rural and urban areas.

The water crisis can touch on the economic sector.[14] Uncertainty about water availability increases risks for investors. They may hesitate to invest in areas facing water

[10]David Groenfeldt, *Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2019).
[11]Peter H. Gleick, "Water In Crisis: Paths To Sustainable Water Use," *Ecological Applications: Ecological Society of America* 8, no. 3 (1998).
[12]Norma H. Thompson, "Current Issues In Religious Education," *Religious Education* 73, no. 6 (1978).
[13]Eric H. Oelkers, Janet G. Hering, and Chen Zhu, "Water: Is There a Global Crisis?," *Elements* 7, no. 1 (2011).
[14]W.M. Hanemann, "The Economic Conception of Water," in *Water Crisis: Myth or Reality? Marcelino Botin Water Forum 2004*, ed. Peter P. Rogers, Manuel Ramón Llamas, and Luis Martinez-Cortina (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006).

crises, which slows local economic growth. [15] Countries facing water crises must spend large amounts of money to build and maintain water and sanitation infrastructure, which can reduce budgets for other sectors such as education and other infrastructure.

Then, in armed conflict, those who control water resources or infrastructure, such as dams and irrigation canals, can use them to pressure. For example, they can cut off water supplies to force an enemy to surrender or use flooding as a military strategy. Examples in Syria and Iraq, Armed groups in Syria and Iraq often control dams and waterways to control territory and populations and as a tactic in warfare.[16]

Inequities in water distribution within countries can create tensions between groups of people, especially in areas that are marginalized or underserved by the government. An internal conflict in India between the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the sharing of water from the Kaveri River has been going on for decades. It has often led to protests and violence.[17]

Water Spirituality As Theological Foundation

Religious education is a part of theology. Before I propose model of religious education, I need theological foundation. In keeping with the topic of this article, I use water spirituality as a theological foundation. The topic of water in spirituality is nothing new. Ian Bradley shows that the spirituality of water has been discussed from the Middle Ages to the present day.[18] Gerald L. Sitter maps out that all streams of Christian spirituality also discuss water.[19] Spirituality can work in water diplomacy by preparation for the process itself and preparation on a personal level.[20]

In various contexts, the spirituality of water has also been studied for example water and Shintoism in Japan[21]; water and spirituality in South Africa[22]; water and Enescu,

[15]M.S. Aguirre, "The Value of Water and Theories of Economic Growth," in *Water Crisis: Myth or Reality? Marcelino Botin Water Forum 2004*, ed. Peter P. Rogers, Manuel Ramón Llamas, and Luis Martinez-Cortina (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006).
[16]Chellaney, *Water, Peace, and War: Confronting the Global Water Crisis*, 19–55.
[17]Chellaney, *Water, Peace, and War: Confronting the Global Water Crisis*, 175–242.
[18]Ian Bradley, *Water: A Spiritual History* (London/New Delhi/New York/Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).
[19]Gerald L. Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality From Early Martyrs To Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007).
[20]Sharoma Ramawadh et al., "Exploring Spirituality in Water Diplomacy," *Water Alternatives* 16, no. 3 (2023): 983–988.
[21]Hsin-Hua Chiang, Mrittika Basu, and Yuki Sano, "Water and Shintoism: Exploring the Link between Spirituality and Water Values in Japan," in *Indigenous and Local Water Knowledge, Values and Practices*, ed. Mrittika Basu and Rajarshi DasGupta (Singapore: Springer, 2023).

Eminescu, Blaga, and Romanian spirituality[23]; earth, wind, fire, and water and spirituality in Aboriginal society[24]; water spirituality beyond the Basin[25].

Discussion of water spirituality can start from the story of creation. In Genesis, water plays a significant role in the creation story. The Spirit of God hovered over the waters before the creation of the world (Genesis 1:2). This shows that water is a basic element of life. Then, Baptism is one of the primary sacraments in Christianity that involves water. Through baptism, believers are believed to be born again and cleansed from sin. John the Baptist used water to baptize people as a sign of repentance and forgiveness of sins (Matthew 3:11).[26]

In the Old Testament, water was used in various washing ceremonies to purify the priest and the objects used in worship (Exodus 30:18-21). Then, the Garden of Eden is depicted as having a river flowing and dividing into four great rivers (Genesis 2:10-14). This symbolizes the fertility, life, and abundance given by God. Then, in desert areas, wells and oases are essential for survival. Stories such as Jacob and Rachel's meeting at the well (Genesis 29:1-14) demonstrate the importance of wells as sources of life and places of divine encounter. Beside that, water also as a symbol of purification. Water is used in various cleansing rituals to purify oneself from impurity. For example, the law stipulates using water for cleansing after touching something unclean (Leviticus 15). A mikveh is a ritual bath used for purification in Judaism. Although more prominent in post-biblical traditions, the practice has its roots in Old Testament ritual laws. Regarding blessings, rain was seen as a direct blessing from God that provided fertility and abundance of the earth's produce. In Deuteronomy 11:10-15, God promises to give rain in its season as part of his blessing to obedient people. In Ezekiel 47, there is a vision of a river flowing from the Temple and giving life to everything it passes through, even bringing life to the Dead Sea. This symbolizes the blessings and restoration that come from God. Beside that, water as a symbol of judgment. The story of Noah and the flood (Genesis 6-9) depicts water as a means of judgment on human sin and of purifying the earth from evil. One of the plagues that befell

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[22]Edna N. Bosire et al., "God, Church Water and Spirituality: Perspectives on Health and Healing in Soweto, South Africa," *Global Public Health: An International Journal for Research, Policy and Practice* 17, no. 7 (2022).
[23]Olguța Lupu, "From The Metaphor Of Water To Correspondences Between Enescu, Eminescu, Blaga, And The Romanian Spirituality," *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai-Musica* 57, no. 1 (2012).
[24]Marcia Langton, "Earth, Wind, Fire, and Water: The Social and Spiritual Construction of Water in Aboriginal Water," in *The Social Archaeology of Australian Indigenous Societies* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006).
[25]James W. Perkinson, *Political Spirituality for a Century of Water Wars: The Angel of the Jordan Meets the Trickster of Detroit* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
[26]Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Origin of Christian Baptism," in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 35–57.

Egypt was that the water of the Nile River turned to blood, making the water undrinkable and causing fish to die (Exodus 7:14-24). This was a sign of God's judgment on Egypt.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ called Himself "Living Water." In John 4:14, Jesus said, "But whoever drinks the water that I shall give him will never thirst." This symbolizes that Jesus is the source of eternal spiritual life. Then, Jesus performed several miracles involving water, such as turning water into wine at Cana (John 2:1-11), walking on water (Matthew 14:22-33), and calming a storm at sea (Mark 4:35-41). These miracles demonstrated Jesus' power over the elements and demonstrated His divinity. Then, although more often associated with wine, the Lord's Supper in some Christian traditions also involves water as a symbol of the blood and water that flowed from Jesus' side on the cross (John 19:34).[27] In Revelation 22:1-2, the river of water of life is depicted flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, giving a picture of the eternal life and salvation that God gives to His people.

The Construction of Religious Education For Encountering The Water Crisis

From the description of the previous section, we already know that water has long been part of discussions of ancient religions, the Bible, and theology. Water becomes an integral part of rituals and teachings. So, how does this stand in the context of the water crisis? As the position of water in Christianity is so important, this also encourages us to maintain the sustainability of water. The unification of the divine source of living water with drinking water and basic daily needs invites us to rethink the task of religious education.

Our fidelity to our Christian identity means that we are called to proclaim Christ as the one who demands conversion from the worship of mammon (Matthew 23:15). This affirms the everyday spirituality of all religions in a particular faith. This is the first dimension, according to Aloysius Pieris.[28] For Pieris, the second dimension speaks to maintaining Christian uniqueness. We must acknowledge in word and deed, liturgy and life that Christ who died on the cross and rose again is proof of God's presence with the oppressed, so the confession of faith encourages an unceasing struggle for justice and peace. This includes our attitude to the water crisis.[29]

[27]D. McCollough, "Ritual Water, Ritual Spirit: An Analysis of The Timing, Mechanism, and Manifestation of Spirit-Reception in Luke-Acts" (London School of Theology, 2014).
[28]Aloysius Pieris, *The Genesis of Asian Theology of Liberation: An Autobiographical Excursus on the Art of Theologizing in Asia* (Gonawala Kelaniya: Tulana Research Centre, 2013), 186.
[29]Pieris, *The Genesis of Asian Theology of Liberation: An Autobiographical Excursus on the Art of Theologizing in Asia*, 186.

The Samaritan woman left her water jar at Jacob's well and did not need to return to get her water jar and meet Jesus. The reason is that a spring continually gushes forth within him; he moves with the flow, and he worships the Father everywhere in the Spirit with Jesus. However, this needs to be developed regarding the church and the world, facing a water crisis in the context of co-existence. Through religious education, the church needs to be observant in seeing the understanding of faith, not only in a vertical understanding but also in trying to understand God's will for humans to work for the sustainability of water.

In principle, religious education is expected to be present through building three levels of awareness in the context of the water crisis. First, water is a source of life that needs to be maintained and preserved from now to the future. Water is consumed only what is needed today. Especially when it comes to exploitation, water should provide life from the past to the future. Religious education allows for the presence of awareness that makes Christians willing to maintain water sustainability. This awareness can be built from preventive to curative.

Second, water is not private property that can be capitalized economically but is a shared property that anyone can access. This understanding encourages religious education to develop an awareness of using water publicly for life, not capitalized. Prolonged capitalization can have an impact on the birth of injustice. This is because people with low incomes are not served their needs. Water is controlled by capital owners or rich people alone.

Third, water must be used wisely and responsibly without causing conflict in various fields. Water that is capitalized and enjoyed by private parties can cause prolonged conflict. Conflict occurs because poor people become victims and fight for it through conflict, or it could be that, on the other side, wealthy people who want to control it take it through conflict. Such conflicts should not occur. Awareness of water as a shared property that can be enjoyed by maintaining its sustainability is an understanding that needs to be voiced through religious education.

Conclusion

Water is a source of life, as has been discussed since ancient religions, the Bible, and theology. Awareness of preserving it is an understanding that needs to be worked on in religious education. This work is also done through three principles namely water is a source of life that needs to be maintained and preserved from now to the future, water is not private

property that can be capitalized economically but is a shared property that anyone can access, water must be used wisely and responsibly without causing conflict in various fields.

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REA

Cultivating Empathy for Earth: Integrating Empathy into Ecological Religious Education

Abstract:

Caring for the earth is a primary calling for people of faith. While religious educators incorporate practices such as gardening, hiking, farming, and contemplative walking into their pedagogies as ways to prompt wonder, appreciation, and respect for the natural world, few have explored what and how such affective experiences motivate ethical behavior. This paper contributes to research on the role of affective experiences in ecological education by exploring the pedagogical implications of one affective experience: empathy. I argue that providing opportunities for people to empathetically connect with creation can catalyze shifts in people's perceptions of and behavior towards the earth.

Introduction

Melting icecaps. Rising seas. Biodiversity loss. Extreme weather. Ecological decline is well under way, and the signs of loss are becoming harder to ignore. While efforts in recent decades to foster eco-literacy have brought earth's distress into the limelight, there nevertheless remains a gap between what we know about the earth and how we live in relation to it.[1] Unsurprisingly, many from both the scientific and religious communities have begun questioning the effectiveness of eco-literacy as a starting point for encouraging ethical action.[2] James Miller's critique sums up sentiments from both groups well: "The erosion of biodiversity is documented and potential strategies to reverse this trend are detailed in an ever-increasing number of journals and at the annual meetings of numerous professional societies. However, the wherewithal to reverse the degradation of our natural heritage in a meaningful way is still lacking. This failure stems, in part, from the assumption that an

[1] Russell A. Butkus and Steven A. Kolmes, *Environmental Science and Theology in Dialogue*, Theology in Dialogue Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), chap. 8; 2018 IPCC, "Summary for Policity Makers.," in *Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5 Degrees Celcius above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty*, ed. V. Masson-Delmotte (Geneva, Switzerland.: World Meterological Organization, n.d.).
[2] Russell A. Butkus and Steven A. Kolmes, *Environmental Science and Theology in Dialogue*, Theology in Dialogue Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), chap. 8; Tallesyn Grenfell-Lee, "The Missing Link: Creation Empathy as the Foundation of Christian Mission," in *Creation Care in Christian Mission*, ed. Kapya Kaoma (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 166.

'educate-the-public' approach will be sufficient to motivate change. Rather than fostering support for conservation, some forms of 'education' might have the opposite effect."[3]

Within the Christian community, recognition that "educate-the-public approach" will not suffice has led to a growing conviction that motivation to care for the earth requires more than ecological knowledge: it necessitates affective engagement with otherkind.[4] This is because, as Larry Rasmussen underscores, "Ethics is not only a rational analysis and argument. Nor is it only, or chiefly, moral exhortation and instruction. Rather, ethics is also intuition and evocation from experience, a lifting what we know in our bones or sense in our hearts so that our discernment about who we are to be and do is less misty, clearer-eyed and truer to the world to which we belong."[5] In other words, affective experiences, far from ancillary to ethics, are the central conduits for developing the intuitive and body-centered insights that support our moral decision-making. Theological educators such as Norman Wirzba and Grenfell-Lee take a similar position, underscoring the need for experiences that engage us on "affective, rather than strictly theoretical levels."[6] They argue that if we want to alter our relationships to and actions toward the land and otherkind, we must actively engage our sensory and emotional faculties so that we "see and feel the creation as God sees and feels it."[7] Notably, this recognition of the need for experiences that tutor our emotional and moral sensibilities alongside our intellectual ones has led to on-the-ground changes in theological education, with Christian leaders and educators increasingly incorporating practices such as gardening, hiking, pilgrimages, field-visits, clean-up projects, and spiritual engagement with nature into their ecopedagogies.[8]

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[3] Miller, "Biodiversity Conservation and the Extinction of Experience." For others noting the limitations of eco-literacy in effecting meaningful action, see: Butkus and Kolmes, *Environmental Science and Theology in Dialogue*, 180; Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*, 16.

[4] Grenfell-Lee borrows the terms from James Nash' Seeking Moral Norms in Nature. She defines it as "the natural, no-human realm on earth." Tallessyn Grenfell-Lee, "Garden Earth and Church Gardens: Creation, Food, and Ecological Ethics" (Dissertation, Boston University, 2016), 11; Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 111; Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*, 195; Erin Lothes Biviano, *Inspired Sustainability: Planting Seeds for Action* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2016), chaps. 1–2.

[5] Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*, 221.

[6] While Wirzba makes this statement in the context of gardening specifically, he is using gardening as an example of the kinds of experiences that can reshape how we "see and feel the world" (111). Gardening is thus a "practical tool to feel and understand our engagement with the earth" (113). Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*, 111; Tallessyn Grenfell-Lee, "Garden Earth and Church Gardens: Creation, Food, and Ecological Ethics," 2, 26; Grenfell-Lee, "The Missing Link: Creation Empathy as the Foundation of Christian Mission," 166–67.

[7] Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*, 118.

[8] Mallory D. McDuff, *Natural Saints: How People of Faith Are Working to Save God's Earth* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), chap. 4.

That said, while the shift toward creating affective encounters that foster connection with the earth is well-placed, few Christian scholars have parsed out precisely what "affective" means or how given affective experiences translate into ethical behavior. This is particularly problematic in that "affective experiences" are hardly uniform, both in the quality of emotion they evoke and their capacity to move us towards ethical actions. In fact, environmental psychology research suggests that there is a sharp disparity between the behavioral responses evoked by positive affective experiences with the natural world, such as love or appreciation, and those that evoke fear or dread.[9] Thus, while our intentions may be to help people to "consciously bond with other human beings and other life-forms,"[10] without a firm grasp of how different emotional experiences influence our relationships and behavioral choices, we may actually drive people away from pro-ecological action.[11]

This paper thus seeks to contribute to the growing conversation around the role of affective experiences in religious ecological education and ecological ethics by exploring the pedagogical implications of one specific form of affective experience: empathy. By empathy, I mean the experience of sharing in another's affective state; literally from the Greek "empathos," empathy describes a "feeling into" another by partaking in their emotions.[12] While the notion of forging empathy for earth and otherkind is not completely new,[13] few scholars have explored empathy for the earth as a Christian pedagogical practice for creation care and even fewer have drawn on non-theological disciplines to explore the role of empathy for otherkind

[9] There are too many resources to name; for a good overview, see: Joseph P. Reser and Graham L. Bradley, "Fear Appeals in Climate Change Communication," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science*, September 26, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.386; Anja Kollmuss and Julian Agyeman, "Mind the Gap: Why Do People Act Environmentally and What Are the Barriers to pro-Environmental Behavior?," *Environmental Education Research* 8, no. 3 (August 1, 2002): 239–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620220145401; Per Espen Stoknes, *What We Think about When We Try Not to Think about Global Warming: Toward a New Psychology of Climate Action* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015); Linda Steg et al., "An Integrated Framework for Encouraging Pro-Environmental Behaviour: The Role of Values, Situational Factors and Goals," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 38 (June 1, 2014): 104–15, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2014.01.002.

[10] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 201.

[11] Referencing the ineffectiveness of both our ecological messaging and cultural fear, Grenfell-Lee asks: "Given plentiful information and opportunities for activism and transformation, why do we as people of faith continue to respond so slowly to the greatest mission call of our time? Grenfell-Lee

[12] Tania Singer and Olga M. Klimecki, "Empathy and Compassion," *Current Biology* 24, no. 18 (September 22, 2014): 875, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.06.054.

[13] Kim-Pong Tam, "Dispositional Empathy with Nature," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 35 (September 1, 2013): 92–104, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2013.05.004; Wesley Schultz, "Empathizing With Nature: The Effects of Perspective-Taking on Concern for Environmental Issues," *Journal of Social Issues* 56, no. 3 (2000): 391–406; Verónica Sevillano, Juan I. Aragonés, and P. Wesley Schultz, "Perspective Taking, Environmental Concern, and the Moderating Role of Dispositional Empathy," *Environment and Behavior* 39, no. 5 (September 1, 2007): 685–705, https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916506292334; David Sobel, *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*, Second Edition edition (Orion Society, 1999).

for Christian ecological ethics.[14] This essay thus brings ecological psychology and social neuroscience research on empathy into conversation with Christian theology and religious ecological education, with the goal of showing how an eco-pedagogy focused on cultivating empathy can catalyze transformations in both how we think about creation, God, and ourselves and how we live in relation to all three. Given the central connection between empathy, compassion, and the call to love all members of the created community in the Christian life, as well as research from the sciences identifying empathy as a key contributor to compassion, altruism and prosocial behavior, cultivating a better understanding of empathy – both how it works and the factors that influence it – can help religious educators develop pedagogies that lead to creation-care and the pursuit of eco-justice.

I begin by offering a theological rationale for privileging empathetic experiences with creation in Christian ecological education. I then examine social neuroscience research on empathy, both in terms of how empathy develops and some of the elements that modulate it, and parse out some of its implications for Christian religious education. In the conclusion, I reflect on the potential for empathetic connecting, when combined with eco-literacy, political engagement, and ecological care activities, to form the backbone of an engaged eco-pedagogy for conversion to creation. My central argument is that providing opportunities for people to empathetically connect with creation – and by extension, God and others – can catalyze concrete shifts in their perceptions of and behavior towards the earth and the communities who unjustly bear earth's suffering. Through practices of empathizing with otherkind, people physically and psychologically experience – feel and imagine - their essential relationship to earth creatures and membership in a wider ecological community and thus begin to "internalize [the] profoundly different anthropology" that McFague argues is essential for our planet's survival and flourishing.[15] Importantly, such shifts in individual perceptions and behavior can lead persons to take more active roles in ecological justice initiatives at the collective and political levels. Integrating practices that help people develop their capacities to empathize with earth into religious education, while certainly not sufficient on its own, can thus serve as an important starting point for mobilizing people to engage the difficult but necessary work of political advocacy, consciousness-raising, and shifting of social norms required to avert planetary catastrophe.

Empathy and Ecological Subjectivity: Perspectives from Christian Tradition

[14] Grenfell-Lee is the only one I could identify who examines empathy within the context of Christian religious education as a way to rouse pro-environmental action. Grenfell-Lee draws on environmental psychology, social psychology and feminist understandings of empathy. Grenfell-Lee, "The Missing Link: Creation Empathy as the Foundation of Christian Mission"; Tallessyn Grenfell-Lee, "Garden Earth and Church Gardens: Creation, Food, and Ecological Ethics."
[15] Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2008), 48.

Theological educators and leaders can design affective experiences around any one of multiple aims - the fostering of delight,[16] deepening of affection,[17] nourishing of appreciation,[18] cultivation of humility,[19] or the heightening of respect for the earth and its creatures.[20] Why focus on empathy? More pointedly, why make nurturing empathy for earth and otherkind one of the central components of ecological religious education? As underscored above, offering a rationale for prioritizing empathic connecting with creatures is necessary given that few Christian eco-theologians have focused on cultivating empathy for the non-human world. In the following, then, I highlight two theological reasons for privileging empathy in our relations to otherkind.

First, empathy occupies a central place in the Christian tradition, both as a practice of faithful discipleship and as a feature of God's character. Specifically, the practice of sharing in our neighbor's emotions – their sorrows, pains, and disappointments, as well as their joys – is understood as evidence of the Spirit's fruit in our lives. Indeed, it is those who are "led by the Spirit of God" (Rom. 8:14 NIV) who later "weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15). It is those who have been knit together as brothers and sisters in Christ that "remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering" (Heb. 13:3). Significantly, this kind of empathy for others does not end with feeling what the other feels but leads to compassionate action on behalf of one's neighbors, as is the case in the Philippians' support of Paul while in prison (Phil. 4:10-20). or the willingness of the Hebrew community to suffer alongside those in prison and accept the confiscation of their property (Heb. 10:34). In fact, empathy and acts of love are so intertwined within the Christian tradition that the absence of the former leads to a questioning of the latter. As the writer of 1 John underscores, "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?" (1 Jn. 3:18). Thomas Merton makes a similar point two millennia later: "I cannot treat other men as men (sic) unless I have compassion for them. I must have at least enough compassion to realize that when they suffer they feel somewhat as I do when I suffer. And if for some reason I do not spontaneously feel this kind of sympathy for other,

[16] McFague, 164.
[17] Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*, 111.
[18] Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Everything That Breathes Praises God," *God's Green Earth: Creation, Faith, Crisis* 94, no. 1 (2007): 54.
[19] Elizabeth Groppe, "A Harvest of Humility: Agrarian Practice and Christian Higher Education," *Journal of Education & Christian Belief* 18, no. 1 (2015): 29–40.
[20] Barbara Ellen Bowe, Edward Foley, and Robert J. Schreiter, eds., "Nature's Parables and the Preaching of the Gospel," in *The Wisdom of Creation* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2004), 115.

then it is God's will that I do what I can to learn how…If I do this I obey God. If I refuse to do it I disobey him."[21] Empathy, in sum, enables us to live into Christ's call to love our neighbors. By "sharing with others their joys, their sufferings,"[22] we become able to not only identify with other people but actually live in love toward them.

Yet, empathy is not simply something humans are called to practice. Empathy is also one of God's ways of relating to the world. Indeed, the biblical text describes again and again how God is "affected" by us. God sees Israel's pain and hears their cries during their bondage in Egypt (Ex. 3:7-9). God takes in the tears of Hagar (Gen. 21:17-18) and Hannah (1 Sam. 1:19). God shares Zion's grief and "longs" to be gracious to her (Is. 30:18-22). This divine empathy perhaps finds its fullest expression in the life of Christ, whose ministry of compassion flows out of his willingness to share the despair and anxieties, as well as the hopes and gladness, of those around him. As the writer of Hebrews declares, "…we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are…" (Heb. 4:15).

Significantly, God's empathy is not reserved for humans but extends to the earth and otherkind. Indeed, from the very beginning, God covenanted with the earth and its creatures in love (Gen. 9:9-10), opening Godself to their needs, hearing their groans and intentionally providing for them. The Psalms repeatedly recount God's attentiveness - "You take care of the earth and water it, making it rich and fertile. The river of God has plenty of water; it provides a bountiful harvest of grain, for you have ordered it so" (Ps. 65:9) – as well as God's concern for the planet - "You sent abundant rain, O God; You refreshed Your weary inheritance." (Ps. 68:9). The laws of the Torah also include provisions for the earth and other vulnerable communities: the land is to lie fallow every seven years; animals are to share in the Sabbath rest (Ex. 23:12; Deut. 5:14); the poor and sojourner are to glean the grain (Lev. 19:10). Even after Israel's exile, God does not forget the needs of the creatures but registers their laments and promises to restore them to health and thriving.[23] Indeed, though the animals and rivers have been panting for God due to the violence of humans, God assures the earth: "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy (Is. 35:1).

In sum, we can see that just as with human empathy, God's empathy – both for humans and all of creation - ultimately drives God's compassion, by which I mean God's being moved in the "womb" or "bowels" to alleviate creation's plight.[24] In

[21] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions Paperbook 1091 (New York: New Directions Book, 2007), 76–77.
[22] Merton, 77.
[23] Isaiah 30:23-26
[24] Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa F. Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action*, First edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 80; John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, First edition, The New Testament Library (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 245.

fact, one might even understand God's compassion towards humanity and the non-human world as emerging from a place of empathy: God willingly shares in our emotional and affective states – feels what we feel – in order to understand our human experience and respond to us with compassion and love. This means that empathy, while not a prerequisite for compassion, is often its initial conduit, the fount from which God's care flows. Humans, who are filled with the spirit of God, thus image God in the world through their empathetic engagement with and compassion towards other humans and the earth.

The second theological rationale for centering empathy for earth in ecological religious education concerns the subjecthood of creation. While the Christian tradition contains a diversity of perspectives on creation (the term itself can open or foreclose subjectivity), it is possible to understand that the earth and all its diverse inhabitants as "Thous," and not just any "Thous," but "Thous" who are humanity's kin. In other words, there is precedent in the Christian tradition to view the earth and its creatures share in humanity's "family tree": earth creatures are sibling, co-inheritors of the same promises, brothers and sisters crafted from the same elements, one earth nurtured and sustained by a common Parent. We see this with the writers of the Scriptures, who regularly identify the earth, land, and creatures that live within it as possessing their own integrity and agency. The earth's landforms, for instance, regularly express themselves in acts of praise. Rivers clap their hands. Hills sing for joy (Ps. 98:8). Seas roar and fields rejoice (1 Chron. 16:32-33). Such creatures also participate in testimony: the rocks cry out (Lk 19:40); the heavens and skies "pour forth speech" and "reveal knowledge" (Ps. 19:1-4). Animals too are described as possessing wisdom - "the ox knows it owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Is. 1:3; cf Jer. 8:7)[25]– as well as prophetic voice - "Ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?" (Job 12:7-9).

This affirmation of the earth and its creatures as subjects also extends beyond the biblical texts, showing up in the writings and lives of significant Christian saints and theologians. For example, St. Francis regularly conversed and empathized with the creatures around him. The saint was known for talking to animals and trees, and his compassionate interactions with the wolf of are well documented by his followers. The saint's renown *Canticle of Creation* also reflects Francis' deep appreciation of the earth, both as belonging to God and as a subject in its own right: "Be praised, my Lord, for all your creation, and especially for our Brother Sun, who brings us the day and the light; he is strong and shines magnificently." Francis' respect

[25] For commentary on creatures knowledge, see: Walter Brueggemann, "The Creatures Know!," in *The Wisdom of Creation*, ed. Barbara Ellen Bowe, Edward Foley, and Robert J. Schreiter (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2004), 1–12.

for and recognition of earth creatures as members of an ecological community has, unsurprisingly, earned him the title of patron saint of ecologists.[26]

This pattern of relating to creation as subject continues with modern-day contemplatives like Thomas Merton, who wrote of trees, flowers, rivers, and mountains as "saints of God"[27] and was known for his ongoing dialogue with the natural world.[28] John Muir, the geologist cum mystic, related to earth's many members as part of his own community and subjects of his affection: "They [the boulders of Yosemite] are dear friends, and have warm blood gushing through their granite flesh; and I love them with a love intensified by long and close companionship."[29] Contemporary theologians, too, have advocated for a recognition of earth as subject as a way to respond to planetary apocalypse. Belden Lane, for instance, in a chapter entitled "Falling in Love with a Tree," reflects on the importance of experiencing earth creatures as beings, not only seeing them but also allowing them to see us, as a way to help humanity move towards the protection of the planet crucial to its survival.

> "Looking into the eye of a bear twenty feet away on a mountain trail, being 'stared through' by a doe with two fawns in tow, gazing on the face of a horse you've learned to love, holding the head of a dying dog you've had to put down: you know in that moment that you've been seen. You know that something rich in mystery and spirit is looking back at you, opening you to a world full of others erupting in your dreams, interacting in ways you'd never imagined. But too often we aren't paying attention. We're blind and deaf to a world that's truly alive, responding to us at every turn, no less vulnerable to suffering than we ourselves."[30]

Lane's point is that animals – and the earth – are alive, responsive, capable of relationship, and that, until human beings begin to treat the more-than-human world as "subjects" rather than "objects," we will continue to obstruct the "great conversation" that is necessary for ecological repair. Like others, Lane affirms a view of earth creatures as both individual members of a

[26] For a brief set of stories about St. Francis' relations to animals, see: Thomas Celano, "The Treatise on the Miracle of Saint Francis (1250-1252)," in *The Francis Trilogy: The Life of Saint Frances, the Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul, the Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis*, ed. Regis J Armstrong, William J Short, and J. A. Wayne Hellmann (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2004); for a recent biography of Francis: Augustine Thompson, *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).
[27] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 30–31.
[28] Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, 1st edition (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).
[29] John Muir and Edward Hoagland, *Steep Trails*, Reissue edition (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994), 19–20.
[30] Belden C. Lane, *The Great Conversation: Nature and the Care of the Soul*, Illustrated edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 38.

cosmological kin-munity and agential beings, subjects and "Thous" like us whom God adores and for whom we will be called to give account.[31]

Despite the emphasis in both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and Christian theology on earth's sentience and agency, it is necessary to point out that that treating non-human being as subjects diverges from some perspectives in current ecological theologies. At present, many theological models of God and the created world portray otherkind as somewhere lower on the hierarchy of being, from a resource to be faithfully utilized to an object of God's affection that possesses moral value.[32] In such models, God exists above and separate from creation, and humanity's vocation in relation to the earth ranges from subduing or ruling over it, to serving as stewards or trustees of it. Even in panentheistic approaches, such as McFague's, which diverge from the above in their emphasis on God's presence within creation, the earth is often portrayed not so much as a mutual partner with humans but a place of God's presence.[33] Thus while metaphors such as the earth as God's body[34] or descriptions of the earth as "mode and sign of divine presence,"[35] certainly imbue creation with moral value and elevate its status as a communicant of God, such understandings inadvertently make otherkind conduits for communing with Christ, rather than members to commune with ourselves.

The difficulty with such conceptions – even those that describe earth as "being in and of God"[36] – is that they obscure the autonomy and subjectivity of the many members who make up the community of this planet. By autonomy I do not mean independence, as if the creatures of earth – or humans, for that matter – could exist on their own, apart from the ecological web that sustain them. Rather, to say the tree or the blade of grass possesses autonomy is to affirm each one's status as an agent, both as an "individual" and member of a community, each of whom possess a distinguishable presence, mystery, and power in the world that humans are called to honor and respect. Obscuring such autonomy and subjectivity is particularly problematic when it comes to empathy, since empathy can only be practiced with a subject, with a "Thou" before whom "I" can give an answer.[37] Thus, while we may discern the face of God in the goldfinch, or sense the Spirit in the opening buds of spring, unless

[31] Lane writes at length about the need to see and treat the earth as full of "sentient beings."He writes that the loss of species is not just a travesty to ecological diversity or a cause of grief for our future children, but a violation of the spiritual community that "has formed us – making us what we are." Lane, 39.
[32] Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*, 228–33; Butkus and Kolmes, *Environmental Science and Theology in Dialogue*, 148–64; Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*, 128–44; McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 66–71.
[33] See for instance, McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 73–78.
[34] McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*; McFague, *The Body of God*.
[35] Butkus and Kolmes, *Environmental Science and Theology in Dialogue*, 160.
[36] McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 117.
[37] Batson articulates the need for understanding the other as sentient in the practice of empathy. C. Daniel Batson, *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer*. (New York: Routledge, 2016).

we actually identify with the goldfinch or the tree from whom the buds are birthed as like ourselves, bearing agency and dignity in their own right apart from their ability to reflect God's presence, we cannot truly empathize with them, because our attention is on their value as *signifiers* of the sacred or *conduits* for knowing God rather than *subjects* to whom we possess an obligation. Given that empathy hinges on mutual relationship –you cannot share in the experience of those whom you perceive as objects or "its" – we need a way of speaking theologically about other creatures that recognizes them as individual community members, agents with whom God and we interact but do not subsume.

To gather the pieces together then: the Christian tradition suggest that humans, as imitators of God and those filled with the Spirit, are called to relate to one another with empathy and ultimately compassionate concern. Such empathy and compassion, importantly, are not reserved for human but are to extend to the whole of creation. Indeed, to understand creatures as "Thous" implies that our connection to the earth community is not merely one of interdependence but of mutual relationship. It is precisely in this context of relationship, which depends on mutuality, respect, and trust, that empathy thus becomes vital. Humans must learn not only to attend to our creaturely collaborators; we must also develop a capacity to take their perspective, to feel with them and thus for them, to increasingly share in and thus understand their needs in way that moves us to alleviate their plight. Empathy, in sum, when intentionally engaged as avenue to develop understanding and deep bonds of trust with other creatures, can thus become a catalyst for compassionate ecological action and care-taking.

How do we empathize with earth? Perspectives from Ecological Psychology and Social Neuroscience

It is one thing to make a theological argument for empathetic connecting with earth's diverse creatures? Yet, one might ask: can we really practice empathy towards otherkind, especially when otherkind includes inanimate or inorganic material and organisms, such as rocks or soil or air that do not possess emotions or sentience? How would we do that? Moreover, as one person puts it, "do we not remain stuck in the anthropocentric pattern when we impose human feelings on animals and the earth?"[38] These questions are especially significant for considering the value of empathetic connecting in ecological religious education, and both ecological psychology and social neuroscience can provide some help in untangling them.

First, biologists and ecological psychologists suggests that animals, at the least, *do* have emotions. While debate certainly exists around the emotional lives of non-human creatures, research in both biology and environmental psychology offer convincing support for emotional processes and affective experience in primate, mammals, and even invertebrates.[39] Frans de

[38] This question was posed to me by an anonymous reviewer, whom I thank for their contribution in strengthening this paper.
[39] Frans B. M. de Waal, "What Is an Animal Emotion?," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1224, no. 1 (2011): 191–206, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2010.05912.x; F. B. M. de Waal, *Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us about Ourselves*, First edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019); Jaak Panksepp, "Affective

Waal's work on animal emotions, for instance, seeks to challenge the scientific taboos around the idea that animals experience emotions and engage in emotional communication. She argues that emotions, far from subjective and imprecise, represent "mental and bodily states that potentiate behavior appropriate to environmental challenges."[40] Recognizing and studying the range, complexity, and various expressions of animal emotions can not only help humans understand animal behaviors, it can also, she contends, inspire greater reverence and appreciation. Yet, even in the case of organic and inorganic life forms that do not appear to experience sentience, the attempt to empathize with such creatures can be valuable both in strengthening a person or persons' emotional bonds with otherkind and promoting ecological action on behalf of the earth's diverse inhabitants. A study that examined the impact of empathy for a "natural object" – in this case a tree - on pro-environmental action found that empathy positively influenced environmental behaviors and attitudes.[41]

What, then, does empathy involve? Growing research in social neuroscience on empathy offers some useful definitions and concepts for thinking about both the distinctiveness of empathy and ways we can practice it. Tania Singer and Claus Lamm define empathy this way: "empathy is the [isomorphic] sharing of the affective state of another person; it denotes an affective response to the directly perceived, imagined, or inferred feeling state of another being."[42] In other words, to empathize is to tune our inner state to mirror the state of another, to feel what the other feels. Empathy, thus, must be distinguished from "complementary emotion": namely, feeling a related but different emotion, such as sadness, in response to the direct or imagined perception of another's emotional state.[43] While complementary emotions are both normal and socially relevant, they

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Consciousness: Core Emotional Feelings in Animals and Humans," *Consciousness and Cognition*, Neurobiology of Animal Consciousness, 14, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 30–80, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2004.10.004; Michael Mendl, Oliver H. P. Burman, and Elizabeth S. Paul, "An Integrative and Functional Framework for the Study of Animal Emotion and Mood," *Proceedings of the Royal Society. B, Biological Sciences* 277, no. 1696 (2010): 2895–2904, https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2010.0303; Michael Mendl, Elizabeth S. Paul, and Lars Chittka, "Animal Behaviour: Emotion in Invertebrates?," *Current Biology* 21, no. 12 (2011): R463–R465, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2011.05.028; Marc Bekoff, "Animal Emotions: Exploring Passionate Natures," *BioScience* 50, no. 10 (2000): 861–870, https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2000)050[0861:AEEPN]2.0.CO;2; Shigeru Watanabe and Stan Kuczaj, *Emotions of Animals and Humans: Comparative Perspectives*, 2012th ed., The Science of the Mind (Tokyo: Springer Japan, Springer, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-4-431-54123-3; Amber J. de Vere and Stan A. Kuczaj, "Where Are We in the Study of Animal Emotions?," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews. Cognitive Science* 7, no. 5 (2016): 354–362, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1399.

[40] Interestingly, de Waal draws (albeit lightly) upon neuroscience research on emotions to articulate the relationship between emotions, cognition, and behavior with reference to animals. de Waal, "What Is an Animal Emotion?," 191.

[41] Jaime Berenguer, "The Effect of Empathy in Proenvironmental Attitudes and Behaviors," *Environment and Behavior* 39, no. 2 (March 1, 2007): 269–83, https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916506292937.

[42] Tania Singer and Claus Lamm, "The Social Neuroscience of Empathy," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1156 (March 2009): 82, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2009.04418.x; Claus Lamm and Jasminka Majdandžić, "The Role of Shared Neural Activations, Mirror Neurons, and Morality in Empathy--a Critical Comment," *Neuroscience Research* 90 (January 2015): 15–24, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neures.2014.10.008.

[43] Julia Stietz et al., "Dissociating Empathy From Perspective-Taking: Evidence From Intra- and Inter-Individual Differences Research," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (2019): 126, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2019.00126.

do not necessarily provide us information about the inner state of the other and thus have a mixed impact on the deepening social relationships and compassionate behavior. [44] Specifically, while complementary emotions such as compassion or sympathy may engender prosocial behaviors – for example, joining a pro-ecological cause or reducing one's plastic-use - other emotions such as fear, anxiety, or overwhelm can actually propel us in the opposite direction,[45] promoting disengagement for the sake of emotional stability.[46]

So how precisely do we practice empathy? The neuroscientific literature suggests that there are two main routes by which we empathize with other beings.[47] The first route to empathy is known as simulation. Simulation is a non-conscious process that involves the "**automatic** neural sharing of the other's affective state."[48] Simulation occurs when seeing, imagining, or hearing another "triggers autonomic and somatic responses that create an embodied emotional experience within the observer that mimics the experience of the [other]."[49] By autonomic and somatic, I mean responses within our muscles and internal organs that are engaged when we process our own emotions. For instance, if we are presented with an affective stimulus, such as another person crying, the muscles and internal organs, as well as the neural systems engaged when we ourselves feel sad, become activated and we begin to experience sadness. This process, as noted, occurs largely automatically and quickly, without conscious or effortful processing, and results in rapid "shared activations" between the self and the other.[50] Because simulation

[44] Philipp Kanske, Anne Böckler, and Tania Singer, "Models, Mechanisms and Moderators Dissociating Empathy and Theory of Mind," *Current Topics in Behavioral Neurosciences* 30 (2017): 193–206, https://doi.org/10.1007/7854_2015_412.
[45] Kanske, Böckler, and Singer; Oriel FeldmanHall et al., "Empathic Concern Drives Costly Altruism," *NeuroImage* 105 (January 15, 2015): 347–56, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2014.10.043.
[46] Singer and Lamm, "The Social Neuroscience of Empathy."
[47] Yan Fan et al., "Is There a Core Neural Network in Empathy? An fMRI Based Quantitative Meta-Analysis," *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 35, no. 3 (January 1, 2011): 903–11, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2010.10.009; Lian T. Rameson and Matthew D. Lieberman, "Empathy: A Social Cognitive Neuroscience Approach," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 3, no. 1 (2009): 94–110, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00154.x; Simone G. Shamay-Tsoory, Judith Aharon-Peretz, and Daniella Perry, "Two Systems for Empathy: A Double Dissociation between Emotional and Cognitive Empathy in Inferior Frontal Gyrus versus Ventromedial Prefrontal Lesions," *Brain: A Journal of Neurology* 132, no. Pt 3 (March 2009): 617–27, https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/awn279.
[48] Claus Lamm, C. Daniel Batson, and Jean Decety, "The Neural Substrate of Human Empathy: Effects of Perspective-Taking and Cognitive Appraisal," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 19, no. 1 (January 2007): 42–58, https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn.2007.19.1.42; Simone G. Shamay-Tsoory, "The Neural Bases for Empathy," *The Neuroscientist: A Review Journal Bringing Neurobiology, Neurology and Psychiatry* 17, no. 1 (February 2011): 18–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/1073858410379268.
[49] Rameson and Lieberman, "Empathy."
[50] Singer and Lamm, "The Social Neuroscience of Empathy"; Lamm and Majdandžić, "The Role of Shared Neural Activations, Mirror Neurons, and Morality in Empathy--a Critical Comment."

involves regions of the brain that are both anatomically closer to the rest of the body and communicate with our sensory-motor system and internal organs, it is sometimes referred to as the "bottom-up" model or "affective-perceptual empathy."[51]

The second route to empathy is known as "perspective-taking."[52] Much like its usage in everyday life, perspective taking in the context of empathy refers to the conscious effort to "imaginatively project ourselves into the place of the other person."[53] In other words, we might conjure up an image of a polar bear perched on a iceberg in an increasingly warming Artic and attempt, in as far as possible, to imagine what that bear might be experiencing: fear, anxiety, dread, determination. In this case, a person would draw on her prior experience or knowledge of polar bears, as well as her understanding of the creature's identity, needs, and living environment, and the context in which the creature is presented or envisioned, to make an "empathetic guess" about that animal or creature's affective experience. Empathetic perspective-taking differs from general forms of perspective taking (also called theory of mind), which can involve reflection on others' beliefs and intentions,[54] in that it focuses on what the other might be *feeling* rather than what she is *thinking.*[55]

It is worth noting that these two routes for empathy can effect different emotional qualities and give rise to different behaviors and/or motivations for acting.[56] Affective-perceptual empathy tends to produce stronger affective and embodied responses. Cognitive-evaluative empathy, by contrast, can prompt active reasoning about the other's state.[57] While both forms of empathy produced shared neural activations in observer and observed and are linked to compassion and prosocial behaviors,[58] they differentially activate other regions of the brain involved with affective processing and decision-making and thus tend to evoke different behavioral responses.[59] For instance, compassionate concern in the form of pro-environmental behaviors stemming from affective-perceptual empathy may take forms that are more personal, immediate, or physical in

[51] Claus Lamm, Andrew N. Meltzoff, and Jean Decety, "How Do We Empathize with Someone Who Is Not like Us? A Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging Study," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 22, no. 2 (February 2010): 362–76, https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn.2009.21186; Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, and Perry, "Two Systems for Empathy."
[52] Shamay-Tsoory, "The Neural Bases for Empathy."
[53] Singer and Lamm, "The Social Neuroscience of Empathy."
[54] Kanske, Böckler, and Singer, "Models, Mechanisms and Moderators Dissociating Empathy and Theory of Mind."
[55] Belief-focused perspective taking, by contrast, is a more detached process; while it may lead to empathetic sharing, the focus on the other's beliefs or intentions can equally lead to a neutral or even negative orientation to the other. Rameson and Lieberman, "Empathy;" Shamay-Tsoory, "The Neural Bases for Empathy.
[56] Rameson and Lieberman; Singer and Lamm, "The Social Neuroscience of Empathy," 91–92.
[57] Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, and Perry, "Two Systems for Empathy"; Fan et al., "Is There a Core Neural Network in Empathy?"
[58] Singer and Klimecki, "Empathy and Compassion."
[59] Rameson and Lieberman, "Empathy"; Kanske, Böckler, and Singer, "Models, Mechanisms and Moderators Dissociating Empathy and Theory of Mind."

nature, as these may be the most emotionally satisfying and deepen our sense of relational connection. Such responses also tend involve practices that are familiar to us, as affective-perceptual empathy evokes memories of our personal and embodied experiences, thus cuing us to environmental behaviors to which we are already sensitized. By contrast, cognitive-evaluative empathy may engender pro-environmental behaviors that may "not be immediately gratifying, but might produce systemic changes in the target's [earth's] situation."[60] This is because cognitive empathy involves reasoning about the other's emotional state through drawing on our semantic and propositional knowledge about the other and our world. In the case of empathizing with otherkind, cognitive-evaluative empathy may look like trying to imagine what a California tree feels about the growing occurrence of forest fires by calling up one's factual or experiential knowledge of a tree, California forests, or causes of forest fires. This kind of empathetic connecting might then lead to pro-earth decisions that are more remote, abstract, complex or collaborative.

That said, it is likely that the two routes interact, with affective empathy influencing cognitive processes and vice-versa.[61] Moreover, while the kinds of empathetic responses the processes produce differ in terms of affective quality and the prosocial behaviors they prompt, both make valuable and significant contributions to the care of our garden home. Perhaps most significantly, neither of these routes to empathy depend upon the presence of the creature(s) or organisms with whom one seeks to connect or even require the other being to possess the capacity to feel emotions. Rather, a person can experience both cognitive and affective empathy with otherkind by employing their imagination to visualize the affective experience of another being.

What, then, can enhance humans' abilities to empathize with earth? In a recent review of the literature on human empathy for animals, Young et al. point out that a best practice for empathizing with other creatures involves framing their stories in a way that imbues them with "individuality, motivations, and experiences," as well as choosing to reflect on information that stresses the creatures' similarities to us.[62] In making this claim, the authors draw on the last two decades of research indicating the ubiquity and value of anthropomorphizing non-human earth forms, a practice in which humans assign human characteristics, experiences, and motivations to inanimate objects, non-human animals, or plants.[63] Specifically,

[60] Rameson and Lieberman, "Empathy," 104.
[61] Bottom-up processes can facilitate automatic emotion sharing and influence cognitive-evaluative processes, and top-down processes can trigger, enhance, or inhibit the emotion. Rameson and Lieberman; Singer and Lamm, "The Social Neuroscience of Empathy."
[62] Ashley Young, Kathayoon A. Khalil, and Jim Wharton, "Empathy for Animals: A Review of the Existing Literature," *Curator (New York, N.Y.)* 61, no. 2 (2018): 336, https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12257.
[63] Young, Khalil, and Wharton, 334.

anthropomorphizing plants, animals, geologic structures and materials, has been shown to increase feelings of empathy and compassion for non-human species, as well as promote pro-social and conservationist behavior.[64] While researchers indicate that anthropomorphizing animals and other creatures can become an obstacle to "accurate" empathy, namely, when our projections are based on incorrect assumptions about animals' or other creatures' needs, the practice can nevertheless serve as a vital way to "understand animal [and other creatures'] motivations and bring them into a sphere of moral inclusion."[65] In this sense, empathy for earth creatures must be understood as both an affective and cognitive skill by which human creatures can develop relational bonds with and a respect for other earth creatures and that is not necessarily predicated upon the actual emotional response of non-human life forms.

The notion that anthropomorphizing can increase humans' abilities to experience empathy for otherkind is significant, calling into question both scientific and Christian perceptions of anthropomorphism as a sentimental, uncritical, self-centered, and egoistic tendency that potentially endangers non-human life form and reflects a "kind of species provincialism, an almost pathological failure to register the wondrous variety of the natural world."[66] General distrust in anthropomorphism in the West arose in the 19th century alongside the rise of modern science and empirical methods, with scientists viewing anthropomorphism as intellectually "sloppy", a "primitive" and premodern mode of thinking that promoted theories and conceptions of the non-human world on limited empirical evidence.[67] Christians too saw anthropomorphism as theologically suspect, a potential affront to the *imago dei,* which was thought to be exclusive to human beings. Anthropomorphism also was seen to threaten traditional interpretations of Genesis 2 in which human beings are supposedly given a mandate to subdue the earth.

Fears regarding anthropomorphism remain prevalent among contemporary Christian eco-theologians, although for different reasons. Specifically, anthropomorphism is often tied to anthropocentrism, namely a tendency among human beings

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[64] Tam, "Dispositional Empathy with Nature"; Kim-Pong Tam, Sau-Lai Lee, and Melody Manchi Chao, "Saving Mr. Nature: Anthropomorphism Enhances Connectedness to and Protectiveness toward Nature," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 49, no. 3 (2013): 514–21, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.02.001; Schultz, "Empathizing With Nature: The Effects of Perspective-Taking on Concern for Environmental Issues"; U. Bebhard, P Nevers, and E. Billmann-Mahecha, "Moralizing Trees: Anthro- Pomorphism and Identity in Children's Relationship to Nature," in *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature*, ed. Susan D. Clayton and Susan Opotow (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 91–112; Louise Chawla, "Childhood Experiences Associated with Care for the Natural World: A Theoretical Framework for Empirical Results," *Children, Youth and Environments* 17, no. 4 (2007): 144–70; Clifford R. Blizard and Rudy M. Schuster, "Fostering Children's Connections to Natural Places through Cultural and Natural History Storytelling," *Children, Youth and Environments* 17, no. 4 (2007): 171–206.

[65] Young, Khalil, and Wharton, "Empathy for Animals," 335; See also: Frans B. M. de Waal, "Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial: Consistency in Our Thinking about Humans and Other Animals," *Philosophical Topics* 27, no. 1 (1999): 255–280, https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics199927122.

[66] Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman, eds., *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, New Ed Edition (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2006), 4.

[67] Daston and Mitman, 3–5.

to imagine the natural world as existing for human enjoyment and a belief that human beings are unique, superior to, and qualitatively from other animals and species.[68] Many eco-theologians claim that anthropocentrism has contributed to the current ecological crisis and that Christian theology's failure to perceive human beings as part of a wider earth community not only places our planet in peril but erodes our understandings of God as creator and our identity and purpose as creatures of this God. In a break with traditional theological formulations in which humans are seen as the "crown of creation," eco-theologians thus emphasize that all living beings exist in webs of interdependence and interrelationship, that God cares about and is actively involved in the entire creation, and that humans, as inhabitants of earth, must remember and continually recognize and respect the aliveness of our earth and seek its material well-being.[69] In fact, Sallie McFague's "body model",[70] which was ground-breaking in shifting theology away from anthropocentric objectifications and domination of the natural world, proved especially powerful in forwarding a sacramental understanding of the earth that emphasized creation's intrinsic worth and called for humans to see themselves as relatives inhabiting a single oikos, members of an interdependent ecological community belonging to God.

That said, in order to move towards authentic interdependence with and reverence for earth's many creatures, human beings must experience (and not just cognitively affirm) other creatures *as like us*, having intrinsic value and inherent dignity, beings that are indispensable in terms of their contribution to wellbeing of the whole planet. Anthropomorphizing can enable this shift in perception to take place. By exploring and imagining the experiences of other-than-human life forms and attempting to connect with them, we uncover points of similarity between ourselves and otherkind and learn to step outside our perspective to take the perspective of members of the earth community, thereby bringing the natural world into our orbit of concern and (ultimately) practices of care. Importantly, this emphasis on similarity for the sake of building bonds of mutual respect and concern for creation is not to mask or dismiss the alterity of otherkind. In fact, the otherness of the natural world often becomes most apparent to us when our attempts to find a point of connection and shared experience with non-human beings lead us into a startling appreciation of the mystery, difference, and otherness of the many bodies that exist on this planet.

It is essential to emphasize, as a final point, that empathizing is not socially neutral; it has an effect on behavior, which has implications for thinking about its value in ecological religious education. Both ecological psychologists and social

[68] Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman, eds., *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, New Edition (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2006), 4. Young et al. also notes the unique preoccuption with anthropomorphism as a negative construct in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Young, Khalil, and Wharton, "Empathy for Animals," 335; McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 46–48, 57–59.
[69] McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 129–30, 150–52.
[70] McFague, chap. 6; McFague, *The Body of God*, chaps. 4, 6.

neuroscientists understand compassion as a secondary emotional response to an initial experience of empathy. Put simply, empathy is a hinge on which the door of compassion swings. Indeed, empathy is considered to be a proxy for and mediator of compassion – both in terms of brain activation and self-reports - as well as a predictor of prosocial behavior.[71] Moreover, growing research suggests that greater empathetic responses to others' emotional states leads to greater expressions of helping behavior, while weak empathetic responses or other emotions such as "schadenfreude" (gloating), envy, or fear not only result in reduced efforts to help others but can even lead to endorsing harm.[72] Finally, several studies identify both empathy and compassion as central drivers of costly altruism – namely, helping actions taken that come at cost to the self - in contrast to vicarious distress.[73] Significantly, research from environmental psychology corroborates such a hypothesis, with recent studies showing that empathetic interventions such as perspective taking, in contrast to informational ones, as well as trait empathy lead to greater motivation and instances of pro-ecological behavior.[74] The correlation between empathy, compassion, and caring behaviors suggests that empathy, in contrast to other affective experiences, may be one of the most direct routes we have for motivating and sustaining pro-ecological actions.

To circle back to the original question then – namely, whether it is possible to experience empathy for inanimate beings and elements of the ecosystem – the answer is 'yes'. Rather than an emotional experience that must be reciprocated by non-human entities, empathy for earth is a human capacity that serves as an avenue for expanding of humanity's perception of the earth as "kin" and heightening its sense of obligation to the non-human world. Moreover, anthropomorphism, insofar as it serves the end of empathetic engagement with otherkind, must be treated as an invaluable resource in advancing the shifts in

[71] C. Daniel Batson and Adam A. Powell, "Altruism and Prosocial Behavior," in *Handbook of Psychology* (American Cancer Society, 2003), 463–84, https://doi.org/10.1002/0471264385.wei0519; Jean Decety and William John Ickes, eds., *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, Social Neuroscience Series (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009); Singer and Klimecki, "Empathy and Compassion."

[72] FeldmanHall et al., "Empathic Concern Drives Costly Altruism"; Mina Cikara and Susan T. Fiske, "Bounded Empathy: Neural Responses to Outgroup Targets' (Mis)Fortunes," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 23, no. 12 (December 2011): 3791–3803, https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn_a_00069.

[73] FeldmanHall et al., "Empathic Concern Drives Costly Altruism"; Vani A. Mathur et al., "Neural Basis of Extraordinary Empathy and Altruistic Motivation," *NeuroImage* 51, no. 4 (July 15, 2010): 1468–75, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2010.03.025; Megan M Filkowski, R Nick Cochran, and Brian W Haas, "Altruistic Behavior: Mapping Responses in the Brain," *Neuroscience and Neuroeconomics* 5 (2016): 65–75, https://doi.org/10.2147/NAN.S87718.

[74] To suggest that empathy might serve as a direct route to pro-ecological behavior does not negate the contributions of other values or more propositional, moral commitments. In addition, it is important to note that some researchers have a less positive perspective of empathy's role in prosocial behavior. See for instance, Lamm and Majdandžić, "The Role of Shared Neural Activations, Mirror Neurons, and Morality in Empathy--a Critical Comment."

perception and action that current Christian ecological theologies argue are vital in order to faithfully and strategically preserve and care for planet earth, rather than a regression to an anthropocentric mentality.

Practices for Empathetic Connecting in Theo-ecological Education

I have argued, thus far, that both Christian theology and scriptures offer a convincing rationale for empathizing with earth creatures, as well as a way to understand other-kind as subjects who possess agency and feelings. Research from environmental psychology and social neuroscience then provided further evidence for the plausibility and value of empathizing with earth creatures and also enhanced our understanding of how empathy functions and how it might be practiced. Specifically, I contended that human beings, through both anthropomorphizing and imagination, can begin to cultivate, affectively and cognitively, an empathetic connection with earth creatures, and this, in turn, becomes an important motivator to engage in pro-ecological actions for the sake of the health our planet. What remains is to consider how religious educators might incorporate practices of empathetic connecting into their indoor and outdoor "classrooms?" In the following, I propose four "guidelines" that can serve as jumping off points for fostering empathetic connecting into religious ecological education.

Exercise the Senses. As we have seen above, empathy, from the perspective of both the Christian scriptures and social neuroscience, is a sensory activity. Touch, eye contact, hearing – God uses each of these to connect empathetically with us, and we, in turn, use them to connect empathetically with others. Specifically, we employ our senses to empathize with others in two ways: consciously, as a way to understand what the other might be feeling, as is the case when we search out someone's eyes or reach our hand out to console, and unconsciously, as when the experience of another's fear widens our pupils or sensitizes us to sounds in our surroundings. Both forms of sensory engagement are critical for understanding the other generally and empathizing with her specifically, since looking, seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting provide us with fundamental information about the situation and person before us, as well as cue us to what he or she may be feeling.[75]

Given the significant role of the senses in empathy, incorporating sensory engagement with our ecological community into religious education would thus seem a natural first step for educators concerned about ecological sustainability. That said, the senses often receive short shrift in theological education, with our pedagogies prioritizing verbal avenues of communication at expense of non-verbal, body-based ones. We thus cannot take as a given that people will instinctively relate to the natural world through their noses, their eyes, their tongues, or their hands. Religious educators looking to help people connect

[75] Additionally, sensory engagement also modulates empathy, as underscored above in the studies on consoling touch and changes in visual perspective, suggesting that intentional use of the senses in our encounters with others can heighten our abilities to empathize.

empathetically with earth's various life-forms will thus want to create opportunities for people to both spontaneously use their senses to connect with such creatures and deliberately hone their senses. [76] For example, one might use audio clips or videos to help people learn the language of one particular animal. Another practice might be to have learners "get to know" a specific life-form – say a tree or plant – through the use of all five senses. Such activities can strengthen learners' capacities to deploy their senses for the sake of understanding and relating to the earth, as well as offer them opportunities to relate to, come to know, and deepen relational bonds with one of the members of our earth community through non-verbal, body-based means.

Manage Overwhelm. Foreboding news headlines, gut-wrenching documentaries, pictures of creatures in peril, apocalyptic language in discussions of climate change: all of these tend to evoke strong affective responses, whether fear, sadness, distress, anger or resentment. On the one hand, provocative or disturbing images and language can be useful in illuminating the magnitude of earth's distress and ecological decline. On the other, messaging and other media that depict earth's suffering can evoke complementary emotions, such as distress, overwhelm, and grief, and people often encounter such images or language in situations where they do not have sufficient time to fully attend to and thus fully process their negative message. As we saw above, this kind of complementary distress is distinct from empathy, and the two experiences lead in opposite directions, the former towards compassionate engagement and the latter towards withdrawal. Unless we give learners time to pause and notice their reactions to the images or information and identify with the subjects they depict, it is likely that they will focus on reducing their own distress rather than sharing in the experience of and caring for the other.

Managing emotional overwhelm and reducing the possibility of anxiety and distress is thus essential when it comes to empathetic connecting with the members of the ecological community – both humankind and otherkind. In fact, as Grenfell-Lee underscores," we do respond, empathetically, to situations that engage us passionately; but deeply held cultural and individual fears impair our empathic ability to identify with and respond to the socio-ecological crisis."[77] One way to prevent such distress or overwhelm when introducing activities that may evoke sadness, fear, or despair is to simply identify the goal of the activity or practice. For instance, if we want people to show a film that documents one human community - and the stretch of river upon which they depend - facing extreme drought due to climate change, we might acknowledge the evocative

[76] John Muir is a prime example of one who regularly and consciously engaged his senses in relating to the natural world. For instance, describing an overnight stay in the high Sierras, he writes, "These are the best bedchambers the high mountains afford – snug as squirrel nest, well-ventilated, full of spicy odors, and with plenty a wind-played needles to sing one asleep…The night wind began to blow soon after dark; at first only a gentle breathing, but increasing toward midnight to a rough gale that fell upon my leafy roof in ragged surges like a cascade, bearing wild sounds from the crags overhead. The waterfall sang in chorus, filling the old ice foundation with its solemn roar, and seeming to increase in power as the night advanced – fit voice for a such a landscape." John Muir, *Wilderness Essays*, Rev. ed (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2011), 115.
[77] Grenfell-Lee, "The Missing Link: Creation Empathy as the Foundation of Christian Mission," 166.

nature of the film and stress up front that the purpose of this activity is empathize with both the humans and the land. Reminding learners of the intent of the experience can help them focus their attention on the emotional experiences of the subjects in the film, rather than their personal feelings in the moment. Additionally, creating opportunities for people to connect with otherkind across various emotional experiences – joy and excitement, as well as pain – can help to alleviate the potential for empathetic distress to move into the foreground of one's relationship with earth's creatures. Finally, reducing the possibility for empathetic distress might simply begin by alleviating or helping people to alleviate or address other sources of stress in their lives. As we saw above, positive emotional states, in contrast to negative ones or those associated with stress, lead to greater empathetic responses to others. Given the growing numbers of the US population suffering from depression,[78] including student populations,[79] thinking strategically about avenues to reduce or address learners' stress is crucial if we want to create space for empathetic connecting with otherkind.

That said, connecting empathetically with otherkind and humankind in an age of climate change is hard: it necessitates sharing in others' pain, as well as facing realities that not only question our ways of living but evoke a profound sense of loss. Even when our empathetic connecting leads to compassion rather than distress, we may still find that ours and our learners' empathy has become fatigued. Providing space for communal processing, leading people in practices of self-empathy, creating opportunities for individual and corporate lament – these too are crucial tools for managing overwhelm and replenishing our capacities to remain both fully present to others and passionately engaged in the work of ecological care and justice.[80]

Practice Perspective-Taking. How might the polar feel about the waning winter ice? How does the majestic humpback whale feel about the plastic bottles that proliferate in our oceans? Engaging in such imaginative inquiry represents one of the central ways we can engage empathetically with our ecological community in the context of religious ecological education, for two reasons. First, as underscored above, perspective taking allows us to intentionally engage with another being without her necessarily being present. Given that few educators have the opportunity to teach fully outdoors and none of us has full access to the multitude of creatures and land areas that comprise our planet, perspective taking practices are both pragmatic and equalizing tools. Additionally, employing perspective taking, as opposed to live encounters with creatures, while

[78] A. H. Weinberger et al., "Trends in Depression Prevalence in the USA from 2005 to 2015: Widening Disparities in Vulnerable Groups," *Psychological Medicine* 48, no. 8 (June 2018): 1308–15, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291717002781.
[79] James January et al., "Prevalence of Depression and Anxiety among Undergraduate University Students in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review Protocol," *Systematic Reviews* 7 (April 10, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-018-0723-8.
[80] Tallesyn Grenfell-Lee, "Deep Green Resilience" (Acadia Seminar: Guest Lecture, Boston, MA, March 29, 2019).

potentially producing less intense affective responses, has the advantage of allowing us to extend our imaginative encounters and thus develop greater empathy overall.

Second, perspective taking exercises that require reflection on the emotional state of the other invite affective reasoning rather than logical deduction. For instance, to imagine how an Arctic-loving polar bear feels each winter as the ice around her shrinks, is not an activity accomplished through factual analysis. To truly reflect upon how a polar might feel, I must engage my affective faculties: I must, for a moment, try to become the bear, to stand in its paws, to feel its heartbeat, to look out through its black, bold eyes, or else visualize myself beside her, stroking her coat, running my eyes along her crest-fallen brow, noticing her somber gaze. Yet it is this kind of perspective taking, in which all one's attention is focused on intimately knowing and sharing in the bear's affective state, that enables my own body and brain processes to trigger in me the very feelings that I imagine the bear to be feeling. In this way, the deliberate, affective reasoning that perspective taking affords thus leads to an experience of empathetic connecting, such that I not only perhaps "know" this bear more deeply but feel myself united to her and even "converted" to the work of seeing to her survival.[81] Of course, incorporating perspective taking into the learning context can take many forms apart from visualization: writing poetry, participating in dramatic reenactment, working with art or other materials, actively engaging earth's creatures as depicted in films, and reading and crafting poetry. Regardless of the activity, however, the main focus of the activity should be to engage in the emotional state of the creature or to translate the other's affective experience into a form to be shared with others. Using perspective-taking to engage affectively with earth's creatures ensures that, even if we are not able to physically interact with these others, we nevertheless heighten our psychological proximity to them and thus shrink our sense of distance.

Use "You" Language. As we saw above, paying attention to how perceived similarity, familiarity, and overall social relationship influence empathy is critical when it comes to connecting empathetically with "otherkind," as well as the vulnerable communities and persons who unfairly suffer the effects of earth's distress. For empathetic connecting to flourish, we need must learn to see creatures as "our kind," members of our ecological community and partners in keeping our planet. We also need to expand our circles of kinship to include those whom we do not perceive as similar or familiar to us. While

[81] Aragonés Sevillano et. al.'s, in their study of ecologically focused perspective taking, provides evidence that empathic perspective taking and engagement with visual images of animals in distress leads to an increase in environmental concern. However, the kind of environmental concern that resulted from the exercise was modulated by the extent to which the perspective taking led to empathic (personal) distress, with those experiencing empathic distress more likely to exhibit egoistic environmental concern and those experiencing empathy for the animals in the images more likely to express biospheric environmental concern. This study reinforces the need for my previous suggestion, namely "managing overwhelm." Sevillano, Aragonés, and Schultz, "Perspective Taking, Environmental Concern, and the Moderating Role of Dispositional Empathy."

empathy has the potential to contribute to this transformation of vision and creation of a wider kin-mmunity, it is not immune to similarity biases, whether conscious or unconscious. Given that many of these biases are "built-in," such that our brains automatically correlate similarity and familiarity (physical and social) with trustworthiness, ecologically-conscious religious educators will need to craft opportunities for empathetic connecting that work with both bottom-up and top-down processes.

One of the ways to do this is to shift how we talk about the diverse members of the ecological community. Indeed, "anthropomorphizing" earth, the natural world and other life-forms has been shown to deepen the sense of connection people feel towards creation, as well as lead to pro-environmental behaviors.[82] Thus, referring to creatures and other life-forms as "persons," while hardly a full descriptor of these others, ironically helps us to see them as similar to us. Other identifiers such as kin, "ourkind," brother or sister, friend, partner, teacher, mentor, sage, or prophet, also help us re-categorize earth's creatures as familiar fellows, which in turn makes us more capable of empathizing. Finally, engaging in dialogue with earth's creatures – and using "you" language to do it – can lead to an integration of those others into our own self-concept, again increasing our potential for connecting empathetically with them.

Conclusion: Towards an Engaged Ecopedagogy

Ecological pedagogies, if they are to be truly ecological, must be holistic: they must honor the integrity of our lives as embodied, feeling creatures who come to "know" not only through intellectual reflection, ecological skill-building, and eco-justice but also through emotive engagement. As we have seen above, privileging empathy as a primary form of this emotive engagement with our earthy kin offers a way to both deepen our relational bonds with the earth's creatures and arouse the wellsprings of compassion that lead to pro-ecological action and the work of eco-justice, both in our local communities and a policy level. At the same time, empathy for earth, while a necessary component of a religious eco-pedagogy orientated toward a conversion to creation, is not sufficient by itself. On the contrary, eco-literacy - by which I mean both ecological and eco-

[82] Tam, "Dispositional Empathy with Nature"; Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson, and H. Lyn Miles, eds., *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals*, SUNY Series in Philosophy and Biology (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Adam Waytz, John Cacioppo, and Nicholas Epley, "Who Sees Human? The Stability and Importance of Individual Differences in Anthropomorphism," *Perspectives on Psychological Science : A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science* 5, no. 3 (May 1, 2014): 219–32, https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691610369336.

theological literacy - as well as ecological activism and service work can and often do play a vital role in supporting the work of empathetic connecting with earth's creatures. When we understand, for instance, the kind of ecosystem the thrush needs to flourish or research the relationship between the Nepalese cultural-economic practices and global warming, our efforts to understand and share in these individuals' affective experiences are enhanced. Likewise, when we engage in hands-on climate-advocacy work or help to manage a community garden, we not only gain a greater grasp of earth's needs; we also cultivate an increased sense of affiliation with and respect for the soil and the local human and non-human brothers and sisters that depend upon them. A pedagogy that prioritizes the nurturing of empathetic connecting, thus, is not in competition with practices of eco-literacy or ecological justice. Rather, they form a "trinity" of sorts: each one intimately related with and contributing to the other, yet all possessing their own distinct characters.

What might this interrelationship between the above approaches mean for formulating a pedagogy that moves us to compassion, solidarity, and strategic action on behalf of our earth and those who suffer its distress? May I suggest that taken together, empathetic connection, eco-literacy, and ecological activism can form the backbone of an engaged eco-pedagogy that leads persons to committed, compassionate, and politically significant action on behalf of our planet earth. Such a pedagogy would not only provide learners with equal opportunity to engage what are often referred to as "hands, head, and heart;" it would also highlight the intimate relationship between all three and create opportunities for learners to bring them together around a common aim of seeking justice, healing, and hope for our planet. While the engaged ecological pedagogy I am proposing cannot – and ought not – replace or substitute for the vital work of political advocacy or global commitments regarding emissions and environmental protections, it certainly can – and ought to – support the wider effort to effect to policy changes at national and global levels by converting imaginations, expanding persons' circles of moral concern, and motivating them to take action. Moreover, such a pedagogy, through its performances of empathetic concern and care, can raise questions about and help to contest social patterns and beliefs in religious communities that devalue the planet and the creatures with whom we share it. In sum, while empathetic connecting, eco-literacy, and ecological justice and service are certainly valuable on their own, when they joined together into a single pedagogical approach they can nurture a compassion that not only moves us towards responsible creation-care, but ultimately converts us to creation's cause. When God comes looking then, perhaps we will be able to say: Lord, *here*, *here in our arms*, is your creation.

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Ecological Peace Education: Toward a Pedagogy for Climate Justice

Abstract: The urgency of the environmental crisis and resulting climate violence must impel educators toward an ecological peace education and a pedagogy for climate justice. This paper will utilize theological and pedagogical frameworks from scholars in peace education to evaluate the existential plight of climate change and suggest epistemological shifts toward ecological consciousness for educating in the Anthropocene, the era of human intervention that has resulted in environmental destruction, resource exploitation, greenhouse gas emission, and what Pope Francis has identified as "throwaway culture."

Ecological Peace Education: Toward a Pedagogy for Climate Justice

Introduction:

Theological education toward ecological ends is the soteriological and eschatological work of the twenty-first century. Can the earth be saved? What does cosmic salvation look like in a time of climate catastrophe? What does human salvation and liberation look like in the face of environmental destruction? Is humanity actually looking at extinction? While these are ecological questions, they are also distinctly theological questions, and theological education must nurture in learners a strong desire to urgently respond as imaginative ecological citizens– proactive inhabitants committed to imagining earth-healing solutions. Exploring these questions during this critical moment in history is the foundation of my own grounded, practical eco-theology and discernment of an ethical educational paradigm in response to climate catastrophe. The environmental crisis is the greatest existential threat of the twenty-first century, requiring faithful and urgent responses from practical theology and theological education across the board. This paper is an effort to further develop my own theory and practice as an ecologically-responsive scholar-practitioner in these trying times.

The urgency of the environmental crisis and resulting climate violence must impel educators toward an ecological peace education and a pedagogy for climate justice. This paper will utilize theological and pedagogical frameworks from scholars in peace education to evaluate the existential plight of climate change and suggest epistemological shifts toward ecological consciousness for educating in the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene refers to the "unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth's history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems."[1] The Anthropocene is the era of human intervention that has resulted in environmental destruction, resource exploitation, greenhouse gas emission, and what Pope Francis has identified as "throwaway culture," all leading to the brink of climate catastrophe.[2] Climate change and ecological devastation are the most urgent social issues of the twenty-first century, and consequently, educators must discern processes and practices for inviting learners into a culture of robust, meaningful, and effective response to this emergency.

Through engaging with the work of various scholars in peace education, this paper will utilize the *See, Judge, Act* model familiar to Catholic social teaching and the Catholic intellectual tradition to evaluate the reality of climate violence and offer suggestions for how educators can engage learners through a pedagogy for climate justice. The *see, judge, act* model, or pastoral circle, was first explored by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot in their 1980 book, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. The pastoral circle has provided a model for practical and pastoral settings to critically engage with social problems and to respond faithfully to injustice. While this model has been critiqued and problematized by some in recent years (scholarship beyond the scope of this paper)[3], my own position as an educator, scholar-practitioner in community-engaged learning, and a Protestant minister employed at a Catholic college with up to a third of our student population identifying with the "nones," I propose that the *see, judge, act* model serves as an accessible framework within my context for bridging religious theory and faithful practice in response to ecological concerns.

In the first section of this essay, "See: Social Analysis," I will describe the injustice of climate and environmental violence and its relation to education in general and faith-based higher education in particular. I will then transition to the "Judge: Ethical Reflection" section of the paper where I will engage with various peace education scholars to offer a deeper analysis of climate violence. This section will explore the criticisms of theological *dis*imagination by Mai-

Anh Le Tran, objectification as violence by Kelly Brown Douglas, and the neutrality of education by Paulo Freire. In particular, this section will assert how these critiques can speak to the climate violence of our day. The final section, "Act: Pedagogical Praxis" will offer ecological epistemic shifts grounded in the above critiques to mobilize educators toward a pedagogy for climate justice. These shifts will respond to Le Tran, Douglas, and Freire respectively with movements toward theo-ecological imagination, I-Thou relationships as peace, and ecological consciousness for a liberative education.

See: Social Analysis

Climate violence is becoming an increasingly urgent matter of justice in this age of the Anthropocene. Climate change and environmental disasters must be understood as climate violence given that they are overwhelmingly caused and/or exacerbated by the exploitative human structures of capitalism and industrialization. The extent of the changing climate that we are experiencing in 2024 is not a natural occurrence but a direct result of exploitative systems that harm both people and planet. Some specific examples of climate violence include respiratory diseases caused by pollution, climate displacement and removal from the land, environmental racism, and climate change's exacerbation of gender-based violence. More generally, climate violence is seen in the infinite extraction of finite resources, exploitation of the land and living beings, and the theft of a habitable planet and a livable future.

Climate violence intersects with every other issue of justice, but particularly the matter of access to education. Globally, the effects of climate change impact young people's access to quality education with the climate crisis disrupting forty million children's education every year.[4] Specifically, for example, victims of climate displacement in Central America see their right to education compromised[5] and schools have been forced to close in the Northeastern United States due to crippling heat.[6] Extreme temperatures, school closures, transitions to remote learning, inaccessibility to schools due to severe weather events, and long-term climate displacement are all consequences of climate change that disrupt student learning and/or reduce educational quality. Long term, climate change may also impact sleep cycles and quality of sleep[7] as well as access to healthful foods.[8] Going to school on a lack of sleep and an empty stomach interfere with student learning as well. In addition to the immediate physical impacts of climate change, youth are also experiencing the effects of eco-anxiety and climate grief, making it more difficult to concentrate on academic content in and out of the classroom. This is apparent, for example, in the youth who ask, "Why should I study for a future I won't have?" or "What's the point of working on my education if we don't deal with [the climate crisis] first?"[9] Soon, educators must come to terms with the reality that climate change reaches into every corner of daily life and is bound to impact student learning either directly or indirectly, if it has not already.

Climate violence is particularly relevant to the context of higher education and its students, as they are the generation that will feel the worst effects of climate change and its resulting violence in the years to come. Following in the footsteps of climate activists such as Greta Thunberg,[10] the Water Protectors of Standing Rock[11], and the Montana youth who brought legal action against their government for robbing them of a safe and healthy future,[12] young people all across the world are deeply aware of the realities of climate injustice and have been urging the adult decision-makers in their lives to take seriously the urgency of the climate crisis. Youth are inviting adults–including educators–into this reality to discern and imagine creative solutions together so that young people will actually have a livable future. Higher education is fertile ground for imagining creative solutions to large social problems. The passion, enthusiasm, and motivation for radical climate action already exist in our youth; our institutions of higher

learning can provide them with the insight, strategies, and tools necessary to manifest such climate action.

This is especially true for Catholic higher education as the history of Catholic social teaching and the Catholic intellectual tradition call us to justice for people and planet. Catholic social teaching calls us to honor the life and dignity of the human person, stand in solidarity with the poor and vulnerable, live into our communal responsibilities, and care for God's creation, all of which are intimately intertwined with the climate crisis.[13] Additionally, the Catholic intellectual tradition has suggested the need for both faith and reason working together in order to face social, political, philosophical, and ethical dilemmas. To face an emergency as vast and deep as climate change, we are going to need the heart *and* the head, the intellect *and* the will, the prophetic *and* the pragmatic. Faith and reason together give us hope, and hope is what will move humanity into a reparative relationship with the earth. More recently, Pope Francis has explicitly called all Catholic institutions to intentional, urgent, and meaningful shifts toward building a more sustainable, resilient, and regenerative world as a requirement of faithful persons. The Laudato Si Movement invites all Catholics, as well as all people of good conscience, to care for our common home through the community work of schools, parishes, non-profits, and other institutions. Given the gravity of the climate crisis and the resulting ecological violence that is intimately related in a multitude of ways to education in general and faith-based higher education in particular, educators must move toward a pedagogy for climate justice no matter their field or discipline.

Judge: Ethical Evaluation

Climate violence is one of the socially accepted forms of violence that Mai-Anh Le Tran suggests is grounded in a theological *dis*imagination that stifles critical thinking and new ways of knowing. Le Tran offers the following definition of violence: "[W]hether passive or active, intra- or interspecies, instantaneous or intergenerational (and even intermillennial), violence is *a distortion of the sacred vitality and intimacies* of bodies, of communities, of social structures, and of earthly habitats."[14] Indeed, Le Tran identifies "the slow yet lethal violence of biodestruction, or ecocide"[15] and continues that violence is that which violates the essential aliveness of another.[16] In Catholic social teaching, this is inherent in the principle of honoring the life and dignity of the human person as well as care for God's creation, as so much of creation has an inherent aliveness that humans must not violate. It is the distortion of the sacred vitality and intimacy of bodies, communities, and ecosystems that have led to the violence of climate change.[17] If violence is anything that deprives one of the fullness of life on this earth, as Le Tran suggests, then climate change is one of the most violent realities of our time.

With this definition of violence in mind, Le Tran argues that such violation of one's aliveness and sacredness must have pedagogical roots that have rationalized such subtle, yet global violence toward the earth's being. Le Tran suggests that there are public stories, images, institutions, and discourses that undermine a capacity to bear witness to new ways of knowing and being in the world.[18] In other words, our socio-cultural environments perpetuate an anesthetized narrative about what is right and wrong, or even what is true and false, that numbs individuals and communities into accepting the narrative rather than challenging, critiquing, or resisting it. This has become an even greater issue in a world of social media, algorithms, and 24-hour news cycles. We are fed the same narrative in an echo chamber of political pundits and social media influencers to confirm our already existing biases rather than exploring new ways of imagining how the world *could* be, how the world *ought* to be. It is the lack of this critical and creative power that Le Tran explains as *dis*imagination that has lulled humanity into an

acceptance of the more implicit and subtle forms of harm that emerge slowly over time, such as climate change.

This theological *dis*imagination has been particularly stifling of ecological ways of knowing that could foster new insights or reflections in response to humanity's disconnect from nature, a disconnect that has fueled the environmental crisis. Historically, the Genesis account(s) have cultivated a sense of human superiority/domination over and disassociation from the natural world. In the scriptures, there is a distinctiveness to the human person that Christian individuals and communities have read as tacit permission to endlessly extract and exploit the earth as a resource rather than treat it as an interdependent haven and a home. This hermeneutic has been passed down from generation to generation resulting in a theological *dis*imagination when it comes to understanding humanity's relationship to the rest of God's good creation. This hermeneutic has, indeed, suffocated critical thinking and public dialogue about the role of the human person in a divinely created ecosystem, which is, by definition, theological *dis*imagination.[19] The "Act: Pedagogical Praxis" section will offer an alternative to the eco-theological *dis*imagination that has propelled us into a climate emergency.

This human superiority and disconnect from the rest of creation also speaks to Kelly Brown Douglas' identification of violence as objectification. While Douglas speaks directly to the cycles of anti-Black violence that are woven through American systems and structures, so much of her argument about what constitutes violence is applicable and adaptable to cycles of climate violence. Douglas argues that "[a]ny ideology or system of thought that objectifies another human being must be understood as violent"[20] and "anything that would devalue the life of another is violent."[21] Again, while she is referring specifically to violence against marginalized human bodies, the claims that objectification is violence and the devaluing of life is violence are easily transferable to humanity's relationship with the rest of the created world. Too often, human communities have viewed the earth as an object for our taking rather than as a subject with whom we enter into relationship. We have devalued the life of the flora and fauna and the life that they provide for the whole of the ecosystem and have destroyed and killed the life-giving reality of God's good creation. By seeing the trees, animals, waterways, soil, and air as objects to be exploited instead of subjects to be cared for, humans have exacerbated the environmental crisis in which we now find ourselves.

This objectification of divinely-created life is not only found in our individual and communal actions but is embedded in our socio-cultural systems, structures, and institutions. In her discussion of anti-Black violence, Douglas argues that "violence includes not simply the physical brutality meant to harm bodies, but also the systems, structures, narratives, and constructs that do harm."[22] Capitalism, consumerism, racism, sexism, patriarchy, and militarism all inherently contribute to environmental degradation. These mentalities of superiority, domination, selfishness, and destruction have spilled over into humanity's treatment of the natural world. When humans come to believe that all that exists, exists solely for our livelihood and not with inherent value of its own, we come to use and abuse rather than respect and nurture. Related to the embeddedness of violence, Douglas discusses *the violence that violence creates*.[23] Climate change not only results in the violence of ecological disasters, unhealthy air/water quality, displacement, and environmental illnesses, climate change also exacerbates interpersonal violence and war. When environmental conditions lead to scarcity of resources, deathly temperatures, and unsafe living conditions, people resort to desperate behavior resulting in violence between individuals, communities, and nation states.

To respond to objectification as violence, Douglas suggests a pedagogical shift in constructing counter-narratives of valuing life and livelihood that, ultimately, must disrupt the

collective consciousness of a people.[24] For Douglas, these much-needed counter-narratives can be grounded in the story of Jesus defeating the cross. The cross was the death-dealing status quo of Jesus' day, much like state-sanctioned anti-Black violence and climate change today. The cross was the visible symbol of the "culture of death" of the empire.[25] Douglas suggests, however, that Jesus imposed a new counter-narrative to the cross, the empire, and the culture of death through Jesus's nonviolent response and ultimate defeat of the cross in his resurrection. As she explains, "God responds in a way that negates and denounces the violence that perverts and demeans the integrity of human lives. God accomplishes this by affirming life, as seen in the very resurrection of Jesus."[26] God's pedagogy involves nonviolent, life-giving, life-affirming counter-narratives to the death-dealing status quo of this world. Breaking the cycle of climate violence through life-giving and life-affirming practices (tree-planting, renewable energy, plant-based diets, honoring indigenous lands, etc.) is essential to creating ecological peace and climate justice. I will suggest that the new non-violent counter-narrative we need today is rooted in I-Thou relationships–also demonstrated by Jesus–instead of the violent objectification of all created life.

The cultivation of counter-narratives for a life-giving and life-affirming world is also at work in Paulo Freire's critique of education and religion as neutral forces in the face of violence and injustice. For Freire, the institutions of religion and education are situated profoundly in history and cannot exist apart from the socio-cultural realities of the past, present, and future. While religion and education have attempted to maintain a posture that is removed, objective, and observant, the truth is that the neutrality of these institutions is ultimately an illusion. Freire explains that "we can no longer speak of the neutrality of the churches or the neutrality of education… 'Washing one's hands' of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral."[27] Education and religion function either to maintain the status quo or to stand in opposition and resistance to it. In Freire's counter-narrative, education and religion are inherently political and must be used for political ends, namely human liberation. I would expand Freire's call for a liberating education to *all* of creation, adopting Elizabeth Johnson's view that God's love and salvation extends to the whole created Cosmos.[28]

Similar to Le Tran's language of "imagination" and Douglas' language of "counter-narratives," Freire advocates the need for an embodied change of consciousness which he identifies as "conscientization" in order to nurture active, educated citizens. According to Freire, education should nurture consciousness and praxis, action and reflection, imagination and involvement all for the sake of a liberative transformation in the world.[29] Education is not the mere depositing of isolated data for the sake of uselessly informed individuals. Education is the exploration of what has been, what is, and what could be and how each of these are intimately woven together. As learners explore what has been and what is, they should be compelled to live in such a way that manifests a more just, peaceful, safe, and joyful world for all the earth. This is the education for liberation for which Freire advocates; when we live in a world of violence, injustice, and exploitation of people and planet, to educate one into a static position would be irresponsible. Freire uses the theological language of Easter and resurrection to describe what should happen on an ongoing basis when it comes to education: learners must die to old ways of knowing and be reborn into new ways of knowing every single day.[30]

Freire's call for the non-neutrality of education and new liberative ways of knowing is especially pertinent to the climate emergency we are living through today. The urgent nature of the environmental crisis and the resulting harm and interpersonal violence requires the immediate response from all individuals, communities, governments, and institutions. There is

still time to act to mitigate the worst impacts of the crisis, but that window of opportunity is growing smaller every day. Thus, our educational policies, processes, and practices cannot remain neutral to this ongoing global disaster. Our climate catastrophe is going to require the creative and imaginative work of every field, every discipline, every career in order to truly combat the worst of the damage. As Freire explains, "I cannot permit myself to be a mere spectator. On the contrary, I must demand my place in the process of change."[31] Indeed, there is so much that needs to change to nurture a livable planet. We must intentionally–and with a bias toward justice–educate individuals into environmental law, environmental health, environmental policy, climate-friendly production, and ecological consciousness in any and all vocational paths. This ecological consciousness is the epistemological shift that I will suggest in the "Act: Pedagogical Praxis" section next.

Act: Pedagogical Praxis

Given the power of the dominant narrative and status quo that has historically educated learners into complaisance or complicity, each of the scholars above argue for the need for epistemological shifts–imagination, counter-narratives, conscientization–in order to operate from pedagogies for peace and justice. Peace education requires a change in consciousness that operates outside of typical or traditional ways of knowing in order to manifest a new world of justice, equity, liberation, and love. Peace education is a prophetic education; peace education is much like the biblical prophets who saw all that was wrong with the world and envisioned a new way of being and called the community to *live into* that new way of being. This change of consciousness and change of being are critical to address the climate violence and environmental injustice of the twenty-first century. This final section will employ the work of the above scholars to offer the critical shifts in consciousness and being to move educators toward a pedagogy for climate justice.

Drawing on Le Tran's theological *dis*imagination, I propose that the necessary epistemological shift for a pedagogy for climate justice is the fostering of a theo-ecological imagination. In her book, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, Maria Harris argues that "[i]magination characteristically looks at reality from the reversed, unnoticed side."[32] Educators must cultivate in learners an ecological imagination that looks at the reality of the climate crisis from the reversed, unnoticed side of possibility. When humanity is overwhelmed with climate data that immobilizes, we must nurture in students a world of possibilities to respond. Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson's Climate Action Venn Diagram is an excellent tool for helping students discern how they can creatively and imaginatively respond to the climate crisis. Too often, youth feel limited in what they can do to respond to the climate crisis, believing they must go work for an environmental non-profit or become a climate scientist.

Image 1: Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson's Climate Action Venn Diagram[33]

This is, of course, the *dis*imagination that Le Tran speaks of, and our pedagogy must invite students to think critically and imaginatively about how their gifts, skills, talents, and passions can contribute to climate justice by looking at the reversed, unnoticed side. I argue that this is a *theo*-ecological imagination because Johnson's venn diagram is closely related to Frederick Buechner's claim that the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. This work is, indeed, a divine calling from a Creator God who loves all of creation and desires for it a thriving existence. Our climate action is a sacred ecological calling with a pedagogy that converts us *toward* the earth.[34]

The second epistemological shift toward a pedagogy for climate justice is from Douglas' objectification as violence to I-Thou relationships as peace. The I-Thou relationship was first explored by Martin Buber in 1937 to describe a way of being in the world that recognized the Sacred with which all we come in contact. The I-Thou relationship is in contrast to the I-It relationship which is the objectification that denies the life and dignity of an other that Douglas critiques. Buber explains, "One cannot divide one's life between an actual relationship to God and an inactual I-It relationship to the world - praying to God in truth and utilizing the world. Whoever knows the world as something to be utilized knows God the same way."[35] When we objectify creation, we inherently objectify the Creator, moving us ever deeper into I-It relationships with the world. There are several pedagogical practices for cultivating I-Thou relationships between learners and the natural world. Educators could follow in the footsteps of Kathleen O'Gorman, for example, and invite students to give a voice to the plants, animals, waterways, or the earth itself either as literary characters or as members of the educational community.[36] Additionally, educators could look at the Forest School model that seeks to return humankind back to intimate kinship with nature instead of unnaturally locked away in classrooms for eight hours a day.[37] Look for opportunities to learn in, from, through, and with the earth to rebuild humanity's intrinsic relatedness to the rest of the natural world.

The final epistemological shift toward a pedagogy for climate justice is from Freire's critique of the neutrality of education to a liberative ecological consciousness of education. As has already been established, education cannot be neutral in the face of our current climate emergency. Education must intentionally move learners toward climate action and environmental response for the sake of the survival of the human species. Thus, educators cannot promote neutral ways of knowing, but must nurture ecological ways of knowing to liberate all of creation from the climate crisis. Nel Noddings' suggestion that we "stretch the curriculum from within" is particularly helpful in fostering ecological consciousness.[38] The climate crisis cannot be solved with one class, one subject, one field or discipline. It should not be isolated into a specific category or course (particularly an elective). To truly combat climate change, educators must embed ecological education into every subject that is taught. We cannot cultivate a liberative ecological consciousness if ecological concerns are compartmentalized.

Conclusion:

The climate crisis is one of the biggest challenges facing educators today while also providing one of the greatest opportunities. Educators must lean into the reality of climate change and the ways it is impacting their students, classrooms, and communities and embrace new pedagogical approaches toward ecological peace education and climate justice. This is a prophetic task in naming and claiming the pervasive climate violence while simultaneously envisioning new ways of knowing/being and inviting others into an alternative reality of eco-flourishing. This will require shifts in consciousness through imagination, counter-narratives, and conscientization that are grounded in and lead to ecological ways of knowing and relating to

the world. Only through the interdisciplinary educative work of all of us will we be able to nurture a generation of climate justice and heal the totality of God's good creation.

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[1] "Anthropocene," *National Geographic*, October 19, 2023, https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/anthropocene/

[2] Francis, Laudato si' (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), sec. 16.

[3] For example, see *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, ed. Frans Jozef Servaas Wijsen, Peter Henriot and Rodrigo Mejia, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005).

[4] Johnny Wood, The Climate Crisis Disrupts 40 million Children's Education Every Year. Here's How We Could Fix It," *World Economic Forum*, February 14, 2023 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/02/girls-education-climate-crisis-educational-disruption-resilience/

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[6] Dan Stillman and Nicole Asbury, "Crippling Heat is Forcing Northern U.S. Schools to Close. Again," *The Washington Post*, June 2, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2023/06/02/heat-school-closings-northeast-climate/

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[9] Jason Plautz, "The Environmental Burden of Generation Z," *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2020 https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2020/02/03/eco-anxiety-is-overwhelming-kids-wheres-line-between-education-alarmism/

[10] Greta Thunberg is the 21-year-old Swedish environmental activist who began the "school strike for climate" at age 15 by skipping school in protest of climate inaction by nation-states.

[11] The Water Protectors of Standing Rock are the indigenous environmental activists who protested the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 as both environmentally unjust and intrusive to indigenous lands.

[12] Nathan Rott and Seyma Bayram, "Montana Youth Climate Ruling Could Set Precedent for Future Climate Litigation," *NPR*, August 23, 2023 https://www.npr.org/2023/08/23/1194710955/montana-youth-climate-ruling-could-set-precedent-for-future-climate-litigation

[13] Erin Brigham, *See, Judge, Act: Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning*, (Winona: Anselm Academic, 2013), 37.

[14] Mai-Anh Le Tran, *Reset the Heart: Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope,* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 19.

[15] Le Tran, *Reset the Heart,* 18.

[16] Le Tran, *Reset the Heart,* 19-20.

[17] My understanding of Le Tran's "sacred vitality and intimacy of bodies, communities, and ecosystems" is the inherent dignity of life and relationship that exists in all of creation simply by virtue of being created by the Divine. Perhaps an attempt at expanding the *imago Dei* motif beyond anthropocentric means to all of creation–a proposition to be explored further elsewhere.

[18] Le Tran, *Reset the Heart,* 21.

[19] Le Tran, *Reset the Heart,* 25.

[20] Kelly Brown Douglas, "Stop the Violence: Breaking the Cycle of Anti-Black Violence," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 71, no. 4 (2017): 401.

[21] Douglas, "Stop the Violence," 406.

[22] Douglas, "Stop the Violence," 406.

[23] Douglas, "Stop the Violence," 405.

[24] Douglas, "Stop the Violence," 407.

[25] Douglas, "Stop the Violence," 405.

[26] Douglas, "Stop the Violence," 406.

[27] Paulo Freire, “Education, Liberation, and the Church,” *Religious Education* 79, no. 4 (1984): 524.

[28] Elizabeth Johnson, "Is God's Charity Broad Enough for Bears?" (Lecture, St. Thomas More Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale University, New Haven, CT, November 7, 2016).

[29] Freire, “Education, Liberation, and the Church,” 527.

[30] Freire, “Education, Liberation, and the Church,” 525.

[31] Freire, “Education, Liberation, and the Church,” 533.

[32] Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), 9.

[33] Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, “Climate Action Venn Diagram,” Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, accessed December 18, 2023, https://www.ayanaelizabeth.com/climatevenn

[34] Johnson, "Is God's Charity Broad Enough for Bears?"

[35] Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010)

[36] Kathleen O’Gorman, “The Natural World as Religious Educator: A Mediated Address by the Natural World,” *Religious Education*, 102:1, 75-92.

[37] “What is a Forest School?” *Forest School Association*, accessed December 18, 2023 https://forestschoolassociation.org/what-is-forest-school/

[38] Nel Noddings, *Peace Education: How We Come to Love and Hate War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 149.

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REA

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How does the ACEQUIA Honor and Celebrate Earth?

Abstract:

One ritual of celebration to honor the Earth from the Latinx of the Southeast is the ACEQUIA; an irrigation system and a democratic social institution that reflects a Latinx ethic of care for creation ground in a theological cosmology.

Alejandro García-Rivera's Theological Cosmology[1]

Latino theologian Alejandro García-Rivera begins his theological cosmology with the question, "Are we at home in the cosmos?"[2] Elements of his answer will help us understand the role of theological cosmology in the Latinx ethic of care for creation. His initial question is about how humans view themselves in relation to the larger place we call home—the cosmos, "[O]ur answer involves how we understand our relationship to, our responsibilities to, our shaping of this relationship, and, more profoundly our own understanding of what it means to be human in the cosmos."[3] In developing his answer, García-Rivera compares the two creation accounts of Genesis. In the first account, "humans are at home in the cosmos."[4] They are told to multiply, subdue, and have dominion over "every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). In the second account, García-Rivera sees human beings in their tragedy, "born at home in the cosmos, they now must struggle to survive in the cosmos"[5] as they are told in Genesis 2:17-19.

Through his interpretation, García-Rivera highlights the human engagement with the cosmos, which is both about glory and struggle.[6] This mix between glory and struggle is seen as

[1] A version of the section on Alejandro García-Rivera appeared in Nelson Araque, "Gift and Fiesta: Two Ways from the Hispanic Latino/a Perspective to Combat Climate Change," in *The Urgency of Climate Change. Pivotal Perspectives*, ed. Gerard Magill and Kiarash Aramesh (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 281–291. And in Nelson Araque, "Environmental Refugees and Human-Environment Relationship," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 23, no. 1, article 4 (2021): 4-25. https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol23/iss1/4

[2] Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 1.

[3] García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 74.

[4] García-Rivera, 75.

[5] García-Rivera, 75.

[6] García-Rivera, 75.

"a great mystery not only about humanity but about our cosmos."[7] This mystery will reveal an essential knowledge to humans, namely, how-to live-in harmony with the cosmos. The first part of the answer depends on humans' attitude toward knowing "the inner and outer workings of the cosmos."[8] Receiving this knowledge of the cosmos implies sacrifice, humility, respect, and an openness to receive it as a gift and to give back. Furthermore, receiving this gift of knowledge enables humans to realize the magnitude of the gift. Lewis Hyde states that the gift has two senses, "The inner sense of gift is the sense of being gifted, of being given a talent or charism. The outer sense of gift is the sense of gift as a vehicle of culture, of that which creates relationships based on the reception of a gift."[9]

Seeking the knowledge of the universe and its reception as a gift helps humans to create relationships within the cosmos and the preparation to give it back in gratitude. This process of receiving and giving is a journey of spiritual transformation, one that is necessary to be fully human and to live in the cosmos as home. If the knowledge of the cosmos and the inner self leads to arrogance, as happened in the story of Adam and Eve, then humans will bring a self-centered dominion and power to the cosmos that will affect their relationship with it, provoking terrible devastation.

The second part of the answer, as to whether we are at home in the cosmos, depends on how humans understand the Holy Spirit's role in theological cosmology. Here is how García-Rivera defines his theological cosmology:

> Let me suggest that a theological cosmology attempts to "see" God in all things. It makes visible the inner meaning of phenomena by allowing them to move the human heart. In other words, a theological cosmology is an aesthetics of creation. Like science, it pays attention to the phenomena of the universe, but it also attempts to "see" the inner meaning of all things. A theological cosmology, however, recognizes that for humans there cannot be detached observation. Phenomena proper to a cosmos move the human heart. We do not simply observe; we participate.[10]

Thus, a theological cosmology is both a scientific and a theological attempt to *see* the inner meaning of all things. Teilhard of Chardin was among the first to attempt to see the inner meaning of all things from both scientific and theological perspectives. His genius lies in his ability to recover and reinterpret the almost lost doctrine of the cosmic Christ in the context of a relational, interconnected, and dynamic universe revealed by the natural sciences in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century. Alejandro García-Rivera, looking for a synthesis between theology and science, revised Teilhard's cosmic Christology, concluding that Teilhard's work lacks the primacy of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, he proposed a deeper cosmological question: "Where is Jesus now?" The answer to this question will bring three new pneumatological

[7] García-Rivera, 75.

[8] García-Rivera, 75.

[9] Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 48.

[10] García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 21–22.

dimensions to Teilhard's Christology, which will help clarify the role of a theological cosmology in an ethic of care for creation. These three new dimensions are the relevance of the Ascension, the notion of place, and the role of beauty.

In the event of the Ascension, the Holy Spirit's dynamism and power animates the convergence of everything in the Cosmic Christ. According to García-Rivera, the lack of a theology of the Holy Spirit in Teilhard's work makes it impossible for the Cosmic Christ to draw all things to convergence in himself, precisely because only the "power and dynamics of the Holy Spirit"[11] allow such a convergence toward abundant life. In the notion of place, the Holy Spirit who, in the Old and New Testaments, makes the Promised Land "home" in the cosmos. García-Rivera contends that the Holy Spirit enables humans to journey through the cosmos to a new creation where the risen and "ascended Christ sits now at the right hand of the Father."[12] Finally, humans understand the cosmos as an ordered unity in the realm of beauty through the Holy Spirit. As García-Rivera says, "Beauty is the most visible sign of the work of the Holy Spirit."[13] Moreover, humans can only recognize this beauty through the Holy Spirit. Thus, the role of the Holy Spirit is crucial in theological cosmology. García-Rivera realized the absence of this essential pneumatological element in the theological cosmology of Teilhard. The Holy Spirit is "not only the ultimate source of the beauty of living forms in creation but is also the source who unites us to their beauty."[14]

Latinx Ethic of Care for Creation

Garcia Rivera's first part of the answer to the question "Are we at home in the cosmos?" depends on humans' attitudes like reception, sacrifice, humility, openness, gratitude, and respect. These attitudes will reveal to humans "the inner and outer workings of the cosmos."[15] This knowledge will help humans create relationships with the cosmos. Through this relationship with the cosmos, humans involve themselves in a spiritual journey that allows them to become fully human, call the cosmos their home, and appreciate the beauty of the cosmos as a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence among us. This theological cosmology is the ground for a Latinx ethic of care for creation.

The Latinx's experience includes sacrifice, humility, respect, openness, and gratitude, which is expressed in their relationship with God's creation as thankfulness for this gift. In this essay, I contend that the acequia is an example of an ethic of care for creation because it enables Latinx to be open to appreciate the place they live, the community, and the relationships within that place, and to be humble for receiving the gift of God's creation.

The acequia makes Latinx reflect on the respect and sacrifice of every single creature in the community, including plants and animals, because they must have their rightful share of

[11] García-Rivera, 51

[12] García-Rivera, 45.

[13] García–Rivera, 52.

[14] García-Rivera, 99.

[15] García-Rivera, 75.

water. Water is especially important in states with a great water scarcity like northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

The acequia nurtures the community by keeping its relationships, not just among humans, but between humans and the rest of the creation—animals, plants, and natural resources as vital as water. The acequia helps Latinx create relationships with the cosmos as they embark on a spiritual journey to recognize the cosmos as their home and discover the Holy Spirit in every aspect of the cosmos' beauty.

Acequia History and Description

The term acequia derives from the Arabic term *as-sakiya,* which translates as "water conduit for irrigation."[16] Today, the acequia refers to both irrigation ditches and a self-governing community of farmers organized around them to perform essential duties and preserve and protect the watershed resources. With more than thirty years of research on acequias, Jose Rivera, Professor Emeritus at the University of New Mexico's School of Architecture and Planning, explains,

> [The] acequias have continued to perform the essential services for the communities that they founded: enabling agricultural production, sustaining popular participation, promoting income distribution and equity, and very importantly, protecting the watershed resources essential to the goals of permanent human occupation and settlement.[17]

Communal systems of irrigation predate the Spanish settlements in the semiarid Upper Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico among the Ancestral Puebloans (Anasazi) and various other Native American groups. Michael C. Meyer, emeritus Professor of History at the University of Arizona, describes how the Anasazi (A.D. 1000 A.D. to 1300) developed elaborate programs of water control. According to Meyer,

> Five or six hundred years before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Anasazi of Pueblo III or Classic Pueblo Period (roughly 1000 A.D. to 1300 A.D.) initiated various programs of water control in the northern fringes of the Southwest. On Chapin Mesa at Mesa Verde in southwestern Colorado, they built check dams and irrigation ditches more than four miles in length. At Chaco Canyon in northwest New Mexico, the Anasazi constructed both check dams and diversion dams, the latter required canals and headgates…. The canals which were operating by 700 A.D. and reached their maximum size some 600 years later, made possible the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash in a harsh desert environment. These

[16] John R. Brown and Jose Rivera. "*Acequias de Común*. The Tension between Collective Action and Private Property Rights, 3 (2000). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42762634_Acequias_de_Comun_The_Tension_Between_Collective_Action_and_Private_Property_Rights.

[17] Brown and Rivera, "*Acequias de Común*," 1.

> ditches up to thirty feet wide and ten feet deep were designed to prevent loss of water through seepage: the bottoms of the canals were hard, suggesting the possibility of some kind of plastering with adobe.[18]

Meyer's description of both check and diversion dams with canals and head gates shows the high technological level reached by the Anasazi. Among the successors of the Anasazi and inheritors of their technology are the Pueblos of New Mexico with whom the Spaniards met.

Spaniards explored and later settlers were familiar with some irrigation practices "developed in similar climatic areas of southeastern Spain."[19] However, they were impressed by the irrigation practices of various Pueblo groups. Gaspar Castaño Sosa, one of the first Spaniards to set foot in New Mexico, wrote about the irrigation canals in the Tewas Pueblos in 1591, as Meyer notes, “incredible to anyone who had not seen with his own eyes”[20]

As the Spaniards continued to be impressed by the irrigation canals built by the Southwest's Native Americans, they settled and used the land according to an early pattern known as land grants or *mercedes.* Devon Peña, professor of Anthropology and President of the Acequia Institute, explains,

> Mercedes (land grants) defined the early pattern of land use and settlement. Under Spanish and Mexican law, four principal types of land were authorized. Pueblo grants confirmed aboriginal land rights for Westerns and Western Pueblo nations. Community grants, which were made to groups of five or more families to settle new watersheds, typically included a large tract of common lands. Individual lands were awarded to soldiers for service to the crown. A four type involved impresario grants to foreigners.[21]

The second type of *mercedes* mentioned by Peña, the community grants, were the most frequent grants in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. These patterned lands were commonly known as a *riparian long-lot.* According to Peña,

> Many mercedes in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado were of the community type. These grants stipulated that each family would receive an individual parcel of land (suerte) for agriculture. The suertes were long narrow, ribbonlike, strips of land that gave settlers access to a river corridor, uplands, and

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[18] Michael Meyer, *Water in the Hispanic Southwest. A Social and Legal History 1550-185*0 (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996), 12.

[19] Brown and Rivera, “*Acequias de Común*,” 5.

[20] Meyer, *Water in the Hispanic Southwest*, 15.

[21] Devon G. Peña, *Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra y Vida* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2005), 79.

> fertile bottomlands. Cultural geographers refer to this land-use pattern as a riparian long-lot.[22]

Therefore, the old agricultural irrigation practices of the Southwest's Native Americans and the new irrigation practices brought by Spaniards mingled with very specific and well-established patterns of land use. Settlements like *mercedes* and the riparian long-lot *suertes* developed to form the basis of the acequia system as we know it today. Roybal summarizes the Arabic, Roman, and Spanish roots of the acequias and their later development thanks to the Southwest's Native American agricultural irrigation practices. He states,

> Spanish irrigation practices are thought to be rooted in Arabic and Roman traditions that were brought to the Iberian Peninsula; in fact, the word "acequia" is derived from the Arabic as-saquiya, irrigation ditch. When transferred to the American Southwest, these Old World irrigation traditions melded with Native American customs, Mesoamerican agricultural practices, and locally unique physical and climatic features to form the basis for the modern-day acequia system. [23]

Thus, acequias are the result of an intermingling of cultures, traditions, beliefs, and patterns of land use and settlement from ancestral times. Cultural anthropologist Ernie Atencio summarizes this intermingling, "By the time the first Hispano acequia was constructed near the confluence of the Rio Chama and the Rio Grande, it represents centuries of intermingling cultures, spiritual traditions, and adaptations." [24]

Years later, when today's U.S. Southwest passed from the Spanish era (1598-1821) to the Mexican era (1821-1848), the first Spanish-Mexicans were established along Rio del Norte (Rio Grande), following the irrigation practices and acequias they knew from the past. Rivera describes the irrigation practices of the first Spanish-Mexican established along Rio del Norte (Rio Grande) and how they built their acequias,

> On the larger streams, the settlers built wing dams protruding into the river from one of the banks; these simple structures were usually sufficient to channel water into the acequias during the irrigation season when natural flows were highest. Streams with intermittent flows, on the other hand, required the construction of dams across the width of the watercourses to impound portions of the flows and form small reservoirs.
> These presas were constructed of forest timbers, juniper brush, boulders, rock slabs, earth, and other locally available materials, resulting in structures that often resembled beaver dams. (Rivera 1999). To complete the infrastructure needed for irrigation, the

[22] Peña, *Mexican Americans and the Environment*, 81.

[23] Roybal, *Measuring Acequia Functionality*, 10.

[24] Ernest Atencio, "*Acequias*," accessed April 19, 2022. https://www.taosacequias.org/acequias

> settlers excavated the main canal (acequia madre) off one or both banks of the river, thereby extending the irrigable lands adjacent to the watercourse for several miles downstream. Typically, each acequia madre was cut perpendicular to the stream source at the upper end of the community to then convey water downstream, parallel to the river alongside the foothills or natural slope of the terrain, all the while enclosing the practical limits of irrigable land. Then, at the bottom end of the community, the ditch was made to return to the original stream through a desagüe channel.[25]

The acequias, as presented by Rivera, were true communal engineering projects of the time, which also served different purposes.

The acequias have been significant in the development and the economic survival of the communities in the southwest because they have provided water—an element of sheer necessity for these villages. As years passed, the community around the acequias developed their own rules from customs, traditions, and local practices. Eventually, they evolved and organized themselves into a self-governed corporate body with shared responsibilities for the welfare of the community. Rivera explains,

> [T]he structure and form of the community acequia as a corporate body developed in tandem with the evolution of the customs, traditions and local practices, and eventually, the more formalized rules and regulations of self-government. First and foremost, the acequias were communal. Given the harsh, semi-arid surroundings, they were an element of sheer necessity for the establishment and subsequent sustenance of the entire human settlement. Their construction, maintenance, and magnitude of operations were beyond the capabilities of individual cultivators and irrigators. Ownership in common and shared responsibilities for the cyclical labor were vital to the economic welfare of the entire community.[26]

In the early 1850s, just after the Mexican era (1821-1848), a territorial law was passed in New Mexico (part of the United States since 1848). This territorial law "codified the basic principles of *acequia* governance including the democratic election of the *mayordomo* (ditch manager) and the practice of sharing the water among *acequias* along with the same stream system."[27] According to Roybal "This pattern continued until New Mexico territory adopted its water code in 1907"[28]

The establishment of the Water Code in 1907 centralized the authority to manage the overall water resources in the acequias. Since 1912, when New Mexico became a state, the

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[25] Brown and Rivera, "*Acequias de Común*," 5.
[26] Brown and Rivera, 6.
[27] Garcia, "Viva la Acequia!"

[28] Roybal*, Measuring Acequia Functionality*, 10.

creation of the Bureau of Reclamations[29] the founding of different water conservancy districts, and the reduction of local agriculture for global production reduced the role of the acequias. However, in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, acequias still exist as an example of a "community-based resource management"[30] institution.

Thus, the acequias have played an important role in the history and development of the southwest. They are the result of the mingling of two different cultures. On one side, the Anasazi and their successors the Pueblos, constructed both check and diversion dams with canals and headgates before any Spaniard settlement in the southwest. On the other side, the Spaniards were familiar with some irrigation practices due to the similar climatic conditions between southwest and southeastern Spain. This mingling of cultures, technologies, traditions, beliefs, patterns of land use, and settlements, like *mercedes* and the riparian long-lot *suertes,* resulted in big communal engineering projects that were replicated in settlements across the southwest. For more than four hundred years, the complex political circumstances of the acequia and its common-good-oriented design based on principles like respect, equity, participation, and protection of the watersheds, have modeled a proper relationship with the cosmos. The acequia has prepared humanity, especially Latinx, to receive the gift of the creation, with its abundant but limited resources, and to give it back in gratitude. The acequia represents the most viable and sustainable water management system ever found.

As important as they have been for the Anasazi, Pueblos, Spaniards, and Hispanics, the acequia's most important characteristic is its sense of community among the irrigators who commit themselves to protect the watersheds, water sharing, and living a common future because they truly know that "water is the lifeblood of the community." [31]

The Acequia Practice

"Today's acequia associations are political subdivisions of the state. Local associations of parciantes elect a mayordomo and commissioners to oversee the annual operations of the acequias."[32] The Acequia practice includes different activities beginning with "the annual spring cleaning of the ditch and other work of repair, maintenance, and improvement; changing the headgate, and dividing the water; and attending meetings of the parciantes."[33]

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[29] Bureau of Reclamation, *Calendar Year 2019 Report to the Rio Grande Compact Commission: Interior Region 7: Upper Colorado Basin* (U.S. Department of the Interior, March 2020), https://www.ose.state.nm.us/Compacts/RioGrande/Meetings/2020 /U.S.%20Bureau%20of%20Reclamation%202019%20Final%20Report%20to%20RGCC.pdf. The Bureau of reclamations established in 1902 manages, develops, and protects water and related resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner in the interest of the American public.

[30] Bureau of Reclamation, "Calendar Year 2019 Report," 20.

[31] Brown and Rivera, "*Acequias de Común*," 6.

[32] Sylvia Rodriguez, *Acequia: Water Sharing, Sanctity, and Place* (Santa Fe: School for School for Advanced Research Press, 2006), 2.

[33] Rodriguez, *Acequia*, 6.

The first of the activities in the acequia practice is the annual spring cleaning (*La saca* or *la limpia de la acequia*), which is necessary to maintain the system. Each parciante[34] must clean or pay labor (*peón*) to clean the ditch according to the acreage he or she irrigates. "On the morning of the designated day, each worker arrives with a shovel and spends the day clearing the way underbrush and digging dirt and debris out of the ditch." [35] The mayordomo calls and marks the sections to be clean. This task or *tarea* is passed from generation to generation of parciantes as a rite of passage where younger generations of future parciantes become familiar with the acequia practice. "To finish a long day of hard labor is a sign of adulthood. A young people acquire a stronger sense of place and belonging and traditional knowledge of natural systems."[36] Stanley Crawford's memoir, *Mayordomo*, highlights the annual spring-cleaning activity as "more like ritual than work."[37] The ditch cleaning is a day of common labor and "it affirms and socializes members into cooperative, subsistent institution."[38]

The acequia practice as a cooperative and subsistent work also implies an annual meeting to elect mayordomo and commissioners and to deal with other ditch businesses such as crisis management during drought or "to decide how the water will be divided on their common streams under pending conditions. A parciante meets with the mayordomo at a given time and headgate to transfer the water from one ditch to another."[39] For this reason, the mayordomo is expected "to be fair and even handed, possess intimate knowledge of local topography and hydraulics, and be able to deliver the water despite adversity or conflict"[40] especially during drought season when "the mayordomo must allocate every drop according to need and give priority to animals. Seniority does not confer, and has never conferred, exclusive right on either stream."[41] Rodriguez mentions some sharing arrangements that "include *sobrante* (surplus) water that others petition to use and the *auxilio* (special dispensation) made during crises." [42]These sharing arrangements, especially during extreme scarcity, reflect two Islamic principles—Right of Thirst and Right to Irrigation. Rodriguez explains,

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[34] Parciante refers to the individual irrigator who owns water rights. For more information see Acequia La Puebla, "Glossary." Water rights are usually inherited. However, in some cases, they can be transferred with the land. Nowadays, water rights can be sold and bought playing an important role as a prime commodity. For more information, see Sylvia Rodriguez, *Acequia* and Acequia La Puebla, "Glossary."

[35] Rodriguez, *Acequia,* 7.

[36] Atencio, "Acequias."

[37] Stanley Crawford., *Mayordomo: Chronicle of an Acequia in Northern New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 224.

[38] Rodriguez, *Acequia,* 7.

[39] Rodriguez, 7.

[40] Rodriguez, 8.

[41] Rodriguez, 4.

[42] Rodriguez, 4.

> Although not articulated as such, the principle at work here resembles-and may well derive from- both the Islamic right of Thirst, which dictates that all living creatures have a right to water, and the Islamic Right of Irrigation, which gives all users the right to irrigate their crops.[43]

Although the acequia has traditionally been a male domain, Rodriguez mentions that the participation of women is rare, but there were innovative cases or the absence of a man to take it. Nevertheless, Rodriguez insists that women face great difficulty, and in some cases hostility, when maneuvering in the acequia domain. Rodriquez writes,

> Women have been known to irrigate, dig and clean ditches, and even serve as a commissioner or mayordomo. But such cases remain exceptional… The rare woman who assumes the role of mayordomo, probably a late-20th-century innovation, will invariably admit to difficulty, if not hostility, encountered while trying to maneuver inside this deeply patriarchal domain.[44]

We have covered reviewing Alejandro Garcia Rivera's theological cosmology and reviewed the history and practice of the acequia. Next, we must find the intersection between theological cosmology and acequia using moral economy, mutualism, and *respeto* as ethical-moral principles. These principles are implicit in the acequia, the Latinx understanding of *querencia,* and the local knowledge and environmental benefits of the acequia

Intersection: Theological Cosmology and Acequia

There are a set of principles that have helped the acequia to show resilience "in the face of a myriad adverse political, economic, social, demographic, environmental and climate forces."[45] These principles are moral economy, mutualism, and *respeto*.

Moral Economy

In 1976, political scientist James Scott coined the term "moral economy," which Paul Trawick later developed and defined as

> A concrete ethic is based on a well-defined set of practices, rules and norms, and corresponding material relations. These have to do with the proper use of vital resources-land, water, and labor- and

[43] Rodriguez, 5.

[44] Rodriguez, 5.

[45] Sylvia Rodriguez, "Key Concepts for a Multidisciplinary Approach to Acequias," in Acequias of the Southwestern United States: Elements of Resilience in a Coupled Natural and Human System, ed. Adrianne Rosenberg et al. (College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, New Mexico State University, November, 2020), 4. https://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/research/water/RR796/welcome.

> the ways that individuals should relate to each other, through the central reality of work, and to the community, as a whole. Although the moral economy is primarily inward-looking, focused on internal social interaction, it is also a "political" economy, as any such ethical system must be by definition, and of course, it does not exist in isolation.[46]

A moral economy of water is an ethic based on a well-defined set of practices, rules, norms, and corresponds to material relations with a vital resource such as water, which is grounded on the relationships among parciantes in the acequia community. Each parciante is committed to following rules and norms, as well as performing specific duties that help to keep the acequia's sense of community. Rodriguez mentions the following duties among the parciantes: "pay their dues, contribute labor, come to meetings, vote for officers, respect the mayordomo, observe the local water-sharing custom, negotiate ditch matters, and themselves serve as a mayordomo and commissioners."[47]

In the acequia community, the water is the vital resource through which parciantes gather and establish corresponding material relationships. The water is seen as a "commons" and the acequia as the means "to explain how people have been able to overcome their conflict of interest, escape the '*commons dilemma*', and pursue the common good."[48]

In his ethnographic research in highland Peru and Valencia, Trawick was able to prove that many different communities of ancient people found the solution to the "commons dilemma." He explains,

> [L]ocal people in a great many communities in several different parts of the world long ago arrived, independently, at a sustainable solution to the 'commons dilemma', creating a set of principles for sharing scarce water equitably and efficiently that minimizes social conflict.[49]

Trawick discovered a set of operational principles for sharing scarce water equitably and efficiently, which are autonomy, contiguity, proportionality (equity), regularity, and transparency, as he explains,

> autonomy: the community has and controls its own flows of water; contiguity: during each distribution cycle, water is given to fields in a fixed contiguous order based on their location along successive canals, starting at one end of the system and moving systematically across it; uniformity among water rights: for each

[46] Paul B. Trawick, *Struggle for Water in Peru. Comedy and Tragic in the Andean Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 292.

[47] Rodriguez, "Key Concepts for a Multidisciplinary Approach to Acequias," 6

[48] Paul B. Trawick, "The Moral Economy of Water: General Principles for Successfully Managing Commons," *GAIA* 11, no. 3 (2002): 5.

[49] Trawick, "The Moral Economy of Water," 5.

> major source or canal flow, everyone receives water with the same frequency; proportionality (equity) in technique: everyone irrigates in the same basic way; among rights: no one can use more water than the proportional amount to which the extent of their land entitles them, nor can they legally get it more often than everyone else; among duties: people's contributions to maintenance of the canal system must be proportional to the a amount of irrigated land that they have; regularity: things are always done in the same way under condition of scarcity; no exceptions are allowed, and any unauthorized extension of irrigation is prohibited; transparency: everyone knows the rules and has the capacity to confirm with their own eyes whether or not those rules are generally being obeyed, to detect and denounce any violations that occur.[50]

Trawick's principles can be logically inferred by looking at how an acequia association operates... Rodriguez, drawing on the similarities among Iberian-Islamic irrigation systems and their more recent cognates in Valencia, summarizes how an acequia association operates,

> Like their Iberian-Islamic forebears and modern cognate in Valencia, acequia irrigation systems exhibit all of these attributes. Acequias operate as autonomous common property regimes while at the same time they are legal subdivisions of the state, subject to state statute. An acequia association consists of farmer-rancher parciantes and landowners who share a common stream diversion (presa) into a hand-dug acequia madre ("mother ditch") from which laterals (linderos, sangrias, or venitas) channel water to individual properties. Parciantes are obligated to pay dues, contribute labor to the cleaning and maintenance of acequia infrastructure, observe the customary principles of water sharing, and annually elect a mayordomo or ditch boss and three commissioners who oversee ditch management and governance. Labor contribution and water allocation are proportional to the amount of acreage a parciante irrigates. The mayordomo allocates water proportionally to parciantes in good standing based on equity and need, supervises communal labor on the ditch, and resolves water disputes. Commissioners usually include a secretary, treasurer, and president, who in concert with the mayordomo oversee all ditch business. Acequia communities are by definition place-based, territorial, and linked through time by kinship, spatial contiguity, and a continuous round of sacred and secular calendric and lifecycle rituals.[51]

Rodriguez's summary gives us one important insight—the importance of the principle of

[50] Trawick, 5-6.
[51] Rodriguez, "Key Concepts for a Multidisciplinary Approach to Acequias," 6.

proportionality. Similar to the communities researched by Trawick, the principle of proportionality is essential to New Mexico's acequias. One of mayordomo's roles, in which his or her skills are tested, is when he or she must allocate water based on equity and need in times of scarcity. Here the mayordomo must realize the importance of the principle of proportionality's core—equity as the basis of the common good of the community.

Social scientists define the moral economy of water as a set of practices, rules, norms, and corresponding material relations between irrigators and a vital resource, such as water found in the clearest expression in the acequia community. Parciantes, who for generations have received the knowledge of the universe through the acequia practice, establish a relationship with water based on a set of principles among proportionality (equity), which is the most important because it allows the acequia community to challenge the commons dilemma. This ensures the water runs through the acequia as a way to graciously give back and prepare future generations to pursue the common good. The acequia is a means to seek and access the knowledge of the universe, a knowledge that allows humans to be fully human and call the cosmos home.

Mutualism

A common unity flourishes and becomes permanent in acequias thanks to the experience of reciprocal mutual aid. Mutualism refers "to the social capital of a community that fosters a relationship of interdependence based on mutual trust and reciprocity for the common good."[52]

The history of the acequias is a good example of mutualism. Thanks to the relationship of interdependence among parciantes, the acequia is known as the oldest water management community-based institution in the United States. Since the construction of check and diversion dams with canals and head gates by the Anasazi and their inheritors, the Pueblos, the irrigation systems require the work of an entire community. Later, with the arrival of the Spaniards, Old and New world's technologies, cultures, customs, and beliefs intermingled to give origin to the acequia as it is known today. The collective work and the union of citizens were necessary. According to Rivera,

> In New Mexico, the initial settlers also organized themselves as a community of irrigators; the owners of property with irrigable lands collectively viewed themselves as el pueblo or town. Each acequia infrastructure was built as commons where the irrigators formed agreements to work collectively, a union of citizens or mancomunidad. Given the harsh, semiarid environment, the ditch was an element of sheer necessity for the establishment and sustenance of the entire village.[53]

The irrigators saw themselves as *el pueblo*, who worked collectively and associated to pursue the common good. They developed their own rules from customs, traditions, and local practices, which evolved and organized to constitute a self-governed corporate body with shared responsibilities for the welfare of the community. Self-governance lasted until the 1850s New

[52] Jose Rivera, "The Roots of Community in the Northern Rio Grande: Acequia Mutualism, Cultural Endurance and Resilience," in *Acequias of the Southwestern United States: Elements of Resilience in a Coupled Natural and Human System*, ed. Adrianne Rosenberg et al. (College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, New Mexico State University, 2020), 4. https://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/research/water/RR796/welcome.

[53] Rivera, "The Roots of Community," 15.

Mexico territorial law that codified the basic principles of acequia governance and ordered the democratic election of the *mayordomo* (ditch manager). Finally, the acequia associations "were recognized and empowered later, during the 1890s, in the American territorial laws of New Mexico as corporate bodies."[54] The official recognition of the acequia association also recognized "a living culture of water based on cooperation and mutualism."[55]

Each acequia association, as a recognized corporate body with elected commissioners and a mayordomo, "have the authority and local control of water management within the service area of the acequia system." This local control gives the acequias an adaptive capacity to respond and adapt quickly to seasonal changes in the streamflow, as Rivera explains,

> In most watersheds, the acequias are the most upstream diversions in the system, and therefore the officers can respond and adapt quickly to seasonal changes in streamflow. During times of water scarcity or years of prolonged drought, for example, the acequia can modify the system of turns for water delivery according to customs and traditions of repartimiento (water sharing), auxilio (emergency water), and allocation of sobrantes (surplus waters). [56]

Local control and its adaptive capacity reflect mutualism and cooperation. Parciantes agree to water sharing even during times of water scarcity or prolonged droughts. Mayordomo and commissioners, acting as elected officials and according to customs and traditions, share the water among all as a sign of mutual help and cooperation.

Among the activities done in the acequia, one highlights mutualism and cooperation proper of the acequia associations. The annual spring cleaning (*La saca* or *la limpia de la acequia*) is necessary at the start of every irrigation season to maintain the system. As I have explained above, *la saca o la limpia de la acequia* is like a ritual early each spring, it is a common labor day, and "it affirms and socializes members into cooperative"[57] because each of the parciantes recognize their rights by working collectively and in cooperation with the community to maintain the acequia. However, as Rivera points out in the *Reglas y regulaciones para el gobierno y manejo de la acequia de comunidad* (Rules and Regulations for the Governance and Management of the Community Ditch) from Acequia Madre de la Joya, there is a special provision that exempts some people from *la limpia* "*las personas que estén incapacitadas o mujeres solas viudas* (handicapped persons or women who are widowed)."[58]

Just as *la limpia* serves to tie the parciantes to work together to pursue the common good, fictive kinships established, especially among Latinx parciantes, show the reciprocity and trust properly of mutualism. The *compadrazgo*[59] emphasizes the reciprocal aid and trust friends or

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[54] Rivera, 15.

[55] Rivera, 15.

[56] Rivera, 16.

[57] Rodriguez, *Acequia*, 7.

[58] Rivera, "The Roots of Community in the Northern Rio Grande," 15.

[59] Compadrazgo is an important social practice among Latinx. The Godparents become an additional set of parents for the child. See more information in Celia Jaes Falicov, *Latino Families in Therapy: A Guide to*

neighbors share through the religious ceremony of baptizing a child, creating the sacred bond of co- parenthood. In the *compadrazgo* kinship, calling each other *compadre* (between males) and *comadre* (between females), heightens the "level of respect that supersedes even that between close blood relations."[60] The bond made through the *compadrazgo* kinship "creates a special set of mutual obligations between peers which provides an important safety net of emotional and economic insurance."[61]

The acequia associations continue today, which focus on mutualism and cooperation by organizing educational programs and cultural events at local and national levels. Examples of mutualism and cooperation are the publication of newsletters, the offering of workshops to provide technical assistance, and the annual meeting—*Congreso de las Acequias*. Rivera writes,

> In contemporary times, the local acequia associations organize educational programs, cultural events, and religious activities at the watershed and regional levels; publish newsletters; provide technical assistance workshops; and hold an annual meeting of the Congreso de las Acequias, which is convened by the statewide, non-profit New Mexico Acequia Association. In Colorado, the acequias are affiliated with the Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association, to protect water rights and the unique governance structures of acequias. [62]

Thus, mutualism fosters an interdependent relationship among parciantes. This relationship is based on mutual aid, mutual trust, and reciprocity. All these characteristics reflect not just the common unity among the parciantes in the acequia or especially, in the case of Latinx, the fictive kinships as those expressed through *compadrazgo,* but also García-Rivera's interpretation of the human engagement with the cosmos. "It is both about glory and about struggle."[63] The mix between these two is seen as "a great mystery not only about humanity but about our cosmos."[64] This mystery will reveal how humans can live in harmony with the cosmos. The acequia practice is a good example of harmonious living with the cosmos.

Respeto

Drawing on the work of Julian Pitt-Rivers and Ramon Gutierrez on the honor-shame complex, Rodriguez explains honor as "the social worth of a person"[65] and clearly distinguishes two kinds—honor-status and honor-virtue.

According to Rodriguez, honor status "refers to social standing by birth and….

Multicultural Practice (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998).

[60] Institute for Latino Studies University of Notre Dame, "Fictive Kinship and Acquaintance Networks as Sources of Support and Social Capital for Mexican Immigrants in South Bend," *Student Research Series* 6 (May 2010). https://latinostudies.nd.edu/assets/95249/original/3.7_fictive_kinship_and_acquaintance_networks.pdf.

[61] Institute for Latino Studies University of Notre Dame, "Fictive Kinship."

[62] Rivera, "The Roots of Community in the Northern Rio Grande," 16.

[63] Garcia-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 75.

[64] Garcia-Rivera, 75.

[65] Rodriguez, *Acequia*, 77.

differentiates people vertically through gender, class and ethno-racial caste."[66] On the other side, honor –virtue "refers to personal comportment and…. differentiates individuals horizontally within a moral community"[67] The lack or absence of honor is a shame that is " both anathema and integral to the maintenance of honor"[68]

In Latinx circles, honor and shame are translated as *respeto* y *vergüenza*. In this case, the Spanish language conveys a full range of nuances that are meaningless in English. For this reason, honor, respeto, and vergüenza are concomitant terms according to Rodriguez,

> An honorable man shows respeto for others and, in turn, deserves respeto from those who know him. Only by having an internalized sense of vergüenza can he avoid shameful behavior and thereby preserve his honor and receive respect. Respeto is central to one's sense of dignity and worth.[69]

Rodriguez draws on the work of sociologist Facundo Valdez and his description of *vergüenza* as the ideal male conduct in northern New Mexico. According to Valdez, *vergüenza* "is closely tied to self-control. A person is expected to acquire it around the time when he becomes responsible in general for his moral behavior"[70] *Vergüenza* conduct, as associated with the ideal male, is evident when someone is "helpful to his neighbors, moderate, self-controlled and has *firmeza."*[71] *Firmeza*, as explained by Valdez, indicates that a man is "reserved, independent, trustworthy, and willing to challenge capricious or arbitrary authority." [72] Lastly, "the cornerstone of this ideal is the ownership of land."[73]

Thus, *respeto* and *vergüenza* are implicit moral principles in the acequia practice because they help humans involved in a spiritual transformation, one that is necessary to be fully human and to live in harmony with the cosmos as Garcia-Rivera's theological cosmology teaches. The spiritual transformation made possible through *respeto and vergüenza* is seen in different activities in the acequia practice like *la limpia* or obedience to one's irrigation days. *Respeto* and *vergüenza* nurture the responsibility, moderation, self-control, and trustworthiness required to accomplish the activities that the acequia practice entitles. Otherwise, without these moral principles, *respeto* and *vergüenza*, the acequia would not exist today.

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[66] Rodriguez, 77.

[67] Rodriguez, 77.

[68] Rodriguez, 77.

[69] Rodriguez, 78.

[70] Facundo Valdez, "Verguenza," in *The Colorado College Studies: The Survival of Spanish –American Villages*, ed. Paul Kutsche (Colorado Springs: Colorado College), 102.

[71] Rodriguez, *Acequia*, 78.

[72] Valdez, "*Vergüenza*," 100–101.

[73] Rodriguez, *Acequia*, 78.

Conclusion

The acequia, as an irrigation system and a democratic social institution, reflects a Latinx ethic of care for creation ground in theological cosmology. I presented Alejandro Garcia-Rivera's theological cosmology. Next, I summarized the history of the acequia, which demonstrated how the acequias in the Southwest are the result of a mingling of the Latinx and Indigenous technologies, traditions, beliefs, and patterns of land use and settlement. I also demonstrated how the acequias as communal projects allow participation and seek equity among parciantes because of its common-good-oriented design. Furthermore, in the acequia practice, I presented the role of the mayordomo and commissioners, the commitment of the parciantes, as well as other businesses, in the acequia practice like *la limpia,* which demonstrated the acequia's sense of community.

Finally, I considered the intersection between acequia and theological cosmology, which I demonstrated by presenting the ethical-moral principles implicit in the acequia like the moral economy, mutualism, and *respeto*.

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Anticipating the Opportunities and Challenges of Using Commercial-off-the-Shelf Games to Educate People on Environmental Sustainability in a Christian Context

Abstract

Some studies show that digital games and board games can be used to facilitate religious learning in Christian post-secondary settings. Would game-based learning be a viable option for educating Christians on environmental sustainability in a congregational church environment? This paper analyzes several commercially-available ecological digital games and board games to explore potential learning opportunities and challenges for integrating such games in a Christian small group study environment.

Introduction

In his ecological liberation theology, Boff (1997) states that "we may . . . conclude that there is a political need for an ecological education that will lead human beings to live together with their cosmic brothers and sisters in the same society" (133). By performing a content analysis of several commercial-off-the-shelf digital and tabletop ecological games, this paper will anticipate opportunities and challenges with utilizing such games to educate Christians on ecological crises in church small group settings. Drawing on themes discovered through this analysis, I suggest that game-based learning could be a viable pedagogical method to educate Christians on environmental matters in a Church small group setting.

Literature Review

Considering current ecological crises, justice for the poor demands that adult Christian educators consider how to encourage Christians to develop what Orr (1992) calls "ecological literacy" (92-93). Ecological literacy "is the comprehension of the interrelatedness of life grounded in the study of natural history, ecology, and thermodynamics" (Orr 1992, 93). People who are ecologically literate possess an "attitude of care or stewardship" (Orr 1992, 92) in light of our dependence on "natural forces" (Orr 1992, 93). Many traditional indigenous ways of knowing that emphasize our interdependence with the natural world are aligned with ecological literacy (McGregor, Whitaker, and Sritharan 2020; Gareau and LeBlanc 2023, 12-15; Tinker 2010, 174-175; Whyte 2018, 133-136). Education in ecological literacy is needed to understand crises such as:

> population growth, species extinction, soil loss, deforestation, desertification, climate change, ozone depletion, resource exhaustion, air and water pollution, toxic and radioactive contamination, resource and energy use–in short, the vital signs of the planet and its ecosystems (Orr 1992, 93).

Many of the people who are most affected by these crises are poor, racialized, and/or indigenous, even though most environmental offenders are wealthy (Ford, Berrang-Ford, et al. 2010, 676; Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003, 1-2, 4, 6-8); threats from climate change to traditional food supply and territory possession are particularly insidious to these groups (Ford, Berrang-Ford, et al. 2010, 676, 677; Sritharan 2017, 60-62, 67-68). Indeed, some indigenous scholars link climate change and other ecological disasters to "ongoing processes of colonialism, dispossession, capitalism, imperialism/globalization and patriarchy" (McGregor, Whitaker, and Sritharan 2020, 36). Ecological liberation theologians draw on the Apostle Paul's declaration of "the whole creation . . . groaning as in the pains of childbirth" (Romans 8:22) to describe how the oppressed Earth and its inhabitants transition to new life through Christ Jesus' resurrection (Santmire 1985, 10-11; S. King 2019, 131, 139-140; Boff 1997, 83, 104). Unfortunately, while Santmire (1985) argues that Christian scriptures have been used by some theologians to support an "ecological motif" through the use of "the metaphor of fecundity" and "the metaphor of migration to a good land" (29), dominant Christian discourses have poorly promoted sustainable ecological views (183, 189).

According to White (1967), Christianity played a significant role in creating conditions that spurred the present ecological crisis (1207). The Church's emphasis on anthropocentrism and dominion-centered views led some Christians to believe that humans are permitted to exploit all of creation (Migliore 2014, 103-105; Boff 1997, 63-64, 69-80). S. King (2019) describes how people quote the Bible in support of slaughtering animals for food (141). According to Weber (1930), Protestant Christianity played a role in creating a capitalist ethic that laid a foundation for rampant industrialism. Additionally, due in part to scripture writings that violently opposed "nature cults" (e.g., Baal; Santmire 1985, 184, 191), Christianity found support for dismantling indigenous spiritualities (Boff 1991, 14-16; Niditch 1995, 3-5; Newman 2016, 127-128; McKim 2017; Tinker 1993, 7); the cultural genocide of indigenous people by church-run residential schools in Canada (see Coutts 2020) testifies to the Church's historical disregard for the ecoaware indigenous spiritualities found on Turtle Island. While scholars in the Church have begun to create ecological liberation theologies (Boff 1997; S. King 2019) and indigenous theology emphasizing the "inter-relatedness" of creation (Kidwell, Noley, and Tinker 2001, 51), many Christians do not prioritize environmental issues (Konisky 2018); this apathetic attitude toward environmentalism has persisted despite calls for environmental "stewardship" from Christian leaders (Shaiko 1987).

As a subgroup of the Church, the Evangelical Christian community is particularly in need of educational interventions that will motivate Christians to act toward ecological restoration. While some Evangelical scholars have embraced environmentalism (Lamb, Lowe, and Meyaard-Schaap 2019; S. King 2019), the Evangelical Christian community tends to be uncommonly resistant to acknowledging the threats posed by climate change and environmental issues when

compared to other religious groups (Ronan 2017; Lowe, Israel, et al. 2022). In a grounded research study, Veldman (2019) found that Evangelical Christians gravitate toward at least three stances on climate change: environmental concerns are insignificant in comparison to matters of eternal significance (62-68), environmental concerns are irrelevant in light of Christ's imminent return (70-74), and climate change is antithetical to the notion that "God is in control" and, therefore, must be a fabricated myth (97-98, 101-102). As a white, cisgender, settler of European descent rooted in the conservative Evangelical Church and an intermittent Christian educational leader, I am positioned in an environment that is often apathetic or hostile to suggestions that Christians are morally responsible for mitigating the effects of environmental destruction. Considering these circumstances, I am looking toward unconventional learning approaches in Christian circles that may promote dialogue on ecological issues.

Veldman (2019) claims many Evangelical Christians lack skills in "ecological literacy" that allow them to discuss non-local environmental issues (49, 50). One of the reasons that Veldman (2019) believes that Evangelical Christians are not motivated to develop ecological literacies is because "environmental problems . . . accumulate slowly . . . they become problems only at a scale greater than the individual can access through personal experience . . . ecologically degraded states do not always appear to the untrained eye to be the result of human alteration" (49). With this understanding, the Church needs a pedagogy that can heighten Christians' experience of environmental issues in a shorter timespan than such issues occur in real life.

According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning occurs through reflecting on and abstracting details from "concrete experiences" in a cyclical process (31). Using the "situated learning matrix" (Gee 2008, 24-26),[1] games can provide "preparation for future learning" (Hammer and Black 2009; Arena 2012) by allowing people to experience and interact with "models" (i.e., depictions or simulations) of reality (Gee 2008, 27-31). Some ecological games allow people to experience the effects of environmental changes in a condensed time frame (op de Beke, Raessens, and Werning 2024, 20-21); experimental, correlational, and qualitative studies have suggested that some of these games can be effective in teaching people ecological and sustainability concepts (Janakiraman, Watson, et al. 2021a; Janakiraman, Watson, and Watson 2021b; Chappin, Bijvoet, and Oei 2017; Yamada, Ribeiro, and Ghilardi-Lopes 2019; Tsai, Liu, et al. 2021; Gatti, Ulrich, and Seele 2019; Vázquez-Vílchez, Garrido-Rosales, et al. 2021). Additionally, experimental and quasi-experimental studies have shown that some games are effective at helping people cultivate empathy (Tucker and Çatak 2020; Bachen, Hernandez-Ramos, and Raphael 2012) and other prosocial behavior (Greitemeyer and Osswald 2010; Iten, Bopp, et al. 2018; Erdoğan and Turan 2023). Would game-based learning be a viable option for creating educational interventions in an Evangelical Christian context?

It has been argued that Christian religious education is closely associated with worship (Sargeant 2015, xii, 105-110, 135; Murphy 2004, 10-11). Accordingly, Christian educators who consider utilizing game-based learning should consider whether the sacred space of small groups is under threat of "transgression" (Douglas 2002 [1966], 49-50, 196-197, 199) by the inclusion of games. Christians have a mixed history of being suspicious of games (Leone 2018; Laycock

2015, 102-103, 106-107, 133-134); however, some Christian groups (including some Evangelical groups) have been receptive to games in recent years, both for entertainment (Luft 2014) and as tools for learning (Macedo de Novaes and Lima 2021). Furthermore, Christian digital and tabletop game-based learning exercises for teaching empathy have been positively received in Christian seminaries (Auxier 2018; Krause, Headley, et al. 2020). Interestingly, one study found that Evangelical Christians tend to make choices in games that align with their Christian values (e.g., avoiding in-game strip clubs; Luft 2014, 163-165); this suggests some Christians may not leave their religious values at the boundary of Huizinga's (1950) ludic "magic circle" that typically defines playful activities as non-serious (10-11). Since there appears to be few, if any, prominent ecological Christian games and since Christians may become religiously involved in playing games, it is unclear how Christians would respond to secular games in a Christian small group setting.

Another important consideration is whether game-based learning can be combined with other Christian symbols to guide people into an encounter with the divine. What likely matters here is whether the game has the potential to enhance or detract from the Bible and Christian tradition.

Methodology

Drawing from my interdisciplinary background in Theological Studies and Education, this paper utilized conceptual and hermeneutical lenses to perform a "theoretically driven content analysis" (Stemler 2015, 4) of several commercial digital games and board games. This paper adopted a participatory observation methodology in exploring several ecological-themed digital games and board games. I recorded notes from playing digital games and board games until I reached data saturation. Exploring the educational relevance of each game by adopting a conceptual lens constructed through game-based learning theory and environmental sustainability concepts, I drew on my Theological background to code the notes into themes that may be relevant in adopting the games in an adult Christian learning environment; in particular, I highlighted possible cultural congruences and incongruences that may impact the adoption of each game in a church setting.

The games explored in this study were chosen with specific selection criteria. Becker (2017) emphasizes the importance of choosing commercial-off-the-shelf games that meet students' learning "needs" (106). Generally, people only remember content from games that directly impact game decisions (Young, Slota, et al. 2012, 80). As such, games were pre-screened to determine if they included content that required ecological decision-making. Furthermore, to ensure that games included in this study could direct people to analytical thinking, only games that met O'Brien's (2011) "strategy" criteria of the "taxonomy on educational games" (1, 5, 7-8, 12) were selected. Games that focused on evolution were excluded from the study as I believed that conservative Christians may find the topic to be offensive. Similarly, I excluded games that held unpopular ratings on "Steam" (n. d.) or low ratings on

"BoardGameGeek" (n. d.). Additionally, to ensure that game models could be interpreted by future players, I excluded games that I found challenging to understand at a quick glance.

I played four games: two digital games and two board games. In the digital game *Endling: Extinction is Forever (*hereafter *Endling;* Herobeat Studios 2022*)*, players control the last remaining mother fox on Earth as she raises her four pups in a world heavily impacted by pollution; the game involves catching sufficient food to keep the pups alive and avoiding threats (e.g., predators and hunters). The digital game *The Wandering Village* (Stray Fawn Studio 2022) requires players to develop a symbiotic relationship with a large creature called an Onbu that can host a village on its back; the game involves managing resources to keep the villagers and Onbu alive as Onbu wanders across the world through various climates. In the cooperative board game *Spirit Island* (Reuss, 2017), players take on the role of nature-based spirits who inhabit an island that is being ravaged by colonial settlers; the game involves managing resources and playing cards to destroy settlements and scare the invaders. *Spirit Island* is noteworthy for having been endorsed for use in lessons about colonialism (Bushner 2024). Finally, the *Catan Scenarios: Oil Springs* (hereafter *Oil Springs*; Assadourian and Hansen 2011) expansion from *Settlers of Catan* (Teuber 2012 [1996]) is a competitive board game in which players manage oil and other natural resources to build a society; as players contribute to pollution, environmental disasters affect the land (e.g.,coastal flooding that damages settlements, permanent land damage affecting resource generation). Some quantitative research suggests that *Oil Springs* may be effective at teaching students about the impacts of climate change (Chappin, Bijvoet, and Oei 2017).

Findings

Playing through the games yielded several themes and general observations related to anticipated opportunities and challenges with using such games to educate Christians in a church small group setting. In the following section, I will outline these findings with my reflections on the practical implications of such observations.

Themes of Opportunity

Opportunity Theme One: Encountering Desperation

A common theme across my experience playing the games in this study was encountering the feeling of desperation. For example, I felt desperation as I frantically searched for food for my starving pups each night in *Endling*. The prey and garbage that my fox family consumed for survival rarely respawned on subsequent nights. Each night I needed to venture farther from my den to find food; along the way I encountered competing predators and hunters. On one occasion, I was unable to find food and, as such, I watched one of my pups slowly die as it lost energy and eventually collapsed. A few nights later I began to see humans moving into a forested area to cut down trees; the abundant forest with bird's eggs for food and trees/bushes for hiding was reduced to a flat wasteland. After being driven from food scarcity to hunt in human settled

areas, I was relieved to find an unguarded chicken for my pups to eat; when I reflected on this incident, I grew sympathy for the local coyotes my local region traps to prevent them from killing and eating domesticated farm animals and pets.

I also felt desperation in *The Wandering Village* when climate/environmental change occurred and my population grew hungry. The infrastructure and technology that supported my village during one biome was rendered less effective or obsolete when the Onbu wandered into a different biome. For example, the crops that my village harvested in a moderate temperature biome were unable to grow in a warm temperature biome. Since I did not have the foresight to see that my crops would fail in a new climate, I did not prepare crops that could be grown in the new climate; this meant that my village soon ran out of food and villagers began to starve to death. I was unable to make agricultural accommodations before a large amount of my population died. With my population diminished, I had difficulty adapting to the future wants and needs of my villagers; this created a perpetual cycle in which I was unable to prepare for disease outbreaks and other environmental changes.

My time with *Spirit Island* produced feelings of desperation as each turn resulted in growing numbers of settlers invading and ravaging the land. As the land suffered damage in *Spirit Island*, I encountered a sense of dread that I may be unable to mitigate the impact of cascading blight and security threats to the indigenous population. During each playthrough, the blight would inevitably cause permanent damage to the island that required me to discard cards or lose territory. The game provided a sense that Eurocentric colonialism was having an impact on the forces of nature. Every victory felt like a narrow escape from disaster.

Finally, *Oil Springs* gave me feelings of desperation when I was affected by environmental disasters tied to the use of oil. During one game, I lost access to wood resources from a territory that I had cultivated; the loss of the territory disadvantaged me and the loss of the wood resources meant that I needed to lean on my oil producing territories. In another game, I struggled to advance my territory as one of my coastal cities kept suffering damage from periodic and unpredictable flooding. The game provided me with a sense of the global unfairness of climate change.

One of the challenges of convincing Christians of the dangers of climate change and environmental damage is that people have moral responsibility for their environmental decisions. The games involved in this study provide concrete experiences of the desperation that wildlife and societies experience as humans exploit the environment and fail to prepare for ecological disasters. From a Christian perspective, the games provide a basis for reflecting on what it means to “love your neighbour” (Mark 12:31) and “do to others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12). If I can develop empathy for a fox, why do I not care for its wellbeing? If I can foresee the challenges faced by future generations and foreign territories, why do I not care to challenge the status quo? If I can feel the desperation of the exploited land, why am I not doing more to lobby for environmental protection and to pursue reconciliation with indigenous caretakers of the land? These questions may fuel dialogue in Christian small groups on how we are moral actors regarding the natural world.

Opportunity Theme Two: The Value of Elevating Human Life Above Nature

Several of the games made me question my presuppositions on the value of human life in relation to the natural world. Every time I died in *Endling*, I was reminded by the game that my pups would not survive and the fox species would face extinction. Near the conclusion of *Endling*, I learned that a hunter's inability to successfully profit from taking my life resulted in his daughter dying from illness in poverty. The juxtaposition of the death of one child with the death of a fox's nearly extinct pups made me question the hierarchy of life seemingly endorsed by Christianity; both the hunter and the mother fox fight for survival in a game of unequal consequences. What is a non-human species worth? Am I to lament the death of the child when her life comes at the expense of a species' extinction? In a world that prioritizes human enjoyment, comfort, and wellbeing, animals are exceptional victims of climate change and environmental damage. In making me assume the identity of the fox, *Endling* forces me to confront the uncomfortable reality experienced by countless animals that humans have caused to go extinct; if I desire the survival of my pretend character, why do I fail to lament the destruction of numerous creatures who desire to survive?

My experience of *Spirit Island* also made me question the value of human pursuits when settlers put the land at risk. The spirits in *Spirit Island* do not depend on humans; as embodiments of nature, the spirits thrive when humans live in harmony with nature and suffer damage when humans ravage the land (Reuss 2017). As a player assuming a nature-spirit identity, I was relieved when I created conditions that expelled settlers or destroyed colonial settlements as these actions sheltered the land. It is interesting that I felt such relief as I am a settler of European descent; in playing the game, I found myself celebrating nature's victory over a group that historically represents my family and nation. By shifting my identity from dominating settler to the oppressed land, *Spirit Island* made me consider the perspective of non-human victims of humanity's industrial progress.

Another experience that made me question the value of human life in comparison to nature occurred when my villagers began complaining of the lack of decorations in *The Wandering Village*. Decorations in *The Wandering Village* raise villager happiness; however, prioritizing the creation of decor comes at the expense of resource production needed to keep the village population and Onbu alive. When my villagers began to complain of lacking decorations, I became frustrated that they were failing to see the gravity of a situation in which people face starvation and the land faces destruction. Yet, when I reflected on the situation, I realized that I prioritize decoration all the time in my consumerist lifestyle; when I vote with my wallet for unneeded consumerist items, I declare that society's resources should be diverted to my wants over our collective and environmental needs.

In my colonial nation of Canada, Christians have prioritized the lives of "progressive" settlers over indigenous peoples. Churches that are committed to reconciliation with indigenous peoples need to encourage Christians to adopt a new mindset about the role of humans in relation to nature and the land. Some games involved in this study may allow people to experience the world from a non-anthropocentric perspective that is allied with some indigenous perspectives

(see Tucker 2010, 175). Christian educators who augment these games with non-anthropocentric biblical texts (e.g., Job 38-39; Job 40:15-24, which contains a description of a behemoth that loosely resembles Onbu) may be able to encourage Christians to reflect on the foolishness of relying on human reason to guide people in relation to the natural world.

Opportunity Theme 3: Impact of Letting History Run Its Course

Another theme that I encountered is the impact of letting our current trajectory of history continue without intervention. *Endling* contained plot elements about the effects of human development on the environment: deforestation, pollution of water sources, garbage, poaching, and deterioration of air quality. Unfortunately, since people who play games rarely remember information that is unessential to completing game tasks, it is likely that players will only remember plot details that most affected gameplay (e.g., the effects of unregulated animal protection, garbage, and deforestation). Similarly, *The Wandering Village* encouraged me to work through my failure in taking preventative action in light of impending climate change. The gameplay of *Spirit Island* showed how uncontrolled settler population growth and land cultivation can harm indigenous groups. Finally, *Oil Springs* showed how land damage could permanently disadvantage societies.

Some Christians negate their responsibility for the environment by claiming God is in control or appealing to Christ's expected return. While history demonstrates that God allows humans to experience consequences for their sins, people may experience difficulty imagining the future impacts of decisions made today. The games involved in this study can be used to prepare people for conversations on the short-term and long-term impacts of present-day choices. Since games offer imperfect simulations, educators would likely need to supplement games with evidence of the effects of ecological degradation to convince people to take their game experiences seriously. Nevertheless, Christian educators may promote reflection by juxtaposing biblical passages that warn of natural consequences for sins (e.g., Proverbs 20:4) with students' experiences of consequences in games.

Themes of Challenge

Challenge Theme 1: Disorienting Symbols

Some of the games utilized symbols that Christians and church visitors may find distasteful, especially in a religious context. When I approached *Spirit Island*, I was apprehensive about taking the identity of a god-like spirit; intrusive thoughts stemming from my Obsessive Compulsive Disorder questioned whether assuming this role was blasphemous. It is possible that other Evangelical Christians who practice religious scrutiny may have similar difficulties with pretending to be a spirit. Additionally, as a post-evangelical white settler, I am acutely aware of how my religion has oppressed groups who believe in spirits of a non-Judeo-Christian origin. How do I reconcile my Christian identity with the game's construction of "totems," the physical

symbols that Christians have torn down? My temptation is to treat the game as fantasy; however, I question whether doing so undermines indigenous religion. Likewise, *Spirit Island*'s treatment of indigenous groups as pawns for fighting invaders may reflect poorly on a religion that has historically mistreated indigenous peoples.

Endling also uses symbols that may offend Christians. Hunters are portrayed in *Endling* as psychopathic murderers and kidnappers. Christians who find meaning and justification in hunting may find such depictions to be unfair and demeaning. While playing *Endling*, I experienced fear and physical trembling during encounters with hunters. Of course, I imagine that if I was a fox in real life, I may experience similar physical sensations around hunters.

Finally, it is possible that some Christians may be offended by the overt climate change agenda promoted in *Oil Springs*. Since *Oil Springs* does not illustrate the relationship between pollution and climate change, some Christians may feel that the game is pushing a liberal agenda without due cause.

Although the games contain symbols that may disorient some Christians, there is also potential for Christian educators to use the symbols to hold discussions on topics that are relevant to ecology. For instance, the cultivation of empathy for a nature-based spirit in *Spirit Island* could allow Christian educators to dialogue with small group participants on having "cultural humility" (Isaacson 2014, 257) toward practitioners of indigenous spirituality. Likewise, the idea that *Endling* tells a story from the perspective of a fox could provide an opportunity to discuss "species location" as a corollary to "social location" (Ringe 1998, 292) or "habitat humility" as a corollary to cultural humility. Perhaps it is even possible to ask participants to imagine how an animal facing extinction would read Psalm 50:10-11, Proverbs 12:10, Isaiah 58:6-7, Luke 12:6, or 1 Corinthians 9:9-10? A hermeneutical exercise that positions the extinct animal as God's beloved and oppressed creature may challenge anti-ecological ideologies in the Church. Unfortunately, experience suggests that it is also possible that some Christians may pose conflicts for small group leaders who utilize games with challenging symbols if such leaders lack transparency on their environmental agendas.

Challenge Theme 2: Living With Environmental Degradation is Tolerable

Another theme that arose among some games is that the dangers of climate change and environmental exploitation may be tolerable. Although environmental damage affected me in *Oil Springs*, my playthroughs of the game never resulted in the island's destruction and my aggressive use of oil often resulted in my experience of prosperity. Similarly, with careful planning, it is seemingly possible to exploit the Onbu in *The Wandering Village* without experiencing significant effects of climate change. Finally, the experience of losing *Spirit Island* does not indicate that the colonial settlers of the island suffered any negative effects for their continued exploitation of the land and indigenous population. Indeed, the blight in *Spirit Island* never posed any long-term negative effects for the settlers or indigenous population; the blight only affected the spirits.

Of course, to some extent, it is possible to argue that the games simulate one of the core problems with motivating people to respond to ecological degradation: many of the consumers of excessive fuel and producers of pollution do not always feel the negative effects of their use. As such, religious educators who utilize these games in a small group setting may need to find methods of inducing empathy for the victims of environmental degradation in the games. For example, it is possible to hold a dialogue on how players of *Oil Springs* felt when they suffered environmental disasters. Similarly, religious educators could attempt to cultivate empathy for indigenous groups by supplementing *Spirit Island* with literature that tells the stories of indigenous people who have been murdered or displaced from their lands for the exploitation of the lands by settlers.

General Observations

While playing the games, I made a few general observations that could be relevant for Christian educators hoping to utilize commercial games in small group settings. First, a game's structure may or may not fit with an intended small group structure. For instance, since a playthrough of *Spirit Island* may take three to four hours to complete, it will likely not be feasible to play the game and discuss gameplay in a single small group session that meets for two hours per week; however, it may be possible to play the game and hold a discussion in a full day workshop. In contrast, the short chapters of *Endling* (marked by scent trails) may allow Christian educators to hold dialogues on small segments of gameplay in short weekly sessions; however, since *Endling* is a single player game, Christian educators will need to decide how learners will experience the game (e.g., playing as a large group in class, assigning gameplay homework, etc.).

Second, since games require players to have differing skills, Christian educators may need to consider how they will make gameplay accessible to all participants in inclusive small group environments. For example, navigating the user interface of *The Wandering Village* or running from hunters in *Endling* may be challenging for some group members. Similarly, although board games may be adapted for people with visual impairments (e.g., adding braille to cards or boards), digital games would probably be unplayable for this demographic. As such, if Christian educators want to utilize digital games in a church learning environment, they may need to adopt methods of accommodating students (e.g., providing gameplay videos, providing audio descriptions of gameplay, pairing students as partners, etc.).

Finally, the graphical models of *Endling* are compatible with Christian spirituality that emphasizes God's creative work in nature. *Endling*'s juxtaposition of pristine wilderness with human pollution and construction can provide opportunities to reflect on the goodness and harmony of God's world.

Discussion

The themes and general observations presented in this paper illustrate some anticipated challenges and opportunities with using commercial games as preparation for teaching adult Christians about climate change and other forms of environmental degradation. Yet questions remain on whether such digital and tabletop games are appropriate for teaching about environmentalism in a church context.

One question is whether these games have the potential to convince Christians that environmental degradation is real and relevant. Since none of the games offered a causal argument for the existence of climate change, there is no reason to suspect that the games in this study would convince a skeptical Christian that climate change is real; however, since the games appear to be capable of soliciting emotional experiences of ecological crises, the games may motivate Christians who are apathetic believers of environmental degradation to learn about mitigating the effects of climate change and other ecological threats.

op de Beke, Raessens, and Werning (2024) warn that environmental games may give people the impression that climate change is "manageable" (21). The findings of this study suggest that this warning is warranted. As such, religious educators should consider how they may supplement games with additional materials to reinforce Christians' responsibility to alleviate suffering experienced by humans and animals. For instance, *Oil Springs* can be supplemented with literature or videos describing how the Inuit are losing access to traditional hunting grounds through climate change (see Pearce, Ford, et al. 2015); this loss of animal resources resembles the loss of natural resources in *Oil Springs.* Likewise, *Endling* can be supplemented with literature or videos that show how losing biodiversity can impact human culture and health (see Clark, Lovell, et al 2014). Since the Bible is rich with passages that discuss people's responsibility in caring for the poor (e.g., Deuteronomy 15:11) and alleviating oppression (e.g., Isaiah 58:6-7), religious educators should be able to integrate people's experiences with the games into a Christian narrative on justice.

Another important question is whether these games belong in a worship learning environment. It is important to note that some church communities are likely unready to embrace digital and tabletop games in church educational programs; in such settings, it may be detrimental to the wellbeing of a church community to introduce digital and tabletop games. Additionally, Christian educators who operate in Evangelical Christian environments should be aware that ideas threatening the infallibility of Scripture may be subject to censorship through the "normalizing gaze" (Foucault 1984, 197) that is extended from "proof-texting" (Cary 2019, 180-183); some games' disorienting symbols may be considered such threats in some communities. Indeed, due to the indigenous symbols found in *Spirit Island*, I am hesitant to encourage Christian educators from settler backgrounds to adopt the game in a small group study environment without exercising caution on racial power dynamics and intercultural issues that may be present. Yet, there are reasons to believe that other games explored in this study can be sources of fruitful dialogue on ecological concerns in church communities that are willing to embrace new methods of education.

While some Christians–especially Christians from racialized and indigenous backgrounds–may regularly experience the violent effects of environmental marginalization,

other Christians–especially Christians from white affluent backgrounds–may not regularly experience feelings of desperation with regards to ecological matters. Civil rights activist Thurman (1959) stated, "[t]he masses of men [sic] live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed" (13). The games examined in this study can provide experiences of being dispossessed from human action or inaction on environmental matters. These experiences may help Christians relate to others (both human and nonhuman) who experience the consequences of environmental devastation. Writing on the Good Samaritan, M. King (1963) stated:

> True altruism is more than the capacity to pity; it is the capacity to sympathize . . . Pity may arise from interest in the abstraction called humanity, but sympathy grows out of a concern for a particular needy human being who lies at life's roadside. Sympathy is fellow feeling for the person in need—his pain, agony, and burdens (35).

Taking action to resolve climate change and other environmental disasters requires that people engage in self-denying "solidarity" (Isasi-Diaz 1998, 30-31; Granberg-Michaelson 1992, 79) with people and creatures they will never meet. The games analyzed in this paper can provide people with a sense of the suffering that those who are negatively affected by climate change and pollution experience; it is possible that these encounters with suffering will motivate some Christians to practice solidarity.

Similarly, by simulating ecological environments, games can provide a means for encouraging learners to encounter both the beauty and fragility of God's creation. According to Santmire (1985), the "metaphor of fecundity" is historically expressed in Christian spirituality as an effort "to rise to a vantage point where I can begin to apprehend the earth's vastness and mystery and beauty" (18-19). The Biblical expression of the fecundity metaphor is Psalm 104 (Santmire 1985, 21-22). By centering one's focus on nature, ecological games can provide an opportunity to reflect on what creation means to us. The findings of this study support op de Beke Raessens, and Werning's (2024) suggestion that "[t]hrough innovative game design, video games can challenge our anthropocentric biases in favor of more biocentric ways of looking at the world, by situating us differently in the landscape" (33). Perhaps Christian educators can draw on the biocentric elements of these games to direct small group participants to worship God while learning and lamenting about environmental threats; this achievement would secure commercial digital and tabletop games as a viable method of ecological Christian education.

Future Research

Having demonstrated that some digital and tabletop games could potentially address Christians' ecological learning needs, further research is needed on how humans respond to the introduction of this method. Qualitative research is needed on teachers' and learners' reactions to introducing digital and tabletop games in a church environment. Additionally, quantitative research is needed for determining whether digital and tabletop games can produce a demonstrable impact on students' learning in church environments. The findings of these studies will show whether commercial digital and tabletop games are viable in ecclesiastical practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, some commercial-off-the-shelf digital games and board games may be suitable for educating Christians on matters of ecological concern in church small group settings. The games explored in this study have some potential in creating emotional experiences that Christians can reflect upon to gain insights into the human and animal lives that are affected by climate change, pollution, and other ecological devastations; however, Christian educators should consider possible challenges that a game may present in their local contexts. Christian educators who can integrate games into their church cultures and Christian narratives may help congregants gain ecological literacies that affect how they see and respond to the world. Hopefully, religious education practitioners will be inspired to try this method in their local contexts and report on how it is received.

Notes

[1] The "situated learning matrix" is defined as the mastery of "content" through solving challenges in a "goal-driven problem space" by utilizing "tools and technologies" that align with in-game player "identity" (Gee 2008, 24-26).

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Climate Change Issues in Saudi Elementary Schools: An Analysis and Suggestions for Islamic Studies Textbooks

Abstract

Aligning with the Saudi Green Initiative and sustainability, I analyzed elementary Islamic Studies textbooks for climate issues to inspire discussions on adding climate change to religious education, enabling children to address environmental issues and sustainability. I found five areas for integration: the rain-invoking prayer, recognizing Allah through signs, the blessing of water, *Ehsan*, and environmental stewardship. Adding these elements to the curriculum could enhance students' awareness and responsibility, aligning religious education with sustainability and ecological consciousness.

Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a historic crossroads of many cultures and one of the world's biggest economies. It is undergoing several social, economic, and educational reforms. Saudi Arabia, a vast country covering approximately 2.15 million square kilometers, is home to around 32 million people (Saudi General Authority for Statistics, 2024). The kingdom faces many challenges related to climate change. According to the World Bank Group (2021), the country is vulnerable to the growing dangers of climate change, with potential impacts on water security, including a reduction in the frequency and amount of precipitation, coupled with rising temperatures.

In 2021, Saudi Arabia inaugurated the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI), a comprehensive societal endeavor that brings together all sustainability endeavors within the nation to swiftly enhance the kingdom's climate action. SGI aligns with Saudi Arabia's goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2060 through the implementation of the circular carbon economy approach, concurrently expediting the nation's shift toward a sustainable green economy. SGI is guided by three primary objectives: reducing emissions, promoting afforestation, and safeguarding both

land and sea environments (Saudi Vision, 2023). Improving the education system will play a key part in the achievement of the Saudi Vision 2030 and the SGI. Recognizing that reaching these goals is crucial, the kingdom emphasizes the need to enhance its education system. A significant aspect of this enhancement involves incorporating environmental and climate change topics into school curricula. This educational development is essential for sustainability, as it not only addresses immediate environmental concerns, but also nurtures a generation capable of contributing to the country's long-term environmental strength and global competitiveness.

Environmental stewardship is deeply rooted in the teachings of Islam, which emphasize the importance of protecting and respecting the natural world. The Qur'an contains several references to nature and the environment, highlighting the interconnectedness of all living things and the responsibility of humans to act as guardians of the Earth. Almighty Allah warns against the corruption of the land and sea due to human actions. He said, "Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]" (30: 41)[1]. Almighty Allah also warns against wastefulness, saying in another verse, "And He it is who causes gardens to grow, [both] trellised and untrellised, and palm trees and crops of different [kinds of] food and olives and pomegranates, similar and dissimilar. Eat of [each of] its fruit when it yields and give its due [zakah] on the day of its harvest. And be not excessive. Indeed, He does not like those who commit excess" (6: 141). These teachings, along with the Prophet Muhammed tradition, provide a strong foundation for integrating environmental and climate change education into Islamic religious curricula.

Scholars from around the world have investigated the integration of climate change education into various educational contexts, shedding light on the approaches and challenges in addressing this critical topic. Chang and Pascua (2017) examined the curriculum of climate change education in Singapore, emphasizing the pivotal role of inclusion within the educational framework to shape policy and practice. Following this, Hurlimann et al. (2021) explored the coverage of climate change in Australian urban planning degrees, highlighting the need for greater emphasis on explicit climate change issues to enhance students' competency in addressing environmental challenges. Subsequently, D'Apice and Bromley (2023) investigated climate change discourse in US history textbooks from California and Texas, illustrating how textbooks frame climate change within narratives of progress and controversy. Trædal et al. (2022) examined climate change discourses in geography textbooks in South Africa and Norway, shedding light on the influence of societal discourses on the portrayal of climate change issues in educational materials. Most recently, Bonilla and Quesada (2024) analyzed climate change content in Colombian schoolbooks, emphasizing the necessity for more comprehensive and contextually relevant educational materials to address climate change education effectively. These studies offer valuable insights and frameworks for comprehending the integration of climate change issues into educational curricula.

[1] The translations of this verse and others in this article were excerpted from the Ayat - Electronic Mosshaf project, developed by King Saud University. Website: quran.ksu.edu.sa.

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Education oversees all aspects of education, and both public and private schools use textbooks established by the ministry. It should be noted that at the time of conducting this research, the Saudi government established the National Center for Curriculum, a distinct entity from the Ministry of Education. This center is tasked with overseeing all curriculum-related matters, underscoring the significance of curricula in Saudi Arabia (Saudi Gazette, 2024). This centralized system encourages a close alignment between textbooks and curricula, leading teachers and officials to often perceive them as interchangeable. Within the educational system, religious education exclusively refers to Islamic education, which is compulsory and taught at all levels from Years 1 to 12.

This article analyzes the current Saudi religious education textbooks at the elementary level (Years 1 to 6) to explore any issues related to climate change and to provide suggestions to curriculum developers. To the author's knowledge, no research has been conducted explicitly to review climate change content within Saudi religious education textbooks. It is hoped that this article will stimulate discussions on incorporating climate change issues into religious education in Saudi schools. The following section discusses the methodology and findings.

Methodology

As stated previously, the aim of this research was to analyze the current Saudi religious education textbooks at the elementary school level (Year 1 to Year 6) to explore any concepts related to environmental and climate change. The elementary school level was chosen for this review because early education is a critical period for shaping values, attitudes, and behaviors among students. Introducing climate change issues at this stage can foster a strong foundation of environmental awareness and responsibility in young learners. A content analysis approach was utilized to review Islamic Studies textbooks at the elementary school level. According to Krippendorff (2019), content analysis enables the production of reliable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful material) to the specific contexts in which they are employed.

The elementary school level textbooks for the early years (Years 1 to Year 3) cover two subjects: (1) *Tawhid* (Islamic creed—the declaration of the oneness of God); and (2) *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and Ethics. For the later years (Years 4 to Year 6), another subject is added, namely *Hadith* and *Sirah* (*Hadith* is the record of the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad and *Sirah* is his biography). These textbooks were authored and revised by a group of specialists. They all were published by the Ministry of Education in 2023, and they are available online on the iEN platform (ien.edu.sa). Table 1 shows the details of each textbook including the number of chapters, lessons, and pages.

Table 1: Textbooks for each term

Textbook (Year/Term)	Title	Chapters	Lessons	Pages
Year 1 – Term 1	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	5	11	58
Year 1 – Term 2	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	6	11	54
Year 1 – Term 3	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	5	12	64
Year 2 – Term 1	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	5	12	56
Year 2 – Term 2	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	6	13	66
Year 2 – Term 3	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	4	13	53
Year 3 – Term 1	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	5	13	55
Year 3 – Term 2	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	7	12	60
Year 3 – Term 3	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	5	13	68
Year 4 – All terms	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Hadith* and *Sirah*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	5/8/5	22/19/22	251
Year 5 – All terms	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Hadith* and *Sirah*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	10/10/9	26/28/31	350
Year 6 – All terms	Islamic Studies (*Tawhid*, *Hadith* and *Sirah*, *Fiqh* and Ethics)	8/10/9	24/17/24	271
Total		122	323	1406

To review the textbooks for climate change issues, I followed the analytical framework used by Hurlimann et al. (2021) for explicit climate change issues, which focuses on the following key issues: climate change (general mention), climate change adaptation, climate change mitigation, transformation, innovation, climate resilience, greenhouse gas emissions, disaster risk reduction, disaster risk response, disaster risk recovery, scientific uncertainty, incomplete knowledge, bushfire, flood, sustainable water management, sea level rise, and heatwaves. All the Islamic Studies textbooks were reviewed page by page for any of these issues of climate change. The review process was repeated by the author after four weeks' interval to ensure the reliability of the review process, and the absence of any climate change issues was confirmed.

Findings and Suggestions

The findings reveal a notable absence of references to climate change in Saudi religious textbooks at the elementary school level. This is unsurprising, given that the focus of religious education is primarily on religious concepts and ethical teachings rather than contemporary environmental challenges. However, during this review, the author identified five topics where climate change issues could be integrated and explored within these textbooks. These topics present an opportunity to align religious teachings with current environmental concerns. Also, incorporating these suggestions may help to achieve the objectives of Islamic Studies as outlined by the Saudi Education and Training Evaluation Commission (2022), including the goal that students will "understand the harmony and integration between science and religion in Islamic Sharia (Law), while fostering a critical mindset aware of universal laws."

The Rain-Invoking Prayer (Sixth Grade, Term 1, *Fiqh* and Ethics)

Chapter 3 begins with six photos and the question: “What do you notice from these pictures?” (See Figure 1). This, in my opinion, provides a good opportunity to include an activity that discusses climate change in general and its impact on rainfall patterns. Following the photo introduction, Islamic Studies teachers can engage students in a discussion activity in which they analyze the images, brainstorm what they notice about rainfall patterns, and provide relevant information on how human activities contribute to climate change and its consequences for weather phenomena like rainfall. If a discussion on climate change and its impact on rainfall patterns is incorporated into the curriculum, students not only deepen their understanding of the rain-invoking prayer, but also gain awareness of pressing environmental issues and their ethical responsibilities as stewards of the Earth.

Figure 1. The Rain-Invoking (Sixth Grade Islamic Studies Textbook -1, *Fiqh* and Ethics, P. 93).

Signs of Almighty Allah (Fifth Grade, Term 1, *Tawhid*)

Upon reviewing the textbooks, it is evident that they explore the topic of recognizing Almighty Allah through His signs. This theme is integral to *Tawhid* (Islamic creed—the declaration of the oneness of God), and it is explored across various elementary textbooks. For instance, in the fifth-grade textbook, Chapter 2 elucidates the concept of recognizing Almighty Allah through His signs, such as the sky, sun, moon, and earth (See Figure 2). As stated in the Holy Qur'an (41:53), "We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth." Issues of climate change can be integrated into Islamic Studies textbooks as a contemporary manifestation of Allah's Omnipotence. Educational activities can be tailored to elucidate this connection, offering students a deeper understanding of how environmental issues align with Islamic teachings and serve as further evidence of Allah's magnificence.

Figure 2. The servant's knowledge of his Lord (Fifth Grade Islamic Studies Textbook-1, *Tawhid*, P. 32).

Water is a Blessing (Fourth Grade, Term 1, *Fiqh* and Ethics)

Chapter 1 in the fourth grade (Pages 63–72) consists of three lessons. It begins with a lesson about water as a blessing (See Figure 3), followed by a lesson on clean water, which can be used for ablution before prayers. The chapter concludes with a lesson on unclean water. The topic of water as a blessing is also mentioned briefly in Grade 1 (Term 2, page 51). Exploring the concept of water as a blessing provides a good opportunity to connect this topic to climate change issues. By understanding the importance and scarcity of clean water, students can appreciate the impact of climate change on water resources. This connection helps foster a sense of responsibility and awareness regarding environmental conservation from an Islamic perspective.

Figure 3. Water is a Blessing (Fourth Grade Islamic Studies Textbook-1, *Fiqh* and Ethics, P. 64).

***Ehsan*, or the Doing of Good (**Third Grade, Term 3, *Tawhid*)

The concept of *Ehsan* in Islam encompasses good conduct and righteous deeds. Allah states, “Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. He admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded” (Holy Qur’an 16:90). This concept, though vast, is briefly discussed in the third-grade *Tawhid* textbook. One activity asks students how they can practice *Ihsan* and good conduct towards their neighbors and friends (See Figure 4). This activity could be expanded to include doing good for our planet as well, as Allah says, “And cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation.” (Holy Qur’an 7:56).


نشاط ١

كَيْفَ أكُونُ مُحْسِنًا لِجَارِي، وَصَدِيقِي؟

١ الْجَارُ: .....

٢ الصَّدِيقُ: .....

Figure 4. The meaning of *Ehsan* (Third Grade Islamic Studies Textbook-3, *Tawhid*, P. 27).

Saving the Environment (Second Grade, Term 2, *Fiqh* and Ethics)

The title of Lesson 4 in the *Fiqh* and Ethics, second grade for Term 2 is "saving the environment." This lesson includes an activity where students are asked to mark the correct photo (See Figure 5). The captions on the right, in order, state: "I keep public gardens clean," "I keep national parks clean," "I keep beaches clean," and "I preserve trees by not cutting them or littering around them." This lesson provides a good opportunity to discuss climate change issues. Students could learn about how Islamic teachings promote the protection and preservation of nature. Furthermore, the lesson could include age-appropriate discussions on how human activities contribute to climate change and the importance of taking action to mitigate its effects.

Figure 5. Saving the Environment (Second Grade Islamic Studies Textbook-2, *Fiqh* and Ethics, P. 39).

Conclusions and Limitations

In conclusion, integrating climate change issues into Saudi elementary religious textbooks presents a valuable opportunity. While current textbooks do not explicitly address climate change, this review has identified five potential areas for integration: the rain-invoking prayer, recognizing Allah through His signs, the blessing of water, the concept of *Ehsan*, and environmental stewardship. By incorporating discussions and activities related to climate change within these topics, students can develop a deeper understanding of these topics, in line with Islamic teachings. They can see the relevance of their faith's teachings in addressing global challenges, which fosters a sense of responsibility and proactive involvement.

However, improving textbooks alone is not sufficient. Effective integration of climate change topics also requires comprehensive teacher training. Educators need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to facilitate discussions on environmental issues and sustainability within the framework of Islamic teachings. This training will enable teachers to address climate change confidently in their lessons, making the curriculum more relevant to contemporary issues and fostering a critical mindset in students that appreciates the harmony between science and religion.

Finally, this research has analyzed Saudi Arabian elementary religious education textbooks for climate change issues and provided suggestions for curriculum developers to consider. It is hoped that this research will help to initiate a discussion on the topic of integrating climate change issue into Saudi religious education curricula. Further studies should investigate the most effective methods for integrating environmental issues and sustainability into religious curricula and the impact of such integration on students' understanding and attitudes towards climate change. By continuing this dialogue and pursuing rigorous research, educators and policymakers can develop more informed and effective strategies for educating the next generation about the crucial intersection of faith and environmental stewardship.

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Unraveling the Intersections of Capitalism, Consumer Culture, and Climate Change: Pedagogies for Social Justice in Religious Communities

Abstract

This research delves into the urgent reality of the environmental crisis, emphasizing its irreversible nature and the pressing need for transformative action. It uncovers the intersection of capitalism, consumer culture, and climate justice, emphasizing the profound challenges faced by society. It explores how religious communities engage with sustainable living and social justice through their theological frameworks and educational approaches. By examining pedagogical methods within religious contexts, the study seeks to provide insights for advocacy and educational initiatives. Ultimately, it aims to illuminate the potential of religious communities to challenge prevailing systems and drive transformative social change amid the environmental crisis.

Introduction

Many scholars consider the environmental crisis to be one of the greatest crises we face in our time. This has been a challenge for recent decades, and now, scholars no longer talk about it as a looming "crisis." Rather, many argue that it is now a "reality" that has reached an irreversible point.[1] According to a WMO (World Meteorological Organization) report, 2023 was the warmest year on record with the global average surface temperature rising almost 1.5°C above the pre-industrial baseline, marking the hottest decade ever recorded.[2] Here, in an age of escalating environmental crises and deepening social inequalities, the intersection of capitalism, consumer culture, and climate justice presents profound challenges that demand urgent attention. As Aja Barber, a writer and activist in fashion industry, argues that we need to keep in mind that "Our climate emergency is everyone's problem, and many of us from the wealthier nations have,

[1] Sally McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013),147; Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "The Challenge of the Environmental Crisis," *Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology*. Accessed on June 3, 2024. https://fore.yale.edu/Publications/Books/Religions-World-and-Ecology-Book-Series/Challenge-Environmental-Crisis; Bojie Fu, Michael F. Meadows, and Wenwu Zhao, "Geography in the Anthropocene: Transforming our world for sustainable Development," in the *Journal of Geography and Sustainability*, 2 (2022) 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geosus.2021.12.004

[2] "Climate Change Indicator Reached Record Levels in 2023: WMO," in *World Meteorological Organization*. March 19, 2024. https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/climate-change-indicators-reached-record-levels-2023-wmo#:~:text=The%20WMO%20report%20confirmed%20that,ten%2Dyear%20period%20on%20record.

sadly, impacted others who haven't contributed in the same way to what will happen to our planet."[3]

The ideologies of capitalism and neoliberalism, which prioritize individualism and unrestricted consumption, are major contributors to environmental degradation and climate change. I believe that religious communities have the potential to challenge and change these systems. However, there hasn't been enough exploration of the specific teaching methods used by religious communities in addressing issues such as intense competition, social inequality, consumer culture, and climate justice. Instead, "for many of our most prominent global warming deniers, religion serves to reinforce their views."[4]

This research intends to fill this gap and contribute insights to inform transformative social change. The research will focus on exploring the ways in which religious communities engage with the complex dynamics of neoliberal economies, excessive consumption, and the imperative for climate justice. By investigating the theological frameworks and educational approaches within these communities, the research aims to uncover strategies that not only foster critical reflections on consumer culture's environmental impacts but also advocate for social justice and sustainable living. It will also seek to identify and support the development of innovative approaches and strategies to ensure that the voices of religious communities are heard, and their contributions are valued.

This research holds significance in shedding light on the pedagogical strategies employed by religious communities at the crossroads of capitalism, neoliberalism, consumer culture, and climate justice. The findings may inform advocacy efforts, policy recommendations, and educational initiatives aimed at fostering sustainable and just societies. By delving into the pedagogies practiced by religious communities navigating the complex web of capitalism, neoliberalism, consumer culture, and climate justice, this research aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on social change. The insights gained may empower communities, educators, and activists to foster transformative approaches that address the interconnected challenges of our time.

Therefore, the main research questions guiding this study are: 1) How do religious communities conceptualize and respond to the challenges posed by contemporary local and global consumer culture and their impact on climate change? 2) What theological frameworks and pedagogical approaches can faith communities employ to engage their members in critical reflections on consumer culture and its implications for environmental sustainability? 3) In what ways are religious communities collaborating with climate justice movements, and how do their pedagogies contribute to broader social change?

Problem Posing: Intersectional Environment Crisis

In his book *The Day the World Stops Shopping*, J.B. MacKinnon explores a thought experiment on the impact of a significant reduction in global consumption. MacKinnon delves into what would happen if people worldwide stopped shopping for non-essential goods. He argues that reduced consumption would lead to a decrease in environmental degradation, lower carbon emissions, and less waste production. This would result in cleaner air, healthier ecosystems, and

[3] Aja Barber, *Consumed: The need for Collective Change: Colonialism, Climate Change, and Consumerism* (New York: Balance, 2021), 72.
[4] Jim Antal, *Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change*, Revised and Updated Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 17.

a slowdown in climate change. He bluntly points out the goals of the consumer capitalism: "There is a business concept called the "four mores" that could stand as the motto of modern consumer capitalism. Because it sounds greedy and underhanded, however, it's really mentioned outside the business schools. The four mores are as follows: sell more things, to more people, more often, for more money. To do so is to achieve the ultimate in perpetual profits, sales and growth."[5] Such process of thoughts and actions inevitably produces more carbon footprints and more destructive environmental consequence.[6] Many people are obsessed with the idea that consumption is the only way for the economy to work, and that is the only way for society to move toward social progress and success. The Anthropocene structure of production, the obsession with success and progress, and the desire to enjoy greater wealth, consume the environment and other creatures in order to keep this great wheel of production and consumption rolling, ultimately at the expense of people—both local and global. MacKinnon bluntly put the result of such actions and consequences:

> It isn't only the consumption is distorting the climate, failing the forest, cluttering our lives, filling our heads with a throwaway mindset, even stealing the stars from the night sky. The worst is that it leaves us with no idea of what else to do, no belief that things can be different. Whichever way we go, it leaves us doomed. …The Japanese word for consumption is *shohi*. It was created in the nineteenth century from two other words, *hi* to spend and *sho* to extinguish, like a fire that burns itself to ashes. The roots of the English word are similar: to consume originally means to utterly exhaust what existed before, to leave nothing behind, as though devoured by flame. If we are to consume more and more, it will have to be more of everything: more opportunities and more exhaustion, more experiences and more distraction, more depth but also more shallowness, more fullness but also more emptiness. We will consume time, space, life, death. We will consume others and we will consume ourselves. It all goes into the fire.[7]

To such end, if religion does not provide frameworks that can counter the capitalist society of infinite competition, who will? If religious organizations don't offer an alternative way of life, a direction for the movement, who will? If not, it is neglect of duty. I'm not saying that we need to create a new theological understanding, rather, we need to rediscover and recover what we used to value.

Theological Framework

As a theological framework for responding to global warming, consumer capitalism, and a society in economic depression, we should pay attention to the following keywords: 1) Divine call for stewardship, 2) moral responsibility, 3) communal spirituality and social salvation, and 4) the practice of kenotic (self-emptying) life.

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[5] J. B. MacKinnon, T*he Day the World Stops Shopping: How Ending Consumerism Saves the Environment and Ourselves* (New York: ECCO, 2021), 169.

[6] MacKinnon, 215: "In the United States, every dollar spent translates, on average, into about 0.25 kilograms of greenhouse gas emissions; Spend a hundred dollars, and your contribution to the economy will produce about twenty-five kilograms of carbon pollution."

[7] MacKinnon, 272-273.

a. **Divine Call for Stewardship**

Through his book *Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change*, Antal shares a compelling call to action for religious communities to take a leading role in addressing climate change.[8] Antal, a prominent United Church of Christ minister and climate activist, frames climate change as the greatest moral challenge of our time and argues that faith communities have both a moral obligation and a unique capacity to combat the environmental crisis. He highlights the ethical responsibility to future generations. He argues that today's actions will have profound implications for the planet's future inhabitants, and that faith communities must act now to ensure a livable world for their children and grandchildren.

He also explores theological reasons for environmental stewardship, drawing on scripture and religious teachings. He emphasizes that caring for creation is a fundamental aspect of faith and that religious narratives can provide powerful motivations for climate action. As the theological basis for preaching on the environmental crisis, he emphasizes the nature of God's covenant and its object not limited to human beings.

> First, our covenant with God is an everlasting covenant. God does not care only for us; God covenants with al future generations and with every living creature (Genesis 9:12). All of scripture is a testimony to this truth. Second, we must take seriously the most basic moral instruction of both the New Testament and Hebrew Scripture – a moral instruction found at the core of every world religion: we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves … must recognize that future generations are no less our neighbors than those who live next door to us today. … Third, we must recognize that "the earth is the Lord's"(Psalm24), and we are stewards who hold the Earth in trust for future generations. Chapter 8 unpacks this important recognition.[9]

b. Moral responsibility

Human beings' moral responsibility stems from the recognition that human activities, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and unsustainable agricultural practices, are the primary drivers of global warming and environmental degradation. As stewards of the Earth, individuals and societies have an ethical duty to mitigate the impacts of climate change by adopting sustainable practices and policies.

Therefore, a collective and conscientious effort to live more sustainably is imperative to ensure the health and well-being of both current and future generations, fulfilling our moral obligation to protect the planet and its inhabitants.[10] Antal insists, "One of the most important roles of the church is to take responsibility for what it has done, and to help people to take responsibility for what they have done individually and collectively."[11]

c. Communal Spirituality and Social Salvation

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[8] Jim Antal, *Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change*, Revised and Updated Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023).
[9] Antal, 131-132.
[10] Antal, 3.
[11] Antal, 13.

Many scholars, such as Jim Antal and Sally McFague, point out that Christianity's failure to pay proper attention to and respond to environmental issues, including environmental issues, is due to the fact that it has focused too much on personal spirituality and personal salvation. Ecotheologian McFague focuses on our relationship with God. She emphasizes that spirituality should include not only a one-to-one relationship with God, but also a relationship with God's creation, as well as the discipline of care.[12] This spirituality is not personal, it is communal, and it is based on mutual learning and mutual care.

Antal stresses the importance of community in addressing climate change. He believes that faith communities can provide the support, inspiration, and collective power needed to drive significant environmental progress.[13] He outlines practical steps that faith communities can take to address climate change. This includes divesting from fossil fuels, advocating for sustainable policies, reducing their carbon footprint, and mobilizing members for political action. He insists that "too much of our preaching focuses only on personal salvation. The reality is that scripture has much more to say about collective salvation than about individual salvation and our preaching needs to reflect that."[14]

In today's society, it is easy to be overwhelmed by environmental issues. The problem is so enormous and intertwined that we can feel helpless and defeated, just like David standing in front of Goliath, or even one David against five or six Goliaths. Barber introduces the concept of a "threat multiplier" in her book.

> In the introduction to her book [*All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*], Dr. Johnson breaks it down: "Climate change is a powerful 'threat multiplier,' making existing vulnerabilities and injustices worse. Especially under conditions of poverty, women and girls face greater risk of displacement or death from extreme weather disasters. Early marriage and sex work-sometimes last-resort survival strategies-have been tied to droughts and floods." It's good to look at and unpack the term "threat multiplier." People who are already marginalized aren't going to have the resources to help support them through this, nor do they have the support from their governments or economies. Because of intersecting oppression anyone who is marginalized will have that status exasperated under a climate emergency.[15]

This process is inevitably based on intersectional alienation and oppression.[16] Without honest examination of the reality, without critical thinking, faith communities cannot be free from the logic of consumer capitalism. Therefore, what we need is a system of production and consumption that is attentive to what we need for our sustainable lives and for the planet.[17] On the path of opposing this multitude of Goliaths, is it right to conform to them? Would you say there is no way? What we can talk about here is the recovery of communal spirituality. McFague argues,

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[12] McFague, 18, 148.
[13] Antal, 72-73.
[14] Antal, 132.
[15] Barber, 87; See also Antal, 77-78.
[16] Barber, 125-126.
[17] Barber, 112.

> The religions—the wisdom traditions—might have something to teach us. They move us from individualism to community, for they are not just about "me and my well-being." Rather, they are tough-minded and objective, insisting on global kinship—that all creatures have the right to the basics of existence. How can you get more revolutionary than that? Such a revolution would involve immense changes in the lifestyle of us well-off North Americans. [18]

She also emphasizes the need to go beyond her role as a supporter of the environment and look for more fundamental and more reformed alternatives to life. In her own words:, "To put it as simply as possible: it is not sufficient to consume in a "green" fashion; rather, we must consume *less*, a lot less."[19] It is the role of religion to teach a generation that seeks to satisfy its own value by consuming more than it needs to think about the harmony between its own existence, its spirituality, and the whole of creation.

We, our God, and our spirituality hold the answers. How do we apply the values we pursue—the ancient and radical wisdom—to our modern lives, and how do we build community education? It is the ongoing and creative task of our religious leaders. McFague emphasizes the need for a radical rethinking of our lives, suggesting that embracing kenotic love can provide a theological foundation for addressing the environmental crisis and fostering more sustainable living. She argues that Anthropocene and individual-centered and market-oriented lifestyles should be considerate of others and the environment. They should experience the divine presence and deepen spirituality through realizing the cosmic self and participating in universal love.[20]

d. The Practice of Kenotic (self-emptying) Life

In her book *Blessed Are the Consumers*, McFague elaborates the notion of kenotic theology. She defines that "Kenosis is the recognition that restraint, openness, humility, respect for otherness, and even sacrifice (diminishment and death are part of life *if* one assumes that individual well-being takes place within political and cosmic well-being."[21] She extends this concept to address environmental and economic issues, advocating for a lifestyle of restraint and simplicity as a form of modern discipleship. She suggests that just as Christ emptied himself for the sake of humanity, individuals today should practice self-emptying by consuming less and living more sustainably to protect the planet and promote social justice.[22] By advocating for kenotic living, McFague challenges the dominant consumerist culture and calls for a radical reorientation towards a life that is more attuned to the needs of the environment and vulnerable populations. Believing in forgiveness, tolerance, peace, understanding, consideration, and sacrifice, rather than selfishness, competition, and material success, is essential for self-emptying.

This aligns with the vision of life that MacKinnon presents in his book, where he creatively imagines a world that stops its consumption. Self-emptying, voluntary poverty, and a simple lifestyle are aimed at environmental restoration, the revival of communal and relational spirituality, and a deliberate effort to address the intersectional oppression and social injustice caused by consumer-driven capitalism and environmental exploitation. And what we need to

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[18] McFague, 19.
[19] McFague, ix.
[20] McFague, 160.
[21] McFague, 144.
[22] McFague, 143-144; See also Antal, 97.

keep in mind is that "None of this is strange or novel: it is what people do all the time when they see themselves as a responsible too and fulfilled by a community (from a family to the planet), rather than as responsible only to the individual self. Kenosis manifests itself in attitudes of curiosity, delight, interest, and openness about the world in which we have mysteriously been "set down" and left to figure out what to do."[23]

Pedagogical Framework

What we need to remember from the exploration of theological and ethical frameworks is that we can't save ourselves or survive by ourselves individually. We can fully comprehend divine providence by being part of God's creation care. Jennifer R. Ayres, in her book *Inhabitance: Ecological Religious Education*, puts it: "by participating in God's work of transforming and renewing the world, humans might become *good* ecological beings – good inhabitants."[24]

Ayres explores the intersection of ecology and religious education, emphasizing how faith communities can cultivate a deeper sense of environmental stewardship. Ayres argues that religious education has a crucial role to play in fostering an ecological consciousness and a commitment to caring for the Earth. Emphasizing the role of community, Ayres argues that ecological religious education should extend beyond individual learning to include community action. She discusses how faith communities can collaborate on environmental initiatives and advocate for sustainable practices. As a key concept for what it means to be an ecological faith community, she explores the concept of *Paideia* with the educational perspective. She notes that "In ancient Greece *paideia* was the process by which learners' "whole personality" and character were formed and deliberately guided in order to prepare them for service in society."[25]

She continues, "Early Christian thinkers would adopt paideia as a means both to instruct Christian communities and to engage biblical texts, serving as a protective force and ordering principle in the life of the Christian, binding the body of Christ together in the spirit of God. Christian formation was precisely this enculturation into a way of life, embracing the contributions of a sharp mind, an active imagination, and a unifying spirit."[26] Faith communities that cultivate personal formation and social transformation can be shaped and transformed through social engagement and environmental Christian education, as outlined by the five basic principles of *paideia*. [27]

First, *paideia* teaches us that education is not merely a transactional process of acquiring knowledge; it is a journey of formation and transformation. It is about shaping not just the mind, but the heart and soul of the individual. Through education, we cultivate the virtues and values that define our humanity and guide our actions. Secondly, *paideia* reminds us that human beings are not solitary creatures; we are formed within communities. Our identities, beliefs, and values are shaped by the relationships we forge and the environments we inhabit. It is within the fabric of community that we find belonging, support, and shared purpose. Third, *paideia* teaches us that our actions are as significant as our words or beliefs. We are formed not only by what we read or hear but also by what we do. Our behaviors, habits, and practices play a crucial role in shaping

[23] McFague, 144.
[24] Jennifer R. Ayres, *Inhabitance: Ecological Religious Education* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019), 39; See also MacKinnon, 187, 190-191.
[25] Ayres, 60
[26] Ayres, 61
[27] Ayres, 61-62.

who we become and how we engage with the world around us. Fourth, *paideia* instills in us a sense of responsibility towards our communities. Educated individuals understand themselves as integral parts of a larger whole. They recognize their role in contributing to the well-being of society and strive to uphold the common good. Finally, *paideia* calls upon us to be vigilant critics of structures, ideas, and practices that perpetuate harm within our communities. Educated persons are not passive bystanders; they are agents of change, challenging injustice and advocating for equity and inclusion.

In theories of religious education for participation in society, community, or ecosystem, the principles of *paideia* serve as a compass, guiding us towards a vision of flourishing for all. By embracing these commitments, we aspire to create a world where every individual has the opportunity to thrive and where our communities are characterized by justice, compassion, and solidarity.[28] The essence of this ecclesiastical community is also in line with Antal's discussion of the repurposed identity of the church. He argues that the modern church should be repurposed in line with the slogans of environmental care and conservation: reuse, recycle, repurpose.[29] The Church does not aim at material growth, convenience, or the preservation of humanistic values. The purpose of the community of Christ's disciples is to preserve the sustainability of God's people and God's creation so that they can enjoy it together. This is a change that is required of each individual and for the community as a whole.[30] Of course, we've come too far, and it's not easy to change our behavior. “Changing this pattern of behavior and expectation may be the greatest challenge civilization has ever faced. History shows that the support of religious leadership is essential for society to successfully navigate such fundamental transitions in values and behavior.”[31] Through this understanding of our communal identity, we need to change the way we consume the materials and resources, the way we treat ourselves and others in the process of production, and the way we cultivate the relationship with God and the world.[32]

Examples of the Repurposed Church

McFague suggests three dimensions to practicing kenotic living: personal, professional, and public levels. Personally, it involves living simply and with restraint, significantly reducing our material comfort so others can have their fair share, which includes considerations like the use of cars, size of homes, and commuting methods. Professionally, it means continuing our work in our trained fields but adopting ecological practices within them. Publicly, it requires using our influence and resources to support environmentally conscious politicians, educate ourselves and others on ecological issues, and implement principles of fair resource use and environmental stewardship.[33] “Hence, voluntary poverty for us is not serving soup, but using our distinctive access to contribute to a planning that is sustainable and where scarce resources are justly distributed.”[34] Our main role is to contribute “whatever assets, talents, gifts, money, influence, and so on that we accumulate during our brief sojourn here on earth” to improve the

[28] Antal, 71.
[29] Antal, 77.
[30] Antal 84-85, 91.
[31] Antal, 84.
[32] Barber, 79.
[33] McFague, 209.
[34] McFague, 208-209.

world, ensuring others have what they need.[35] This reflects our interconnectedness and shared responsibility, underscored by the evolutionary history of our planet and principles in religions.

a. Trinity United Church of Christ[36]

Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago has a strong commitment to addressing climate change and promoting environmental justice. Their initiatives are multifaceted, involving education, advocacy, and practical action to create a more sustainable and equitable world. Trinity has a dedicated Green Team Ministry, which integrates eco-friendly practices into church operations and engages the congregation in sustainability efforts. The church emphasizes environmental education through workshops, seminars, and events that cover climate change, environmental justice, and sustainable living, often featuring guest speakers and film screenings. Sustainable practices are implemented within the church facilities, including energy-efficient systems, recycling and composting programs, and exploring renewable energy options like solar panels. Trinity also engages in community outreach and advocacy, supporting environmental justice policies and raising awareness about the impacts of environmental degradation on marginalized communities. Their food justice initiatives promote access to healthy, sustainable food through community gardens, farmers' markets, and partnerships addressing food insecurity. Environmental themes are woven into worship services and teachings, and youth are involved in environmental activities through programs and educational trips. The church also focuses on building community resilience to climate change, educating on disaster preparedness, and advocating for climate adaptation measures. Collaborations with various organizations amplify their impact, addressing systemic environmental issues. Additionally, health and environmental wellness programs educate the community on pollution, clean air and water, and the health impacts of environmental toxins, advocating for policies that protect public health. Through these comprehensive efforts, Trinity in Chicago aims to be a leader in the movement for environmental justice and climate action, integrating faith with a commitment to sustainability and justice for all.

b. United Methodist Church of the Resurrection[37]

EarthCOR (Earth keepers of the Resurrection) is an environmental ministry at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, dedicated to promoting sustainable practices and environmental stewardship within the church community and beyond.[38] The ministry focuses on various actions and activities to engage and educate the congregation about environmental issues and encourage sustainable living.

EarthCOR engages in a range of activities to promote environmental awareness and sustainability. They host educational programs, including workshops and seminars, on topics like climate change, renewable energy, waste reduction, and sustainable agriculture, often featuring guest speakers and experts to engage participants. The ministry implements sustainable practices within church facilities, such as energy-efficient lighting and HVAC systems, recycling, composting, and using eco-friendly cleaning products. They support community gardening

[35] McFague, 210.
[36] Explore Trinity UCC's website: https://www.trinitychicago.org.
[37] Explore Resurrection UMC's website: https://resurrection.church.
[38] https://resurrection.church/earthcor/.

projects that provide fresh produce to local food banks and educate members on organic gardening. EarthCOR is active in advocacy and outreach, organizing letter-writing campaigns, meeting with policymakers, and participating in environmental rallies, often partnering with other organizations to enhance their impact. They ensure eco-friendly church events by reducing waste, minimizing single-use plastics, promoting carpooling, and sourcing sustainably. The ministry advocates for renewable energy, exploring solar panel installations and educating members on green energy benefits. Youth engagement is a priority, with programs like eco-camps and nature hikes designed to inspire young environmental leaders. They incorporate environmental themes into worship services, celebrating events like Earth Day. EarthCOR also provides resources to help members adopt sustainable lifestyles, offering tips on energy and water conservation, ethical consumerism, and reducing carbon footprints. Through these actions and activities, EarthCOR at the Resurrection aims to foster a culture of environmental stewardship, inspire meaningful action within the faith community, and contribute to the broader movement for ecological sustainability and justice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as we confront the escalating environmental crises and deepening social inequalities of our time, the intersection of capitalism, consumer culture, and climate justice presents profound challenges that demand urgent attention. Scholars no longer view the environmental crisis as a looming threat but as an irreversible reality. Amidst this context, religious communities possess the potential to challenge and reshape the systems perpetuating environmental degradation and social injustice.

The theological framework emphasizes concepts such as stewardship, moral responsibility, communal spirituality, and kenotic living. These principles provide a foundation for addressing environmental challenges and promoting sustainable lifestyles within religious communities. Moreover, the pedagogical framework, informed by principles of *paideia*, underscores the role of religious education in shaping individuals and communities committed to environmental stewardship and social transformation.

Examples of repurposed churches like Trinity United Church of Christ and United Methodist Church of the Resurrection demonstrate the practical implementation of these principles. Through education, advocacy, and sustainable practices, these communities are actively engaged in addressing environmental issues and promoting environmental justice.

In essence, this research holds significance in shedding light on the pedagogical strategies employed by religious communities at the crossroads of capitalism, consumer culture, and climate justice. By informing advocacy efforts, policy recommendations, and educational initiatives, the findings aim to contribute to the broader discourse on social change. Ultimately, the insights gained may empower communities, educators, and activists to foster transformative approaches that address the interconnected challenges of our time.

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What do five-year-olds think about God, creation, and relationships with the earth? Insights from a research journey.

Abstract

Christian schools frequently use Scripture stories to teach children about God and how God invites people to live in the world. As these sacred texts were written thousands of years ago by different authors in varying contexts, teachers can find it challenging to interpret Scripture texts in ways that enable learners to discover appropriate meaning for life today. Without addressing the need to build the capacity of teachers to teach Scripture competently and confidently, children may not develop the skills to discover rich meaning from Scripture texts, limiting their ability to understand God's dream for our world and the role they can play in bringing about God's dream. This paper tells the story of a religious education leader who searched for meaningful ways of interpreting and teaching the second creation story in Genesis 2 and outlines her experience of introducing five-year-old children to this text, learning about children's insights into God, creation and relationships with the earth. The story of a research journey is also presented, highlighting findings about pedagogies, learning and teaching processes and building teacher capacity to teach Scripture in meaningful, engaging ways.

Introduction

This story begins with a phone call from Jacqui, a primary school religious education leader, requesting assistance to teach a Scripture text that perplexed her and her early years teachers. Revealingly, they found the Genesis 2 creation story difficult to interpret and, therefore, challenging to identify engaging ways of teaching this text meaningfully to children from four to six years of age in their first year of school. This paper provides insights into the journey that followed through both a practical and theoretical lens, detailing how Jacqui succeeded in her mission at Siena Catholic Primary School on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia. The threads of learning (building teacher readiness to teach the text), designing (engaging in informed pedagogical decision-making) and implementing (the process of teaching the text) are woven throughout this paper, highlighting the interconnectedness of all three elements. This paper will also provide insights from recently completed research on building capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture in the early years, presenting some explicit links between the research findings and what Jacqui did as a religious education leader to construct rich learning opportunities. Perhaps most unexpected were the insights from learners about God's relationship with people and God's love and concern for the Earth.

The story of how Jacqui facilitated early years learners to discover and think about the Genesis 2 creation story runs adjacent to the research story. While Jacqui was not involved in

the research, as her education advisor, insights from the research allowed me to employ the strategies and processes that would likely lead to meaningful, engaged Scripture learning. On the flip side, Jacqui's experience provided a chance to test the strength of the research insights in a new context, as the research was still in the early stage at this point. Therefore, presenting Jacqui's story first, followed by the research story, aids insights into why Jacqui achieved her goal of enabling young children to find meaning from the Genesis 2 creation story. To that end, Jacqui's story elaborates on what the research findings can look like in practice. The practitioner and research stories provide religious educators and leaders with rich insights into some of the keys to unlocking the secrets of *facilitating* rich, engaging Scripture learning that leads beyond knowledge of the text (being able to retell the story) to transformative learning.

The Genesis 2 story: What's in a text?

The art of leading learning requires the leader to have a plan to enable learners to journey to a desired destination. When a journey is geographical, the tour leader requires sufficient knowledge of the terrain, the places of significance along the way and the degree of difficulty for the travellers, to enable appropriate adjustments to facilitate maximum participation for all on the journey. If the journey is educational, it is reasonable to expect that learners will have the highest degree of successfully reaching a desired destination when the teacher has clarity about *what* to teach, so they can identify where learners need time to explore the elements of significance along the way, and design the journey to respond to the needs of learners as they traverse new ground. Using this analogy, the starting point for Jacqui was building knowledge of the *terrain*, which involved exploring the Scripture text carefully to identify the points of significance that could uncover meaning and illuminate *what* to teach. To engage in this process, we set up a video conference meeting. We equipped ourselves with core resources to investigate each line of the text, embarking on an adult learning journey with meaning-making as the desired destination.

Using Bible Gateway revealed different starting points across the three translations of the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE), the Contemporary English Version (CEV) and the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE). The NRSVCE and CEV translations begin with Genesis 2:4b, with a statement about when "*the Lord God made the earth and heavens*". The NABRE, however, begins the second creation story in the book of Genesis in 2:4, stating, "*This is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation"*. Right at the start, the term "story" indicates that the author is not writing a scientific report but telling a *story.* This insight highlights that this is a theological text (a story to teach something important about God) rather than presenting literal, scientific history (Boadt 2016). Therefore, considering how to tune learners' thinking to the genre of this text is essential. Otherwise, reading the creation stories in Genesis would be somewhat like reading Harry Potter as a science text rather than a fantasy genre (Mulherin 2019).

Two insights have emerged already. The first is that there is value in looking at different translations of Scripture, as one translation may include a keyword that provides a rich teaching opportunity. (A word of caution here is that the translations used need to be appropriate for the context and faith community, and as this work occurred in a Catholic school, the three translations selected are all approved for use in the Catholic Church.) The second is the need to find effective ways of teaching learners to understand the genre of

Scripture texts prior to teaching the text, to tune their thinking into the purpose of the text and to consider why the author wrote the text in a particular way.

The text then presents an image of a barren place. "*When the* LORD *God made the earth and the heavens— there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the* LORD *God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man (no one) to till the ground"* (Gen. 2:4b-5 NABRE).

The text indicates that the earth was barren for two reasons. First, the action of God sending life-giving rain had not yet occurred. Second, God's action alone cannot ensure that the earth will flourish because God requires human beings to work in partnership, which is the notion of co-stewardship. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2011) The definition of stewardship is "the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care," which suggests that a commitment to protecting the diverse social-ecological contexts of the planet is needed.

Returning to the translation issue, instead of using the term "man", the CEV and NRSVCE use the term "no one", implying that the story is about God calling all humans to work in partnership. It is worthwhile to consider whether this terminology difference matters for young children. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2024), the term "man" previously implied both men and women but is now more likely to be seen as excluding women. Therefore, many people now avoid the term in favour of less contentious, clearly inclusive terms. For early years teachers, using the term "no one" avoids any confusion among learners about whether the text implies men only or all human beings. Furthermore, in a society where growing gender diversity awareness is creating an evolution in language usage, emphasising respect and inclusion (Ullman, Manlik, and Ferfolja 2024, Australian Government Public Service Commission 2023), it seems increasingly important to move away from a literal interpretation of the term "man".

The Genesis text continues: *but a stream was welling up out of the earth and watering all the surface of the ground— then the* LORD *God formed the man (earth creature) out of the dust of the ground and blew into his (the earth creature's) nostrils the breath of life, and the man (earthling*[i]*) became a living being* (Gen. 2:6-7 NABRE).

Here, God's action is depicted in the world in multiple ways, and we encounter issues of translation accuracy again. The Hebrew word for man is ha adam (NABRE), which in English translates most closely to earth creature (Elmer 2010 - The man and woman in the garden). This insight makes a significant difference in interpreting the text because *earth creature* is a genderless term, representing a human born from the earth. A play on words occurs in Hebrew between *adam* (human being from the earth or earthling) and *ha adama* ("ground") (Speiser 2008, 16). Elmer (2010) writes that the first human appears in the text "as a genderless earth creature (*ha adam*) who is born of the earth (*ha adama*) and the breath or wind (*ruarch*) of God". Integral ecology today echoes this theme from Genesis 2:7, highlighting that humans are central to the environment's health (Francis 2015 para. 137 and following). Not to be missed, the action of God breathing life into a human is striking imagery, also found in Ezekiel. 37:5 and John 20:22. A Jewish understanding of the term "human" meant "living voice," a "living nephesh" (*throat*) which has profound implications for ensuring that the voice of every human is protected (Elmer 2010).

The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man (earth creature) whom he (God) had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The LORD God then took the man (earth creature) and settled him (the earthling) in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. The LORD God gave the man (earth creature) this order: You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; when you eat from it you shall die (Gen. 2:8-9,15-17 NABRE).

The author paints a picture of beauty as God continues to create a place with all one needs. Into this scene emerges the imagery of two trees, which form part of a larger story beyond what we intended to explore with five-year-old children. However, the genre of this text could be described as a sacred myth (stories that tell important truths about God) and the notion of myth is one of being a meta-narrative (a story that describes an overall pattern of human behaviour). At this point in the story, God is the only one who knows the difference between good and evil. Christians generally know that the story goes on to introduce the humans as Adam and Eve, and the temptation proves too much. A pattern is established of God wanting humans to flourish, but humans strive to have more power than they are entitled to, which results in a breakdown of relationships and creation fails to thrive (Boadt 2016, Elmer 2010 - The origins and meaning of the story...).

As a meta-narrative, this story is lived out again and again whenever one's misuse of power causes the loss of voice in another, when relationships break down and aspects of creation fail to flourish. In Australia, during 2022-2023, one woman was killed every eleven days from domestic violence, and one man was killed every 91 days by their partner (Australian Government Institute of Health and Welfare 2024). In 2024, the figures are rising for violence against women (Roberts April, 2024). It is estimated that almost half the Australian population have experienced physical violence since the age of fifteen (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023). Telling the Genesis 2 creation story well is vital to reclaim God's dream for our world. The language, imagery and symbolism we use to communicate our ideas and beliefs about one another and God are incredibly important. A child who only hears about God through the use of male pronouns needs to experience authentic love from the core male relationships in their life to understand God as unconditional love. Language matters, and retelling our sacred stories in ways that motivate people to live love in the world matters.

The LORD God said: It is not good for the man (earth creature) to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him (the earth creature). So the LORD God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the air, and he (God) brought them to the man (earth creature) to see what he (the earthling) would call them; whatever the man (earth creature) called each living creature was then its name. The man (earth creature) gave names to all the tame animals, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be a helper suited to the man (earth creature) (Gen. 2:18-20 NABRE).

The themes of relationship, community, companionship and responsibility arise. Even young children often have experiences of naming their pets or hearing their parents name their new siblings, and they can identify that the act of naming also brings responsibility. Naming does not occur in isolation but within a dual action of taking responsibility for the life that receives

a name. However, the author describes that God saw the need for humans to live in community, in relationships with other humans, within the life of the natural world.

"So the Lord God cast a deep sleep on the man (earth creature), and while he (the earth creature) was asleep, he (God) took out one of his (the earth creature's) ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The Lord God then built the rib that he (God) had taken from the man (earth creature) into a woman" (Gen. 2:21-22a NABRE).

Once again, translation accuracy drives interpretation, with the word 'rib' being 'sela' in Hebrew, which means 'side', therefore, drawing from the side of earth creature and presenting an image of the complete complementarity of male and female (Elmer 2010). This story has been widely used to justify attitudes towards women (Niditch 2012). Capra (2013, 202) defines ecology as "the study of the relationships that interlink all members of the Earth household", which are also sentiments clearly expressed in the EcoJustice principles put forward in the Earth Bible (Habel n.d.).

"When he (God) brought her to the man (earth creature), the man (earthling) said: 'This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called 'woman,' for out of man (the earth creature) this one has been taken.' That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body. The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame" (Gen. 22b-25 NABRE).

Finally, God as creates male and female, the author presents an image of the complementarity of both genders. Importantly, the story conveys a relationship of equality (Elmer 2010 - The man and woman in the garden). If read as a meta-narrative instead of a text presenting what literally happened in history, the storyteller invites readers to focus on the quality of relationships that lead to human thriving and the amazing gift of our bodies, which also need care, nourishment and protection. Perhaps if the storyteller left readers with a final question, it might be: Now you see that God has created an incredibly beautiful world that depends upon mutual custodianship, how will you enable the interconnected web of life to continue to thrive[ii]?

Keys for interpreting ancient, sacred texts

Religious education leaders and teachers will find Scripture interpretation less daunting when they have some keys to finding meaning in ancient sacred texts. First, it is helpful to know that there is no one process, procedure or approach for reading ancient, sacred texts, as debates have led to the realisation that many different methods have contributed rich insights (Miglio 2023). Second, each ancient text needs to be considered in the social, historical, geographical and cultural context in which the text was written (Miglio 2023). Third, each text needs careful consideration as a work of literature, paying attention to the images, words, repetitions, linguistic features and ideas presented in the text (Miglio 2023). Four, interpretation is an ongoing process that continues with each reading of the text and each generation.

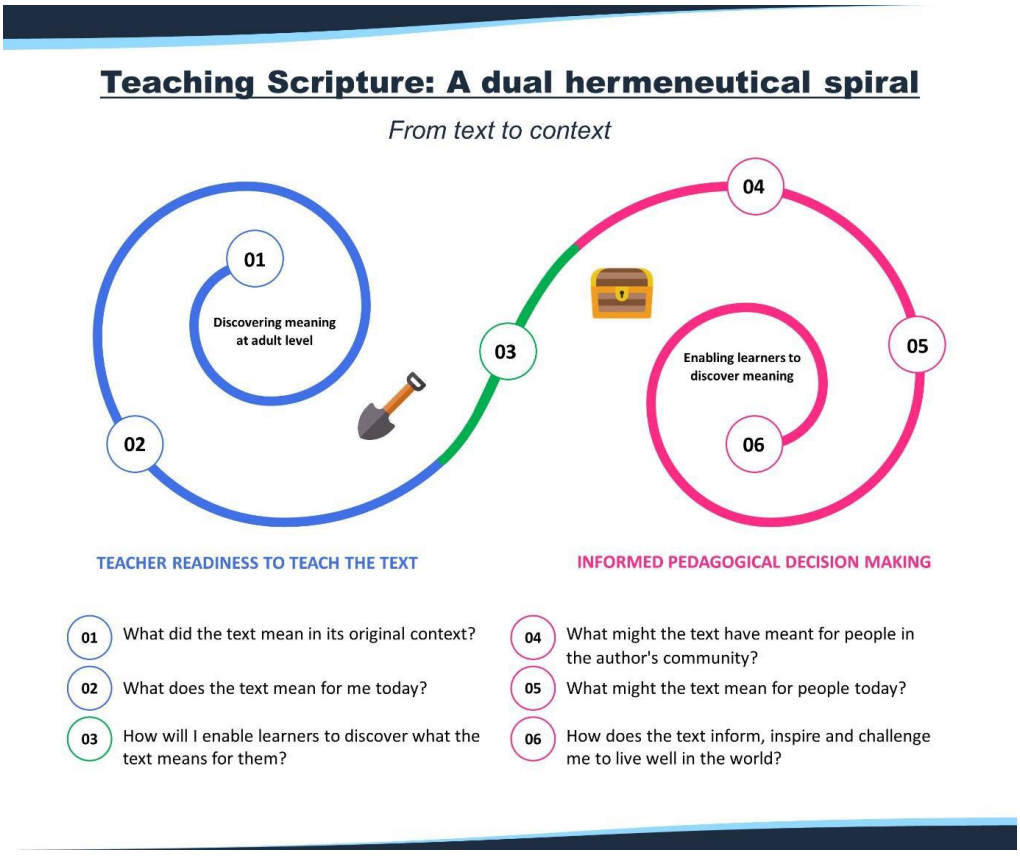
The significance of interpretation goes beyond an individual's need to find meaning in a text. A dynamic and inclusive approach to interpreting ancient, sacred texts encourages dialogue across religious traditions, enabling people to "cultivate empathy and mutual respect, and contribute to the flourishing of a more just and compassionate world" (Arshad 2023, 13). Therefore, interpreting ancient, sacred texts is much more than a scheduled religious

education activity. The process of interpretation needs to foster authentic dialogue as learners and religious educators discern appropriate meaning from the text together, opening possibilities for discovering rich meaning, participating in prayer, fine-tuning an understanding of justice and mercy, and facilitating personal and spiritual transformation (Arshad 2023).

The context of the text plays a significant role in identifying meaning from individual Scripture stories. Gen 1:1-2:3 presents an orderly account of creation, which could be read as the first part of the overall story of creation, with Gen 2:4-25 as the second part of the story, where human life enters the world (Niditch 2012, 30). This insight suggests the texts are not isolated but form part of a larger narrative. Another function of context would include investigating if other creation stories existed in other cultures. The older Babylonian story of Gilgamesh has multiple similarities to the creation stories in Genesis, suggesting that the authors of the Genesis creation stories had knowledge of Mesopotamian literature (Miglio 2023). Such stories also suggest that they function as attempts to answer some of the great questions of life, such as why life contains challenges and suffering (Boadt 2016).

One of the insights emerging from the research project draws on the work of Osborne (1991), who presented the concept of the hermeneutical spiral to consider what meaning the text held in its original context before considering what meaning the text might hold today. Osborne proposed that the third step is to consider how to tell others about the text. However, entering this process from the perspective of a teacher, led to the development of a dual hermeneutical spiral, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1:



As modelled through this paper, the research project found that meaningful Scripture teaching began by building teacher readiness to teach the text, which included closely reading the text, finding out information about the text and considering the text in context. Throughout this stage, teachers obtained meaning from the text at a level relevant to them as professional adults. When the themes, insights and 'treasures' of the text emerged, teachers naturally began to consider how they could enable learners to discover meaning from the text.

The process of teaching the text led to a second hermeneutical spiral, where teachers facilitated the learning process and explored three critical questions. Learners investigated what the text might have meant for people in the author's community, what the text might mean for people today, and how the text could inform, inspire and challenge them to live well in the world today. For people of faith, the text may inspire their prayer or nurture their faith. For others, the text can also illuminate what it means to live well in the world. Considering what the world may be like if everyone ignored key insights such as looking after the needs of the other, ecological stewardship and respecting the dignity of all, leads to informed ways of living tolerance and justice in the world, regardless of faith. Osborne (2017) considered that the first reading of a Scripture text occurs at a surface level, and to find rich meaning from the text one needs to go digging to find the treasures. The process of digging for the treasures in the text is modelled in this paper, mirroring the process that Jacqui and I worked through to determine how the text might be taught in meaningful ways to five-year-old children.

Jacqui's story

Through our close reading of the text we could readily identify key teaching points that would assist learners to find meaning in the text. We identified strategies such as talking with learners about how the breath of God in this story was the same breath that God breathed into them when they were born, which learners could feel by holding their hands in front of their faces and breathing on their hands. We documented rich questions for dialogue, considering why the author wrote the story, what it might mean to live in relationships and community, and what insights about God and responsibilities emerge through the story. Jacqui then supported the early years teachers at Siena Catholic primary school to teach the creation story from Genesis 2.

Jacqui states, "We reflected on the fact that we had not taught the Genesis 2 creation story for the past few years because we avoided it, so we thought about how we could use that in a deeper level" (Winmill 2020). Jacqui explained that the focus was to try to move learners from a real literal interpretation to discover some of the treasures in the text. The key strategy implemented was reinforcing to learners that as they listened to these stories in the Bible they needed to avoid asking, 'Did this really happen? Instead, learners were encouraged to say, "What is the message God wants us to hear?" To help learners think about that question, the teachers provided each learner with a printed emoji face, which showed an image of appearing to think carefully, with two question marks appearing next to the emoji face. When the teacher shared the Scripture story, the learners would have the emoji face in their hand as a visual reminder for learners to think about what God wanted them to hear in the story. Using this strategy assisted learners in beginning to think beyond a literal interpretation of the text, and the following activities led to further meaning-making, starting with learners each given a piece of clay. Jacqui tells her story:

> In one of our playgrounds we had three trees, so we created a Siena garden of Eden. Each teacher took their class down into the Garden of Eden at different times with their clay, and the teacher shared the Scripture text in a meditative way. The teacher would pause at that particular moment when the text states that God took the dust of the ground and formed the earth creature, and the children would take their clay and form a person. I went down to the Garden of Eden with a class, and we talked about the story. Then, I asked the children to imagine they were God. "I want you to take your clay and hold it in your hand and gently form it into this person, this perfect person that God wanted to create. Then, I asked them to pick the clay up and breathe into it – breathe life as God did in the Scripture story. So, the children were breathing life, and I looked up across from me and I saw this little boy who was going very red in the face and I said to him, "Tim[iii], are you alright? Are you okay?" Tim replied, "Yes, Mrs Winmill, but I know that if I want my person to be perfect they'll need more than air to keep them perfect. They'll need love." So Tim was blowing love into his person. Then we started talking in the group about what else would our person need to be the perfect person and they said lots of beautiful things like caring and to be peacemakers. Then one little girl said, "And they'll need to have courage" so we all finished by blowing courage into our person[iv].

This was the first time Jacqui had taught the text this way so she was not expecting these responses from the children. When she taught the same text with the other classes, Jacqui provided prompts to ensure she could expect those responses from the learners, facilitating their theological and environmental insights. Jacqui describes what occurred when the same children sat down in the (Siena) Garden of Eden:

> We had done some work talking about the tree of knowledge, exploring what are the things that God would want us to know. We considered the tree of life and thought about what God would want us to have to have a perfect life, and they had beautiful responses like, "God would want us to care for everyone, God would want us to love our brothers and sisters". Then a little boy said, "But we've got a third tree in our garden so what could that tree be?" Then we started talking among ourselves about what this tree could be. One boy said, "It would be the tree of making things better". I replied, "Oh, well what would that tree do?" and the boy replied, "You know when the river gets polluted, well this tree would make all the pollution go away, and you know when an animal's no longer here." At this point another boy nudged him and asked, "You mean extinct?" The first boy agreed and replied, "Yes, when an animal is extinct this tree would bring them back to life again. So, we ended up agreeing that we would call it the tree of healing. We thought that was a beautiful third tree to have in our garden of Eden[v].

Jacqui's stories reveal that five-year-old children can grapple with concepts about God, how God calls people to live well in the world and the consequences of not living well in the world. Importantly, these children brought new insights to the Genesis 2 creation story, showing that children can bring their own thinking to the process of Scripture interpretation. While Jacqui's school was not involved with the research project, it was already apparent that a teacher's capacity to find the treasures in the text before planning and teaching was critical.

The research story

The research journey provides a larger lens through which to consider the implications and learnings from Jacqui's story of teaching Scripture. While the research project on building capacity and self-efficacy for teaching Scripture to early years learners officially began in 2016, the data collection phase occurred during 2019-2020, taking place in Catholic primary schools in southeast Queensland, Australia. The research used the design-based learning (DBR) approach to bridge the gap between theory and practice and discover usable knowledge that others facing the same challenges may be able to apply to their context (McKenney and Reeves 2019, Herrington et al. 2007, M. Goff and Getenet 2017, Christensen and West 2018). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland (Ref: H19REA011) and Brisbane Catholic Education (Ref:324).

The major study involved working with religious education leaders and some early years teachers from four primary schools. The major study investigated what pedagogical strategies and learning environments support the meaningful teaching of Scripture for young children in the first four years of school (Preparatory to Year Three). The major study was a collaborative inquiry, with a core leadership team of religious education leaders and teachers meeting six times from May 2019 to the end of April 2020. After reading insights from the literature, discerning the problem to investigate, and explaining why the challenge of low teacher confidence in teaching Scripture existed, the team identified an intervention to trial in each school. Data from the major study was obtained from the transcripts of meetings, visits to schools and participants' individual journal writing.

The minor study investigated what factors, processes, and strategies enable professional learning to be transformed into professional practice. This inquiry involved interviews and meetings with early years teachers and religious education leaders who had participated in Scripture professional learning after school. Thematic analysis was used to code the themes emerging from the data.

The findings

The study found two precursors to the findings of the research questions. Affirming the process Jacqui engaged in to learn about the Genesis 2 creation story, the research found that teachers needed to achieve *readiness to teach the text* before planning or teaching Scripture. Meaningful teaching of Scripture only occurred when teachers found meaning in biblical texts beyond a surface-level, literal understanding of the text, and learned how to use multiple processes and strategies to enable learners to discover rich, appropriate meaning.

The second precursor showed that teachers needed to engage in *informed pedagogical decision-making* for teaching Scripture, which included four elements:

1. Understanding the purpose of teaching Scripture
2. Beliefs about learners and learning.
3. Principles for teaching religious education and Scripture.
4. Using a learning process to ensure Scripture teaching moves through different levels of thinking (Nolen 2023).

Comment is warranted for each element of informed decision-making. First, the purpose of teaching Scripture in a Catholic school is to enable learners to find appropriate meaning from the text, which may challenge, affirm or inspire them to live well in the world (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1997, para. 24, Benedict XVI 2010). Believing that the purpose of

teaching Scripture is simply to teach the curriculum can readily lead to surface-level, disengaged teaching. Second, beliefs about learners underpin pedagogy. Believing that learners cannot interpret Scripture texts at the age of five will result in a different type of pedagogy from that which Jacqui implemented. Jacqui provided opportunities for learners to engage in rich dialogue (through questioning and respectful sharing of ideas), 'playing' with clay (using creativity and imagination) and being in an outdoor setting. Third, one of the principles for teaching Scripture stressed the importance of learners having opportunities to find a multiplicity of meaning in sacred texts. Jacqui's story demonstrated that her learners found meaning about God, about the challenges of living well with creation while still retaining hope for the future. Four, knowing the elements that enabled learners to extend their thinking throughout the teaching process would have benefited Jacqui. To plan for the Genesis 2 creation story again, we would insert the elements of building familiarisation (starting with an activity to hook the interest of all learners), exploring and investigating the text, thinking critically about the text and applying the text to life. In the research project, deep and transformative learning came about when teachers incorporated these four elements. Without the element of critical thinking, learners could retell Scripture stories but remained with a surface level or literal understanding of the text.

The research found that learning activities teachers would describe as successful also reflect the age-appropriate pedagogies identified by Griffith University (Fluckiger et al. 2017) for early years learners. Renaming some of the age-appropriate pedagogies enabled a stronger identification of what was needed for teaching Scripture. Data analysis showed that the pedagogies could be grouped into four specific areas:
1. Learner focussed pedagogies (promoting learner agency; learner individuality and being learner responsive).
2. Literacy rich pedagogies (enabling Scripture storytelling; language immersion and deepening dialogue).
3. Targeted and collaborative pedagogies (activating explicit teaching, collaborative partnerships and scaffolding learning).
4. Innovative and inquiry pedagogies (fostering active engagement, creative investigation, imagination and innovation) (Nolen 2023).

The findings help illuminate why Jacqui's teaching of the Genesis 2 creation story had such an impact on learners. As adults reflecting on what they learned through the children's insights into the text, the teachers may well have written a letter to Dear Earth. If they did, it may read as follows:

Dear Earth,

God created you as an incredible gift that we cannot live without. Our sacred stories reveal that God not only calls us to look after you responsibly but also *needs* us to be responsible caretakers of you, as God alone cannot enable you to flourish. God depends upon humans to work in co-partnership as stewards of you, our precious Earth, for God has also gifted us with free choice to decide how to live. Sometimes, we see the negative consequences of our choices as flora and fauna become extinct, and humans become silenced, disempowered and disrespected through acts of violence and neglect.

However, we know that God also gifts us with the ability to be healers, with the wisdom to know how to heal you when you are suffering, and aspects of creation that depend upon you for survival are struggling for life. When we listen to the courageous voices for positive

change in our world, we see the rise of movements that call out racism, sexism, intolerance, inequality and the climate crisis. Our young people can lead the way, challenging us to think differently, change our complacency and live judiciously. As the prophetic voices of our young people rise to the fore, like Australian schoolgirl Molly Steer, who began a national mission to ban single-use plastic straws (Steer 2024), and the teenage activist Greta Thunberg, who implored Australians to "wake up and treat the climate emergency like an emergency" (Ackew and Ferguson, ABC 2022), we hear the crisis with new ears and we begin to see new ways forward.

Our amazing Earth, you are breathtakingly beautiful and so precious to us. We need you to thrive and continue to be a place where creation can flourish. We know that God wants all creation to flourish, including humans, so we can live in ways that recognise our need for one another, our interdependence and our complementarity. We also know the secret to enabling this to happen is to remember that God wants us to use our power responsibly and never seek more power than we are entitled to so the voices of all will be heard. When we misuse our power, relationships are fractured, including our relationship with you, our suffering Earth. Our misuse of power leads to loss of life, love and responsible living, and aspects of creation cease to flourish. We must remember that God calls us to be healers and peacemakers, caretakers and gardeners, storytellers and visionaries, and change-makers and innovators who work together with a shared dream to enable creation to thrive.

Therefore, we promise we have heard God’s call and pledge ourselves to your service. We commit ourselves to teaching our sacred stories that reveal how to live love in the world. We pledge to teach our sacred texts meaningfully, inspiring our children and allowing their insights to show us how to live wisely and responsibly, enabling you, dear Earth, to flourish. Your future and our future depend upon it.

Blessings, Religious Education teachers (per BN).

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[i] The terms 'earth creature' and 'earthling' are used interchangeably to avoid repetition as both words are close translations of the Hebrew word *ha adama*.
[ii] Mutual custodianship and the interconnected web of life are terms and concepts drawn from the Earth Bible: EcoJustice Principles.
[iii] Tim is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the child.
[iv] Interview with Jacqui Winmill, Assistant Principal Religious Education, Video conference, September 10, 2020
[v] Interview with Jacqui Winmill, 2020


REA

Youth Faith Development, Consumer Culture, and Climate Justice

Eser Kim

We are in this new era, variously called Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, or Chthulucene, or simply put, climate crisis, it seems that we are going to live in this period for a while. Although in March 2024, geologists have rejected to declare an Anthropocene epoch,[1] we are living in an era when human impact on the Earth is significant and its inhabitants. Some scientists argue that Earth is entering the "sixth mass extinction," with species disappearing at a rate one hundred times faster than the natural extinction rate, primarily because of human influence.[2] This new era calls new ways to think about humanity's relationship to nature, and humans ourselves, and our collective existence of all beings. Through critical reflection we can make this a good Anthropocene instead of being a destructive one.[3]

This paper takes this climate crisis as a moment of a pedagogical opportunity, more specifically youth ministerial opportunity, in which I analyze youth ministry interactions with the nature. This research critically examines the current state of youth ministry education programs that incorporate nature-related activities, including camping and retreats. While these programs offer engagement with the environment, this study argues that the pervasive influence of consumer culture leads youth ministry to treat the Earth as a didactic tool rather than fostering a profound connection and lasting commitment to eco-justice. The research delves into alternative youth ministry practices, aiming to cultivate a lasting sense of ecological awareness and responsibility.

Popularity of Outdoor Trips in Youth Ministry

Nature is truly important in youth faith formation. The popularity of outdoor trips in youth ministry demonstrates the importance. Every spring and fall, when the weather is breezy, youth educators are busy taking their youth out to the mountains or riversides. Usually the schedule is packed with hiking, zip-lining, exploring, outdoor barbeques, and most of all trying to find God in the midst of the wilderness. The hymn "How Great Thou Art," a hymn that praises God and God's creation, is the anthem of these adventures. Nature-based youth programs offer young people outdoor education experiences that combine experiential learning, open exploration, and tasks that challenge them physically and psychologically.

First, Nature often serves as a powerful backdrop for spiritual experiences. The beauty and complexity of the natural world can inspire awe and a sense of the divine, helping young people to feel closer to God. Outdoor settings can provide a peaceful environment conducive to prayer, reflection, and meditation. Youth tends to experience transcendence, a connection to something larger than themselves and enlightenment inside their hearts. At first, the breathtaking moments in nature might disappear quickly, and what remains can be a desperate struggle with the bugs. However, as time passes, youth experience various joys for innumerable reasons. Some experience the smallness of themselves, as the psalmist

[1] Damian Carrington, Geologists reject declaration of Anthropocene epoch, the Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/mar/22/geologists-reject-declaration-of-anthropocene-epoch

[2] John Sutter, "Sixth Extinction: The Era of 'Biological Annihilation,'" CNN, last modified July 11, 2017, accessed June 2, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/11/world/sutter-mass-extinction-ceballos-study/index.html

[3] Lövbrand, E., M. Mobjörk, and R. Söder. 2020. "The Anthropocene and the Geopolitical Imagination: Rewriting Earth as Political Space." *Earth System Governance* 4:1–8.

confesses[4] that leads to joy in how God is providing for them. Others can clear their minds, creating room that is filled with abundant joy they never have experienced before. Still others feel complete freedom in nature, which brings them joy and leads them to praise God. Many biblical narratives take place in natural settings, and being in nature can help youth connect these stories to their own lives. As scriptures emphasize the significance of nature and creation, by experiencing the natural world, youth can gain a deeper understanding of biblical teachings related to creation, stewardship, and God's provision.

Second, youth ministries acknowledge how camping can be a chance to step away from the ordinary. Most of the youth living in the city hang out with friends at the mall, play video games, and going out in nature, youth confess how freeing it can be of not being too connected online. Teens camps promote their camps by showing how a Christian camp can provide youth an opportunity get away from their daily distractions and brokenness of the world.[5] Spending time in nature has numerous health benefits. It can reduce stress, improve mood, enhance physical health, and increase energy levels. For youth, who may be dealing with the pressures of school, social dynamics, and personal challenges, time spent outdoors can provide a much-needed respite and promote overall well-being.

Third, outdoor activities and retreats are excellent for building strong relationships within the youth group. Shared experiences, such as hiking, camping, or participating in environmental projects, can foster camaraderie, trust, and teamwork. These activities often require cooperation and mutual support, helping to build a sense of community and belonging among participants.

Although on the last day of the trip almost every youth appreciates their experience – they had fun, made good friends, somewhat meditated on God – the touch of this experience fades away ephemerally. Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer demonstrate how these outdoor activities do not translate into the youth everyday life about nature. In their book *Lives to offer*, the authors write,

> "Young people may find their appreciation of God's creation or their sense of awe at God the Creator expanded by the exhilaration of these activities. But with the focus on the entertainment activity, and not on an encounter with the land, water, or creatures within that ecology, the relationship between youth and the earth remains one of a user to a resource or location. The point of the experience is recreation and exhilaration, and not an encounter with other creatures of God valued in and for themselves. Nature is scenery for the activity rather than integral to it."[6]

Although youth programs incorporate nature widely, having a long lasting impact beyond outdoor trips for care about nature and encouraging youth outdoor experience to face eco-justice issues is not happening.

Youth Ministry's Limited Interaction with Nature

The limitations are informed by several factors. Many nature programs tend to be

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[4] Psalm 8: 1 O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

[5] Growing Kids for the Kingdom, 5 REASONS TO SEND TEENS TO CHRISTIAN CAMPS, https://www.growingkidsforthekingdom.com/5-reasons-to-send-teens-to-christian-camps/, Teen Quest, 8 Reasons for Summer Camp, https://teenquest.org/8-reasons-for-summer-camp/, Montreat Youth Conference

[6] Dori Grinenko Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer, *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 56.

structured as occasional events or retreats rather than ongoing, integrated efforts. This can limit their impact and the continuity needed for long-term eco-justice initiatives. Some organizations may prioritize other aspects of youth ministry, such as spiritual education or community service, over environmental issues. Traditional churches view rituals such as hugging a tree more too shamanistic than Christian. Some can argue taking a nap under a tree can be a waste of time. In addition, eco-justice involves a complex intersection of environmental science, sociology, theology, and ethics. This can be challenging to convey in a youth program format. Furthermore, Youth leaders may not have the necessary training or knowledge to effectively incorporate eco-justice into their programs. They might feel more comfortable sticking to familiar, recreational activities or spiritual inspiration in the wilderness.

Esteemed works within ecological and environmental literature have explored the religious dimensions of this crisis, pointing to problematic interpretations of the Genesis 1 creation narrative. Some scholars draw onto anthropocentrism in relation to misinterpretation of human dominion in the Genesis 1 creation story. Anthropocentrism is the belief that human beings are the central or most significant species on the planet. This viewpoint often leads to prioritizing human needs and desires over the well-being of the environment and other species. For instance, Lynn White, Jr.'s seminal article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" was published, essentially establishing the academic study of religion and nature. White argues that religions—particularly Western Christianity—are a major cause of worldwide ecological crises.[7] Rosemary Ruether observes that humans have so extensively dominated the natural world that it has become impossible to discuss nature without framing it in terms of human needs and priorities.[8] On the other hand is the disconnection from nature. Modern lifestyles and urbanization have led to a physical and psychological disconnection from nature, reducing awareness and concern for environmental issues. This detachment can lead to a lack of empathy for the natural world and its preservation.

Several religious education scholars already seriously theorize, evaluate, and propose constructive approaches to the ecological dimensions of religious education. Mary Elizabeth Moore explores the intersection of spirituality, ethics, and environmental stewardship within Christian ministry in her book *Ministering with the Earth*. Moore argues for a holistic approach to ministry that integrates care for the Earth as a fundamental aspect of Christian discipleship.[9] Tim Van Meter explores the role of youth and the church in promoting social justice and healing in the world. He argues that youth ministry should not only focus on spiritual growth but also empower young people to engage with and transform their communities. Van Meter advocates for a holistic approach to youth ministry that integrates social activism and the pursuit of justice as essential components of Christian discipleship.[10]

In addition to these arguments are true, I argue that consumerism played a crucial role in making current youth outdoor programs. In our society, everyone from infants to the elderly is greatly influenced by the formation of consumer culture. There is ongoing interest in the impact on adolescents in particular. This is because adolescents are at a critical stage where their professional sensitivity is being developed, they represent a significant target

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[7] Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203.
[8] Rosemary Radford Reuther, "Biblical Vision of the Ecological Crisis," in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 60.
[9] Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Ministering with the Earth: A Theology of Careful Compassion* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998).
[10] Tim Van Meter, *Created in Delight: Youth, Church, and the Mending of the World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013)

market, and they are beginning to enter the economic world on their own.[11] For all these reasons, addressing the issue of consumer formation among adolescents is important in both secular and religious environments. Marketers often say that adolescents' loyalty lasts a lifetime. New products targeting children, such as school supplies, clothing, and media events, are constantly emerging. Eco-marketing[12] has become increasingly prevalent in recent times. While eco-marketing involves more than simply placing a green recycling icon on a website, Earth Day has largely turned into a marketing ploy.[13]

First, the biggest impact of consumerism in youth ministry is seeing nature as commodity that leads using Earth as didactic tool where natural spaces and experiences become products to be bought or sold. Katherine Turpin powerfully writes in her book *Branded* that the true danger of consumer culture lies in its potential to become the defining identity of adolescents.[14] Moreover, 'consumer culture' is problematic not merely as another term for materialism or the relationship with money, but because it shapes our vision of ourselves, our neighbors, and the common good, commodifying both humans and nature. Consumer culture influences not just economic standards, but also identity, values, relationships, and the public imagination.

As seen above, many youth outdoor trips do tend to focus on fun. Often these programs end up focusing more on recreational activities without extending into sustained eco-justice efforts or integrating deeply into daily life. David Ng's argument that because youth educator's purpose of youth ministry is in fun and entertainment this feeds into focusing on having fun and exciting outdoor trips. He, argues that Youth ministry tries to make young people happy with each other and get along through overly lively activities that aim to be fun and entertaining.[15] There can be a tendency to prioritize fun and entertainment to attract youth participation, potentially at the expense of more profound, challenging discussions about eco-justice. and consequently, youth ministry may adopt a similar approach, emphasizing superficial interactions with nature through organized events rather than encouraging a profound understanding of ecological interdependence. In addition to Ng's argument, youth ministry inadvertently adopt consumeristic perspective, treating nature as a resource for entertainment and programmatic activities rather than valuing it intrinsically. So, youth ministry programs may focus on immediate, entertaining nature-related activities rather than promoting a deeper and more sustained engagement with ecological issues. The educational content of nature programs may not include substantial information on environmental stewardship, sustainability, or social justice issues related to the environment but more entertainment focused.

Consumer culture often relies on marketing strategies that appeal to human desires and needs, reinforcing an anthropocentric worldview. If influenced by this mindset, youth ministry may need to adequately address the environmental impact of human actions, missing the opportunity to instill a sense of responsibility and accountability. Understanding and addressing these consumer culture aspects can help youth ministry transition towards a more holistic, eco-justice-oriented approach beyond treating nature as a lesson plan to cultivate a

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[11] Turpin, Branded, 18-19.

[12] Eco-marketing is marketing for a product that emphasizes the fact that it does not harm the environment. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/eco-marketing

[13] https://fashionunited.uk/news/business/why-earth-day-has-become-largely-a-marketing-gimmick/2024042275230

[14] Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 18.

[15] David Ng, *Rethinking Youth Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 94

deeper and more meaningful relationship with the environment and the Creator. Consumerism also feeds into understanding nature and often drives to have superficial relationship with nature rather than Developing and promoting ethical frameworks that integrate environmental sustainability with Christian values can guide behavior and policy. Consumeristic system can prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability.

Especially for youth ministry, many of these aspects impacts youth relationship with the nature and becomes strengthened in a negative way through youth ministry nature activities. Thus, David Orr - In works like "Ecological Literacy," Orr emphasizes the need for education systems to reconnect people with the natural world and instill a sense of responsibility for its care that causes lack of environmental ethics.[16]

To better engage in climate justice movements rather than using earth as a didactic tool, rituals of grief, mourning, confession, and lament needs to be done as we witness the demise of species, communities, and lifeways. Unlike some youth camps promote that camping can help youth to get away from daily distractions and brokenness of the nature, nature is where youth can truly face the brokenness of the nature and initiate to make a change.

Calls to Awakening

Introducing a new concept into youth ministry can significantly diverge from consumerist faith by providing opportunities for participants to redefine their self-understanding. This involves recognizing themselves as integral parts of nature, rather than merely enjoying temporary experiences in nature and returning to lifestyles that perpetuate exploitation—such as opting for disposable cups for quick convenience, among other unsustainable practices.

Turpin writes that It disrupts their daily routines that provides energy for ongoing conversion.[17] The new vocabulary is: *sympoiesis*. The word "sympoiesis" derives from the ancient Greek *sún* ("with, together") and *poíēsis* ("creation, production"), meaning "making-with" or "becoming-with."[18] As Donna Haraway explains, :"Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means 'making-with.' Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing…. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company."[19] Having this vocabulary sympoiesis, youth recognize their betwixt and between positions, that they are part of the problem, they are part of the human exceptionalism and may have approached other species and this mother earth in an oppressing way but then they also realize that they are not considered part of the web as they are yet growing, yet becoming humans. also they are excluded as they try to make a difference in this eco-anxiety society and contribute to a positive change. What is hopeful with this vocab is that all living beings including youth can become agents and make the world together.

Plus, thinking not only themselves but earth's agency such as (psalm 98) seas roar, rivers clap, hills sing for joy together before the lord, they can encounter the living web that

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[16] David W. Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1992)

[17] Turpin, Branded, 118.

[18] Originally introduced by M. Beth Dempster in 1998, the term denotes a collaborative production system without specified spatial or temporal boundaries. Donna Haraway later expanded on this concept in 2016, describing it as evolutionary systems that facilitate the recovery and resilience of living systems.

[19] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 58.

they are part of it. Earth also shapes us, earth responds to a web that we made, and exercise its agency. Paying close attention to everyday small things, contingent partialities and messy relations, earth reminds us that earth is also practicing their agency and youth is partaking in reshaping, shifting, and making the earth together. As mentioned above, youth tend to run away from the brokenness of everyday life or want to disconnect. However, at youth camps, young people can truly see how Mother Earth has been broken, and that is the future they might live in.

Also rituals of celebration and earth honoring practices are encouraged. A church located in South Korea started a curriculum called environmental missionary. This was inspired by a Christian association called Salim[20]. Deokshin Church aims to become a green church, which is a church that seeks to preserve the creation world throughout various aspects such as worship, education, service, mission, organization. Focusing on Environmental Sunday, the church takes the lead in various practices such as actions to combat global warming, campaigns like the Empty Plate Movement, installation of solar power plants for energy transition, preservation of mountains and rivers, church greening projects, operation of eco-friendly stores, operation of nature schools and eco-libraries, use of eco-friendly recycled paper, tree planting to prevent desertification, vegetable gardening, and participation in local community eco-environmental movements.

Additionally, centered around Environmental Sunday, the church creates educational materials on carbon neutrality and Christian ecological environment, engages church school children in activities like carbon fasting prayers and activities during Lent, helping them understand the background and necessity of carbon neutrality, and encourages living a life of environmental missionary work.

Before going on a camp trip this church commits to having three classes in advance. Deokshin church focus on the process of nurturing the next generation to understand the heart of the Creator God amidst the climate crisis, and to live in harmony with nature. They start weeek 1: [Climate Crisis] Whose Earth is it? Folloed by week 2: [Natural Cycles] There is no Planet B!; week 3: [Climate Justice] Eco Summit; and 2eek 4: [Carbon Neutrality] We are Green! Camp"[21]

Youth ministry need to take a step deeper and not just co-exist but understand that all species are like a web, and all species have agency, and each are impacting each other. Coexistence can intensify eco-injustice saying you do you I will do what I've been doing, let's just have this as it is.

[20] The term "salim" is a Korean word that refers to "restoration" or "renewal." It conveys the idea of housekeeping or making something alive again, often in the sense of restoring something to its original or intended state. In practical theological discourse, it implies the process of renewal or revival, particularly in spiritual or moral contexts.

[21] Deokshin Church, http://www.dsjesus.co.kr/Board/Index/3541

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REA

Meaningful Vocation in a Climate-Changed World: Learnings from Seminary of the Wild

Abstract:

Practices and strategies for sustaining resilient spiritual leadership are critical in this time of climate crisis. Learnings from participants in the Seminary of the Wild eco-ministry certification program offer guidance for engaging in practices of education and formation that can help people of faith meet the challenges of these times and meaningfully contribute to the flourishing of their communities and the planet. The implications of these learnings for wider contexts will be explored.

Introduction:

Increasingly, people are naming that the foundational causes of the climate crisis are rooted in our ways of being — that at its heart, the climate crisis is a spiritual crisis. Pope Benedict XVI, for example, asserted "The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast."[1] In the Preface to *Beguiled by Beauty: Cultivating a Life of Contemplation and Compassion*, Wendy Farley writes:

> We, especially white people, have found it difficult to acknowledge the realities of climate change, racism, and all forms of inter-human degradation. These are not political matters but spiritual ones. We cannot retain our humanity in these dark times if we do not discover the inner resources to live with nobility, compassion, and justice.[2]

> Environmental lawyer and advocate, James "Gus" Speth states: I used to think that if we threw enough good science at the environmental problems, we could solve them. I was wrong. The main threats to the environment are not biodiversity loss, pollution, and climate change, as I once thought. They are selfishness and

[1] Benedict XVI, 2005. "Mass, Imposition of the Pallium and Conferral of the Fisherman's Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome." The Vatican. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html

[2] Wendy Farley, *Beguiled by Beauty: Cultivating a Life of Contemplation and Compassion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), ix.

> greed and pride. And for that we need a spiritual and cultural transformation.[3]

Using different language, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone write about the need for inner transformation alongside outward action to address the planetary challenges of our time. Macy and Johnstone lay out a vision for the "Great Turning," which they describe as a "transition from a doomed economy of industrial growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the recovery of the world."[4]

Macy and Johnstone believe that this Great Turning is already underway, rooted in three dimensions. Two of these dimensions name outward and visible actions necessary for addressing climate change and other social injustices: direct action, such as protests and boycotts, and transformation of social systems and practices, such as transitioning to purchasing practices and investment policies whose bottom line is sustaining planetary life. Macy and Johnstone name a third, often overlooked, dimension which is fostering a shift in consciousness. This names what is needed to address the spiritual crisis described above. Macy and Johnstone assert that

> We take part in this third dimension of the Great Turning when we pay attention to the inner frontier of change, to the personal and spiritual development that enhances our capacity and desire to act for our world. By strengthening our compassion, we give fuel to our courage and determination. By refreshing our sense of belonging in the world, we widen the web of relationships that nourishes us and protects us from burnout.[5]

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[3] Jim Antal, *Climate Church, Climate World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 9. Antal writes the following in the quote's footnote: "Gus Speth tells me that he said something like this in 2007 at a gathering of scientists and evangelicals who were uniting to protect creation." (p. 186) All instances of the quote that I could locate are secondary sources.

[4] Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012), 26.

[5] Ibid., 32.

Fostering such shifts in consciousness, fueled by personal and spiritual development and widening the web of relationship to the more-than-human[6] world, lies at the heart of a program called Seminary of the Wild.[7]

Summary of Analysis:

Equipping spiritual leaders with practices and strategies for addressing the spiritual roots of the climate crisis is critical at this time in our planetary journey. However, prospects of further climate catastrophe and other global challenges can move even well-intentioned, justice-seeking people of faith into paralyzing despair. How do we help persons of faith stay engaged in meaningful work on behalf of planetary flourishing? How can we deepen people's resilience and foster hope[8] in the midst of overwhelming challenges? How can we equip them to facilitate the Great Turning and equip others in that work?

These questions prompted me to conduct research as a participant-observer in the first cohort of the Seminary of the Wild (SOTW)

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[6] The term "more-than-human" was coined by David Abram to describe the planetary community beyond human beings. See *Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

[7] Seminary of the Wild was the original name of this process. It has since experienced a shift in leadership and has been reworked. The program is now operating under the name Seminary of the Wild Earth, facilitated by two of the four original leaders. https://www.wildspirituality.earth/seminary-of-the-wild-earth

[8]The term "hope" takes on many different meanings. Macy and Johnstone distinguish between hope as hopefulness or optimism and what they describe as "Active Hope." "Active Hope", they state "is a practice…it is something we *do* rather than *have*….Active Hope doesn't require our optimism, we can apply it even in areas where we feel hopeless. The guiding impetus is intention; we *choose* what we aim to bring about, act for, or express." (Macy and Johnstone, 3) Vaclav Havel's understanding of hope is similar. He states, "Hope … is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather the ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 181-82.

eco-ministry certification program. This program proposed to nurture deep authenticity and foster leadership development through engagement with the more-than-human world, grounded in what the leaders described as "the wild[9] roots of the Christian story":[10]

> *The Seminary of Wild Eco-ministry Certification program is a yearlong experiential offering designed to help you remember your deep participation in sacred Earth. In the face of profound ecological and social challenges, a New Story is emerging. At the core of that Story is an ancient and yet new way of relating with the earth, with other humans, and with God, defined by a deep inter-connection between all things.*

The focus of the program's final module, Wild Call, invited participants to "embody your sacred calling, beneath your daily vocation, to deliver your gifts to a world desperately needing your unique gifts."[11]

This paper will explore the experiences of SOTW participants and highlight changes in their understanding and practice of vocation in light of their program participation. By focusing on deepening human wholeness, developing relationships with beings in the more-than-human world, encouraging formation of supportive human communities, and other practices, Seminary of the Wild fostered a fruitful environment for people to discern vocations grounded in commitment to their own flourishing and the flourishing of the planet. Some implications of these learnings and strategies for education and formation in other contexts will be explored. While this original manifestation of the SOTW program was

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[9] "Wild" as it is being used here and throughout the process means "undomesticated" at its essence. Some questions posed to readers on the current website help point to its meaning: "Where do you feel tamed? In which ways are you ready to step outside the culture of domestication?" https://www.wildspirituality.earth/seminary-of-the-wild-earth, accessed June 15, 2024. Essential to this rewilding process is deeper connection to the more-than-human world, as will be described later in this paper.

[10] Specific reference to the "Christian story" or "Wild Christ" has been removed from the framework of the current process of Seminary of the Wild Earth, though its leaders are grounded in the Christian tradition. Foundational practices of the process remain the same as in the first version though the content has broadened.

[11] Quotations above from: https://www.seminaryofthewild.com/eco-yearlong; accessed September 11, 2019.

grounded in the Christian story, not all participants identified as Christian. Many of the program's foundational resources also came from outside of the Christian tradition. Thus, I am hopeful that learnings from this study can be helpful for other contexts.

Program Content and Research Methodology:

The SOTW program included participation in four intensive online modules between April 2020 and March 2021.[12] These modules addressed the following themes: Wild Self, Wild Earth, Wild Christ, and Wild Call.[13] Each online intensive included time for content sharing related to that module's theme, shared ritual, small group conversation, and off-screen individual reflective practices in the natural world. In between online sessions, participants were given readings, journalling prompts, and practices to engage. The practices generally fell into three categories:

1. Wandering: individual weekly time in the natural world for 30—60 minutes at a time, often with a guiding question or suggested practice
2. Imaginal journeys: a form of guided meditation which helped participants connect with deeper wisdom beyond conscious thought and reflection
3. Ceremony: typically at the conclusion of each module, participants were given a specific ritual to engage during an extended period of time in the natural world in order to synthesize their learnings and experiences from that module

Each participant was also assigned to a "clan," a small group that met monthly throughout the program led by one of the four leaders — known as "guides" — and received individual mentoring sessions with their guide. Online presentations by and conversations with inspiring leaders and thinkers such as Joanna Macy, Matthew Fox, and Andreas Weber others rounded out the program.

I invited participants to complete a total of five surveys: a pre-program survey, and surveys after each online module. Those who

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[12] Originally planned were two in-person intensives and two online intensives. With the onset of the pandemic, all programming was moved online.

[13] The revised version of the program has three modules: Wild Earth, Wild Soul, and Wild Spirit. https://www.wildspirituality.earth/seminary-of-the-wild-earth , accessed June 15, 2024.

completed at least the pre-program survey and the final survey were invited to take part in follow-up interviews six months after completion of the process. Fourteen of the twenty-five participants in SOTW met this criteria, of whom twelve agreed to be interviewed. The twelve interviewees were from the United States and Canada, equally divided between persons identifying as male and female, ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s, with most in the 40-60 age range. Five interviewees were clergy persons, two of whom are currently serving as pastors of congregations. All participants identified as white. The interviews sought to ascertain what formational learnings had been sustained over the six months and which aspects of the program, if any, had been most personally and vocationally significant.

Foundational Texts: Wholeness and Genius as Essential to Vocation

A brief discussion of some foundational SOTW texts is necessary for interpreting the interview data. These texts provided shared language and principles for program participants. Three readings emerged as significant to the interview participants. Two in particular are relevant to the focus of this paper.[14]

The primary text for the Wild Self module was Bill Plotkin's book, *Wild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche*. He asserts in the book's introduction that

> We're being summoned by the world itself to make any urgent changes to the human project, but most central is a fundamental re-visioning and reshaping of *ourselves*, a shift in consciousness. We must reclaim and embody our original wholeness, our indigenous human nature granted to us by nature itself.[15]

Plotkin believes that through this reclaiming of our wholeness, we open the possibility to "feel and honor our kinship with all species and habitats, to embrace the troubling wisdom of paradox, and to shape ourselves into visionaries with the artistry to revitalize our enchanted and endangered

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[14] The third reading was *Matter and Desire* by Andreas Weber (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2014), which was the primary text for the Wild Earth module.

[15] Bill Plotkin, *Wild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2013), 2.

world."[16] He distinguishes this approach from the traditional approaches of Western psychology which "has focused on pathology rather than possibility and participation" and thus has "unintentionally cramped our abilities to grow whole and to fully mature."[17]

Plotkin asserts that with some notable exceptions, including the work of Carl Jung, Western psychological practice has placed too little emphasis on what is "inherently right and inspiring about human beings."[18] He states that "when we eliminate symptoms without cultivating wholeness, we still have an unwell, unwhole, or fragmented psyche that will soon enough sprout new symptoms that express, in yet another way, the lack of wholeness."[19] Individuals are not to be blamed for their lack of wholeness, however. Plotkin asserts that "when a large proportion of people in a given culture have significant psychological troubles, as is demonstrably the case in the Western world today, these people are not to blame. Their culture is."[20] Plotkin believes that cultivating personal wholeness is essential to building a mature, life-giving culture, one that protects and nurtures its environment, adequately equips elders to mentor future generations in practices of well-being, and fosters the wholeness of its individual members.[21]

Another significant shortcoming of Western psychology is its disconnection from the more-than-human world. While those of us shaped by dominant Western culture are largely oblivious to this, Plotkin asserts that "it nevertheless remains true that the deep structures of our human psyche…have emerged from this living web"[22] of our connection with the more-than-human world. Plotkin advocates liberating not just psychotherapy, but also disciplines such as coaching, education, and religion from indoor spaces into the natural world, "by fashioning approaches in which our encounters with the other-than-human world are the central feature." What might happen, he asks, "when we allow nature

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[16] Ibid., 2.

[17] Ibid., 3.

[18] Ibid., 3.

[19] Ibid., 5.

[20] Ibid., 6.

[21] Ibid., 21.

[22] Ibid., 7.

itself to be the primary therapist or guide, while the human mentor or advisor becomes more of an assistant to nature, an agent or handmaiden of the wild?"[23]

Throughout the SOTW process, the human guides emphasized this role of nature as primary guide. All four of the SOTW guides had taken part in programs at Plotkin's Animus Valley Institute, which hosts programs grounded in the above-described principles.[24] Other theoretical foundations from their experiences at Animus Valley deeply influenced the SOTW process.[25] In *Wild Mind*, Plotkin lays out an elaborate map of the human psyche which framed the structure and content of SOTW's Wild Self module. While a few participants mentioned not fully resonating with Plotkin's map, or desiring exposure to other models, almost every interviewee used language and concepts that demonstrated the positive impact of the Wild Self module's emphasis on cultivating wholeness through deepening relationship with the natural world.

The Genius Myth by Michael Meade was a central text in the Wild Call module. This text was mentioned less frequently by interviewees than Plotkin's, but its principles implicitly emerged in a broad sample of participants. Meade parallels Plotkin's emphasis on wholeness by emphasizing the giftedness of each human being. He turns the typical understanding of "genius" as a specially gifted individual on its head. Instead, "the genius myth imagines that everyone, by virtue of bearing some genius qualities, is subject to a genuine calling in life. The question becomes … in what way does genius appear in you and how might it contribute to both your own well-being and that of the world around you."[26] He asserts that "in a rapidly changing world faced with seemingly impossible problems, it becomes important to imagine that each person

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[23] Ibid., 7-8.

[24] https://www.animas.org/

[25] The most significant difference that the SOTW guides brought to their program was the module on the "Wild Christ." All the guides were grounded to some extent in the Christian tradition and had been exploring the connections between their experiences at Animus Valley and what they had been experiencing in their own faith journeys as what they described as the wild roots of the Christian tradition.

[26] Michael Meade, *The Genius Myth* (Seattle: Greenfire Press, 2016), 3-4.

born might have something to contribute to the solutions."[27] The real work of humanity, therefore, "may be to awaken the unique spark and inner resiliency of genius within each person."[28] When we act out of our genius, Meade asserts, we come to trust our own inner authority and bring more of our authentic selves into our being in the world. "Nature only produces originals," he states, "and when we act from our own authentic selves, we bring something unique and original to the world."[29] Our genius "ties each of us to the ongoing story of creation and calls upon us to awaken to the precise ways that we might help heal the wounds of history and contribute to the reweaving of nature and culture."[30] Meade has put these principles into practice in his work with at-risk and suicidal youth, gang members, veterans, and other populations experiencing trauma and/or marginalization at Mosaic Multicultural Foundation.[31]

These themes of cultivating wholeness, acting out of authenticity, and utilizing one's unique gifts emerged consistently in the SOTW interviews. The impact of these new ways of being in the world will be described below.

Lasting Impact from Seminary of the Wild:

Almost without exception, interview participants described continued lasting impact from their experience in SOTW six months after completion of the process. I began each interview reading back participants' responses to two questions from the final SOTW survey. I then asked if those responses still held true. The first question asked respondents to describe new ways of believing, being, and doing that they gleaned from the program. The second asked them to describe life changes and growing edges that had developed out of their participation. Most every respondent indicated that their answers from six months ago still held true. In this section, I will explore the new ways of being and doing, those shifts in consciousness, described by SOTW participants.

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[27] Ibid., 11.

[28] Ibid., 12.

[29] Ibid., 46.

[30] Ibid., 47.

[31] https://www.mosaicvoices.org/

Seth[32] described the following perspective shift on his life's purpose:

> Being able to walk through this world with a lighter new way of being…with a larger purpose than just to make money and get older…I remember a specific point where I was talking with my wife about …. "What is the big awakening? What is my takeaway? Am I supposed to go change the world in a way?…Do [I] have to start a new company that fixes things? ….She was like, "no … I think it's really just an invitation to how you move through the world that you're already in. And that may take shape in different ways."…. It kind of snapped all into perspective of what I learned … the life that I have, it's just how do I walk through that….to see the short life that we are given on this planet in a different way.

In his career as a sales representative,"the people I work with have become partners in business versus people I sell to. I have a larger vision of what we are doing here on the planet." Seth described ways in which his roles as a parent and spouse were positively impacted as well. He also experienced an expansion of planetary care beyond individual practices, such as recycling, to learning about and promoting regenerative agriculture as a means of nurturing sustainable life on the planet.

Laura, a lay person involved in Wild Church leadership, stated the following:

> I often felt overwhelmed by the immensity of the task in front of us to heal the planet and despair for future generations. I find that the program has given me a new perspective, tools for the journey. And while the problems we face are still the same, I have peace and steadiness within, allowing me to take one day at a time and commit to doing the best I can in that day.

Cliff explicitly stated his intention to "nurture my own wholeness and engage more fully in the world" in his final survey. During our interview, he described this as "not turning away":

> I tend to disengage from the world when things get chaotic or troublesome or whatever. And I think I've intentionally decided to

[32] All names of interview participants have been changed.

> not turn away from that kind of stuff and just be more present with my feelings and also with other people….I just feel more that I'm living life as it comes and engaging in it more fully than turning away.

Charles used the same language in describing his anti-racism work after SOTW. "Racism is a huge issue", he said, "What can I do? I can show up for those events that come. I can plan events and invite. I can engage in conversations with those who are different than me. I can hold space for the deep pain of racism, and not turn away." Laura described how her world before felt very narrow, now

> I feel like my eyes have been open to so many perspectives, lenses, paradigms….I feel like my world is kind of like — it's just expanded….I'm challenged to participate in a way and at a level and with an energy a focus that kind of doesn't let go of me…I could go to sleep and forget it all or I can be…I'm bothered by it, you know, and I say that I think that's good thing because I think I need to be bothered by it….There's no going back.

Participants named renewed or deepening senses of call, or having received encouragement to venture into new vocational experiences. These shifts in call were often described in terms of living deeper into authenticity or bringing a different way of being into work they were already doing. Beth, a lay person raised in a conservative Christian environment, stated, "I am no longer waiting for my church or ministerial leaders to lead me or offer opportunities for me in ministry. I'm about knowing what my call is and answering that call wherever and however I am led."

Lorraine participated in SOTW with two members of her ministry team. She laughed as she shared, "Mary, Laura, and I started Seminary of the Wild thinking we were going to get …. how to do Wild Church, and it's like, 'Ooh, no, this is more about how to do Wild You.'" She went on to say, "I just feel so clearly in myself that I have finally landed in the work that I'm supposed to be doing, both for myself and for the world. And I don't think I've ever walked fully in that kind of confidence before, that I am truly authentically living into my call." Charles describes a shift in his anti-racism work:

> As a white man who has lots of resources, the question always is, "what am I supposed to be doing?" And maybe that's not the

> question,…maybe the question is, “who am I supposed to be?” or “how am I supposed to be here?” … It’s really about developing the capacity to hold space, to be present….. So, for me, there’s a direct connection between the work I do in racism, and simply trying to be present and listen and learn … trying to simply be present in a different way, rather than maybe just as a guilty white guy.

A number of participants in SOTW practiced therapy in some form. All described ways in which their SOTW experience had shifted their practice. Quinn stated that “when I feel it’s appropriate for my therapy clients,…I will really talk with them about, you know, how much time do you spend outdoors? What is your relationship with nature?” Brandon named an intention to bring eco-therapy into his professional practice. Julie stated that as a therapist/healer she was “on a unique path that will integrate some of what I’ve learned from Seminary of the Wild and continue. . .on the path of weaving in nature-based practice, knowing, and belonging.”

SOTW enabled some participants to claim new aspects of their identity. Pam claimed her identity as an artist. Prior to her experience of SOTW, Pam dabbled in oil painting, but refused to say she was an artist. During the yearlong SOTW process, which coincided with the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pam described “painting like a madwoman for survival”. At the time of our interview, a local art gallery had just accepted a number of her paintings for an exhibit. She stated

> now I get to call myself an artist. … That’s my Wild Self saying, “yes, you can do this,” not, “no, you’re not good enough, no one will ever look at your art and care about what you paint; you’re doing this for your own sake.” And I was doing it for my own sake, for survival, and the recognition is nice, but I really don’t do it for that. I did it because I wanted to create beauty in the world when it seemed like there wasn’t anything but ugly.

Madison also felt a call into creative expression. She described how art, music, movement, and writing were emerging as “my work for the world.” Madison intended to find part-time work to supplement this call — work that would not diminish “my emotional energy, that would take away from my ability to do those other practices… Just trying to trust that it is for the world. And that it is on behalf of the planet and that it’s not selfish.”

At the time of our interview, Grant was working with Q’ero masters in the Andes Mountains to become a paqo shaman, a combination of

earth keeper, mystic, and shaman, as he described it. He stated "that's definitely something I've been interested in for about 15 years, but the experience at Seminary of the Wild … really helped me to consider that and step into it." One of his concerns, as a pastor, was theologically meshing this desire to become a shaman with his Christian identity. His experience in SOTW helped him find this theological consistency. He came to believe that "Jesus has more in common with nature-based cultural, spiritual leaders than post-enlightenment Western thinkers… That was a revelation to me."

Foundational Practices

What aspects of SOTW were most significant in helping participants make these shifts? While all the program components listed in the "Program Components" section above were named by one or more interview participants, two were named by every interviewee in some way.

Deeper Connection to the Earth

The practice of wandering, described above, offered participants the opportunity to engage at least weekly with the more-than-human inhabitants of their own ecosystems as kin, neighbors, and teachers. All participants named this as an essential practice for deepening their connection to the earth. People described significant encounters with trees, ants, bodies of water, and other inhabitants of the more-than-human world — relationships that began during the SOTW program and have continued. Cliff described his reciprocal relationship with a tree he calls his grandmother:

> Whenever I'm walking through the cemetery, I will walk up to her and give her a big hug. And it's more for my own well-being than what it feels like I'm offering to her, and she has a way of reminding me that everything in life will be just fine despite all the tumult and the chaos, and all the crises that have happened over the last couple of years in particular.

Pam stated that "My connection with the earth was profound before, but I still felt separate. I cared for Mother Earth, but I didn't feel that I was an integrated part of nature…Now, I'm much more aware of how I am a part of everything, and everything is a part of me." She lives out this awareness on a footbridge crossing a nearby creek. The footbridge is

covered with a toxic stain that has seeped into the water. “So, every day when I go by it,” Pam said, “I take weeds or flowers or seeds, and I place it on the middle post and ask forgiveness from the creek for what we’re doing to it.”

> Lorraine described an increased experience of being open to … allurement from the natural world and understanding that it really is a reciprocal relationship. It’s what Robin Wall Kimmerer talks about in her book[33], like, …she said “Do you think the natural world can love us?” And I think that for me, I walk in that little bit of awe and wonder that I truly believe that it can, that it really is reciprocal…. I’ve experienced walking into my circle of grandmother trees….When I went back after being away for a time, and I was like, “I just missed you all so much.” And it was like, just this energy came back, like, we missed you, too.”

Importance of Community Support

Supportive community was a second universally important part of the SOTW experience. Interview participants described the significance of their monthly clan meetings for sharing, accountability, and support. Quinn stated, “It wasn’t just my journey I was going on; I was accompanying others on their journey; they were accompanying me on mine.” Most participants, like Quinn, continued to meet with their clans, or another configuration of SOTW participants, after completion of the program. Julie described continuing these relationships as “like life to me, life support.” Her clan supported her “to find my own way, and then to come back and have it witnessed and held…. There’s a place to belong without having to have it be a certain way necessarily. There was so much room for you to be like, this is where I am. And to be held with so much love in that process.” In addition to continuing with her clan, she also started a women’s dream circle with other SOTW participants.

People named this ongoing support as essential to maintaining the shifts that occurred as a result of participation in SOTW. Charles describes the importance of continuing his monthly clan meetings:

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[33] Lorraine is referring to *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge,*
and the Teachings of Plants. by Robin Wall Kimmerer (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

> because we're checking in, and we're speaking of our journeys and our time on the land. And we're listening to one another and affirming one another, it's probably been the greatest gift in terms of continuing the Seminary of the Wild….It helps remind me of "Oh wow, I have a meeting on Monday and I haven't been on the land. I'd better get out there."

Grant describes the continued community support as "organic growth, you know…What's happening is that people are not going away. There are many who were…lingering, you know, we've graduated, but we're still lingering outside of the … theological school, div school chapel, on the yard." The importance of this lingering, organic continuation of SOTW community was evidenced by Brandon. Brandon was the only person I interviewed who stated "I don't know that [SOTW] did very much to equip me." While he did describe the importance of his clan during the program, Brandon was the only interview participant that had not continued with his clan or found some other communal support system after the program completion. One can infer that without ongoing support, Brandon had difficulty sustaining any equipping he might have experienced during the program.

Implications for Education and Formation in a Climate-Changed World

Participation in the SOTW experience clearly assisted participants in discerning, affirming, and/or living more fully into their life's purpose and authenticity. Explicitly or implicitly, each person's journey included deeper love for and action on behalf of the natural world. What can we learn from the experiences of these individuals that might translate into other educational and formational contexts?

Small, intentional long-term communities of support and accountability are practices that could be integrated into faith communities. In Christianity, for example, small communities were an integral part of its early history, and continue in some contemporary Christian settings. The scope and focus of these groups would need to be expanded to meet the challenges of the present moment. For example, in the Methodist stream of Christianity, covenant discipleship groups are the current manifestation of the class meetings which were foundational to the early Methodist movement. Participants in covenant discipleship groups make commitments to growing their faith in four

areas: acts of devotion, acts of worship, acts of mercy, and acts of justice. Incorporating aspects of our connection to the natural world in any one, or even all four, of these quadrants can become an integral part of this covenant discipleship practice. Groups such as this have the potential to become places where people are supported in the shifts of consciousness needed to help foster the Great Turning if properly facilitated to build trust and nurture open, honest sharing amongst participants.

Faith communities can also incorporate experiences of meaningful connection with the more-than-human world.[34] Outdoor worship services or small groups with times for reflective wandering are possibilities for many communities. Providing opportunities for folks to pay attention to the natural world around them, even in urban settings, can foster deepening love and care for the more-than-human world. Naming wandering as a spiritual practice, alongside prayer, meditation, and/or study of sacred written texts, can encourage individual faith community members to see relationship with the more-than-human world as an essential part of their faith practice and spiritual development. Resources such as Steven Chase's *Nature as Spiritual Practice*[35] or Micah Mortali's *Rewilding: Meditations, Practices, and Skills for Awakening in Nature*[36] contain wandering practices that can be used by individuals and communities.

In order for any of the above to foster shifts in consciousness, however, more fundamental changes will be needed in mainstream Western faith communities. I will name just two that the experience of SOTW participants point toward. These will warrant further exploration beyond the scope of this paper.

First, faith communities need to recognize that this formation process is long-term. One program, one sermon series, or one small group study will be insufficient in bringing about the shifts in consciousness needed to sustain one's being or work in planetary

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[34] See the sections on "Pedagogical Implications" and "Next Steps" in my article on Wild Church practices for more suggestions. Wanda J. Stahl, "Healing Our Divide with the Non-Human World: Theological Foundations and Pedagogical Practices within the Wild Church Network." (*Religious Education*, 117:1).

[35] Steven Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011.

[36] Micah Mortali, Rewinding: *Meditations, Practices, and Skills for Awakening in Nature* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2019.

flourishing. The quick-fix mentality of Western culture has conditioned an expectation that a weekend workshop or eight-week study can lead to significant change. SOTW participants recognized that the changes they experienced during the process needed ongoing support to be sustained and for fostering continued growth. One year was insufficient for changes to root deeply and continue to flourish.

The second change is theological. The undergirding principles of fostering wholeness and uncovering one's giftedness or genius sparked significant changes in SOTW participants. One can assume from this that strengthening emphasis on each person's value and worth as a beloved child of God and recipient of God's grace could lead to a similar empowerment. Like Western psychology, some faith communities place too much emphasis on the sinfulness of human beings rather than their giftedness. This can be disempowering, leaving individuals and communities feeling like they have little to offer the world for its transformation and healing. Granted, Western individuals and faith communities have great need to repent of our treatment of the more-than-human world, along with other systemic injustices. That said, this needs to be accompanied by an equally strong, if not stronger, emphasis on the God-given gifts we have been given to bring about healing and wholeness for this planet. From this foundation, faith communities can encourage members to utilize their gifts and abilities for alleviation of suffering, and for imagining and living into a different future.

Conclusion

This paper has barely scratched the surface of the depth of people's experience through SOTW, let alone the possible implications of its processes for a wider audience. Despite these limitations, this discussion has described shifts in consciousness that are possible when attention is given to addressing the spiritual roots of the climate crisis. By integrating learnings from SOTW into experiences of education and formation, faith communities can increase their likelihood of contributing to the Great Turning rather than being disempowered bystanders to the demise of our planetary home.

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2024 REA Annual Meeting, July 8-12

Religious Education

in the

Context of an Evolutionary Universe

A Deeptime Mythopoetic Approach

Abstract

When addressing someone or something as 'Dear' we assume there is an ongoing relationship. However, we can now say that we have forgotten our relationship with Earth, no longer expressing through action, a 'faith in the integrity of creation" living through a mindset affected by the trauma of separation. Our cosmology is dysfunctional. With no common story, we no longer consider ourselves as bound together *(religare*), or being drawn forth (*educere*) led by a vast Mystery. We need a metanoia. RE in the context of an evolutionary universe evokes this metanoia[1] to address the healing of Dear Earth.

> The prophet appeals to something the community already knows and wants to value but has managed to hide from itself or keep separate from the domain of its present behavior…Prophetic speech is the creation of a fresh interpretation of that part of the tradition that has slipped from view and thus is failing to make an effective claim for action in the community or in the larger society. (Ruffing, 2001, 10)

> "The beginning of Wisdom is: Get Wisdom: and at all cost of all you have, Get understanding." (Prov. 4:7)

Introduction

The term Religious Education carries cultural baggage in many circles. Even within the REA itself, we see an inability to agree, as a collective, on what Religious Education as a profession actually is (Horell et al. 2024).

[1]Metanoia: Change in one's mind, penitence, reorientation of one's way of life, spiritual conversion. In James Fowler's work on conversion and humility as one of its fruits, he writes "It represents a time when she gave up her old centers of value, admitted the impoverishment of the images of power on which she had relied and made a self-conscious decision to undertake the reshaping of her life in accordance with a new master story (1995, 288).

Having lived and worked in communities of different 'faith' traditions in USA, Ireland, and India, I learned as I spoke of the work that I do, of healing Cartesian cosmology (a process of reconciling students back with Earth, etc., in the context of an evolutionary Universe), that for many people, using the term 'religious education' brings to mind histories of colonial conversion, communities of religious essentialism, nationalism, othering, etc.

In the news we hear some people, politicians, etc., being called 'religious leaders' by journalists, yet their practices and policies betray Cartesian cosmology and are deeply divisive. The term 'religion' has become moribund; folks continue to embrace "I am spiritual, but not religious."

Language, when we address imagination, is a vital question and can carry vital potential. In *Teaching and Religious Imagination,* Maria Harris addresses the importance of language and imagination, and her own struggle to convey what she was doing in her work with a theology of teaching. Rather than spend time trying to explain using terminology which has lost meaning for many, I use the term 'mythopoetic' education in circles without formation in the profession. People seem to understand and have receptivity to the term 'mythopoetic.' The term links narrative with making, the essential dynamic of our evolutionary universe, a collective story of autopoiesis.

Mythopoetic taps into memory and evokes the capacity of responsible action. "Grounded in storytelling, mythopoetic pedagogy strikes awe in the hearts of new learners and establishes the domain upon which they are focused" (Leonard 2008, 90). Since we are struggling to define what we do as a profession of religious educators, the term "mythopoetics" is a term which is open-ended, to keep the conversation from ending—when it needs to continue and be revived.

Gabriel Moran (1989, 1997) described a two-sided model of religious education to make a distinction and clarify the difference between the two. The first side: to teach religion—is with the purpose of teaching to 'understand'—the advocacy is linguistic, and the language is academic (logos), so greater understanding is possible. Some therapeutic/mythos languages are also used.

The second side of the coin—teaching to be religious—is how this instruction/understanding plays itself out beyond the classroom through our families, work, and recreation in the public square. The therapeutic languages (healing) and homiletic languages (storytelling, lecturing and preaching) arise from a community existence with a shared set of beliefs.

Previous to my studies in RE, I would not have addressed Earth as "Dear," with the respect Gaia/Pachamama demands and deserves. I had not culturally inherited this sense, although there were glimmers. I was 'in denial' of being an emergent 'member' of Earth, in a planetary communion of reciprocal relations, human and nonhuman. It has been a journey of re-memberance and "befriending an estranged home" (Dalton 1990).

The 'conversion/metanoia' in my life, shifting from a Cartesian cosmology to the embodiment of a 'faith in the integrity of Creation,' would not have been possible without standing on the shoulders of our academic ancestors, researchers in the field of Religious Education.

As the Cenozoic Era ends, we stand in a threshold moment, a liminal time, when Religious Education can foster a 'faith in the integrity of creation,' working in solidarity towards Earth's transition into the Ecozoic Era.

What follows is an abridged description of a model of religious education fostering 'cartesian conversion' in the context of an evolutionary universe. A demonstration of this model is offered, described as a 'deeptime' mythopoetic approach.

Lapsed Membership/Cartesian Cosmology

> "The rupture between the human and more-than-human, between body and soul, heaven and earth, spirit and matter—must be named and acknowledged before the healing can begin. Only when we allow ourselves to feel the full weight of our exile will we be able to begin describing and imagining a world charged with Eros, a world straining to be joined together in a web of intimacy" (Burton-Christie 1999, 13)

The religious point of view/understanding, of being bound (*religare*) with each other, Earth, and Cosmos—a 'faith in the integrity of creation'—is not being culturally fostered consistently, across Earth, in our institutions of family, work, school, and recreation, in spite of some being described as 'religious.' In *Laudato Si,* Pope Francis points to a loss of integral identity, saying our issues are "symptomatic of the real social decline, the silent rupture of the bonds of integration and social cohesion" (LS #46).

The dualistic cosmology, where the sense of the sacred is in another realm, beyond a mechanistic universe, is also known as Cartesian cosmology. The results of the process of Cartesian cosmology/education (coed) are reflected in news stories of our social injustices, ecological unsustainability and spiritual alienation—our anomic response[2] and anthropocentric concerns. We are in a state of denial.[3]

> More than anything else, our disconnection from the earth is probably the severest form of pain we know today. The problem is that most people don't feel it consciously. We have invented a vast array of sedatives, drugs, alcohol, hedonism, workaholism, religiosity and pseudo-therapies to rationalize our alienation. (O'Murchu 2007, 49).

In the *Culture of Denial: Why the Environmental Movement Needs a Strategy for Reforming Universities and Public Schools,* C.A Bowers points to this sensual detachment stating "the existential sense of temporality is first learned and continually reinforced through the messages and systems that sustain cultural life" (Bowers 1997, 173).[4] Further detailing the facts of our

[2] Our anomic responses can be seen in our various addictions, and the link is clearly made by those in the field of ecopsychology, ecotheology, and deep ecology. Pope Francis names this outward and inner rupture 'sin.' His comments directly link it with the denial of addiction. On top of all of this, and in spite of all the evidence, humanity continues with its "present lifestyles and models of production and consumption. This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices. Trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the import and decisions and pretending nothing will happen" (LS 59).

[3] I still continue my license as a licensed counselor in the field of addiction recovery I was involved in prior to my profession in RE. Addiction and denial are terms appropriate for our predicament and show the difficulty of individual metanoia/conversion for cultural change.

[4] All-knowing is somatic, embodied and expressed in narrative. While engagement of 'women's ways of knowing, growth in connection' have been researched, there are whole cultures of Indigenous men and women globally who operate according to the aspects described by women's ways of knowing researchers. I am interested in naming the somatic sense of unity, the integrity of creation as the sense that must be retrieved to heal our rupture whatever the gender. It is the grounding sense of unity that we have lost in secular Cartesian culture. This pattern—of

rupture and denial, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira lists the 'constitutive denials' of Cartesian modernity in her efforts of *Hospiscing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism.* They are included in detail because no institution is immune at this point. Manifestations of our denial within REA were identified by REA president Anne Carter Walker (Walker, 2023, 393)

1. The denial of systemic, historical, and ongoing violence and complicity in harm
2. The denial of the limits of the planet and the unsustainability of modernity/coloniality
3. The denial of entanglement (our insistence in seeing ourselves as separate from each other and the land, rather than "entangled" within a wider living metabolism that is bio-intelligent) and
4. The denial of the magnitude and complexity of the problems we need to face together (Olivera 2021, 23)

Gabriel Moran sums up our predicament and denial of entanglement:

> The most comprehensive teacher is the whole universe, which offers gifts each day. The human can receive the gift of learning from ocean and desert, mountain and tree, sunlight and star; or the human being can refuse to be taught…Individuals can diminish their own humanity, but if most of the human race takes this attitude toward air, water, topsoil, forest and earth, then the human race will eventually discover that a refusal to be taught is not a long-term option…freedom is always a bounded situation, a person exists with a physical body and a psychological makeup that are a precipitate of the past (Moran, 1997, 203).

Forty-five years ago, Moran defined the task for today's religious educators:

1. A person can immediately begin changing the way he/she speaks about education, religious education and adulthood;
2. He/she can demonstrate at least in microcosmic fashion another model of education (Moran 1979, 150)

The ideal of Cartesian adulthood is the rational and autonomous individual. We are sensually detached, through dualism, from aspects of ourselves, each other, the planet and underlying Mystery. Accordingly, we have developed cultures with an explicit curriculum fostering the ideal of material progress and development through industrial conquest of lands and peoples.[5]

The explicit curriculum of Cartesian culture focuses on progress and development through material wealth and limitless economic growth through economic development. This goal is

body/planet/cosmos alienation, awakening, and connection—is the pattern of conversion/metanoia needed by.and common to all religions. This was explored in my narrative research PhD thesis (Hazra 2009).

[5] In India, these explicit beliefs and implicit values are confirmed in the 12 March 2012 MHRD *Report to the People on Education:* "The spread of education in society is at the foundation of success in today's globalised world, where the real wealth of a country is not in its tangible natural resources but in knowledge, which is the driver of economic development." The mission statement for the US Department of Education continues to be "To promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access" www.2.ed.g

supported by an implicit curriculum (organization, patterns, procedures) that frame the explicit curriculum. The implicit curriculum of Cartesian culture supports anthropocentric competition, individualism, exploitation, mechanical universe, national security, value-free knowledge, dominion, control, autonomy, racism, patriarchy, ethnocentrism, hierarchical class, and sexism. The curriculum supports talents contributing to the explicit ideal of progress based on material wealth.

In contrast, the null curriculum is a paradox. Maria Harris states:

> This is the curriculum that exists because it does not exist. It refers to areas left out and procedures left out. And the point of naming it and including it here is critical: ignorance is not neutral. Not being educated in something skews our perceptions, limits our alternatives, narrows our options. (Harris 1988, 245)

Our educational alienation is seen in the relegation of the sense of unity, wonder and awe, compassion, interdependence, symbiotic relationship, reverence[6], responsibility, restraint, respect, redistribution and renewal…all to the null curriculum. Our cosmology has skewed our perceptions by teaching us to live 'as if' there is a split between our minds and bodies, one another as Earth and ongoing Mystery. Clearly, we are faced with a problem of education/transmission in our families, our schools, our workplaces, and our recreation. Our issue is intergenerational, international, interinstitutional, and interreligious—the transmission of a faulty cosmology through the explicit, implicit and null curriculum.

By placing our integral 13.7 BY contextual journey of Cosmogenesis, the wisdom of science, in conversation with the wisdoms of religion, indigenous peoples and women,[7] a demonstration model of religious education tracing alienation, awakening and healing action comes through in the narratives of students engaged with programs on the Deeptime Network.[8] We now need, as per the Earth Charter[9], to "Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities" (EC 14B). We need to foster the sense of the integrity of creation, and to experience awe and wonder, respect, reciprocity, and to live life as if 'all is one,' because it is.

To lay the foundation for the two-sided education process, first we can examine Cartesian cosmology through the lens of education/curriculum to see what is not taught and celebrated in Cartesian classrooms and beyond. Integral cosmology and other ways of being human together are then explored through narratives of our Indigenous educators who express a faith and

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[6] "*Reverence for life*" is a term Albert Schweitzer concluded as the basics for ethics.

[7] In 2009, my dissertation from Fordham Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education (GSRRE) describes this model of RE in the context of an evolutionary universe. While living in India (2008-2018), I applied the model at Tarumitra, a Jesuit ecoliteracy center in Patna (Hazra, 2016), and several retreat centers, renewing the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm at St Xaviers College In Mumbai (Hazra 2022a; 2022b) and Deeptime Network (Hazra 2024). (Additional articles listed in Bibliography from 2009, 2010, 2012.)

[8] Deeptime Network www.dtnetwork.org. An online model of religious/mythopoetic education begun in 2013 by Jennifer Morgan.

[9] Earth Charter www.earthcharterinaction.org. The Earth Charter is both a universal foundation/ethical document and a movement which arose from the UN Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It has become a soft law document often used by UN agencies and was cited by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*.

lifestyle based on the integrity of creation. Indigenous cultural ways and bioregions continue to be at risk, but are now gaining recognition as exhibiting the ideals Cartesians have lost.

Education in the context of an Evolutionary Universe ensures the transition from an anthropocentric culture of Empire to an integral biocentric Earth Democracy. Innovating Religious Education through the lens of an evolutionary universe links us back with Dear Earth[10] in the hope of ensuring climate justice within Earth's community.

Integral Indigenous Cosmology/Education

> "The particular gift of Native Americans (and of other indigenous peoples) is an immediate awareness and experience of the sacredness and interdependence of all creation."
>
> (Tinker 1989, 528)

In contrast to the Cartesian educational process, which aligns its citizens for the purpose of developing skills and values in support of the industrial empire, Native Americans and Indigenous peoples globally foster other ways of being, with different ideals, and link their ecospirituality with ecojustice issues.

> Unlike the West's[11] consistent experience of alienation from the natural world, these cultures of indigenous peoples consistently experienced themselves as part of that created whole, in relationship with everything else in the world. They saw and continue to see themselves as having responsibilities, just as every other creature has a particular role to play in maintaining the balance of creation as an ongoing process. (Tinker 1997, 171)

Vine Cordova shows us a very different way of experiencing her body to discern right from wrong based on a lesson her father gave her:

> My father described life as like constantly shifting sand. On that shifting sand I lay down a barrel and on that barrel I place a board. My duty is to stand astride that plank and maintain my balance as the sand shifts. My actions can be neither sudden, nor erratic, I maintain my balance by maintaining a certain harmony with the motion that I am reacting to. If violent action surrounds me, I maintain my stance, knowing that the action is only temporary. It is also necessary that I examine my own actions as a possible source of such action. Have I, even unknowingly, contributed to the creation of violence? If there is ugliness around me, can I counter that with the creation of beauty? (Cordova, 2004, 254)

In contrast to Cartesians, who have difficulty dealing with change, having inherited a world view of a static universe, Cordova sees herself as a responsible partner in the cosmic dance of life. She envisioned her duty to be maintaining balance as she stood on a plank above a barrel on the sand, her body held in balance within the matrix of a teaching/learning Earth community.

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[10] O'Gorman 2007.

[11] Although Tinker and other indigenous writers correctly point to the 'West' as being alienated, there are many signs that a similar alienation is being inherited in Asian and African communities as they embrace the ideals of progress and development, based on industrialization and material wealth. The environmental degradation and displacement of indigenous peoples globally by transnational companies is now seen on all continents. Research through the lens of cosmology moves the critical analysis in another and more productive direction through the field of religious education. It is the world view of each of us that needs to be addressed.

The narratives of Indigenous scholars reveal people who have been somatically fostered in a different way to experience themselves and their bodies in union with the rest of Earth—all their relations. Our Indigenous brothers and sisters express a duty to preserve their communities within the wider community of creation. Indigenous communities have long maintained an educational system which supported their faith in the integrity of creation, and their writings call us to heed and celebrate particular experiences. They further the argument that world views are tied to particular experiences and places, and that these, then, are culturally acknowledged in language and life practice. Their ideal of adulthood was and continues to be to conserve their human and nonhuman communities for the next seven generations.

Like Tinker, African American theologian and lawyer Barbara Holmes addresses cosmology and insists on context. She points to the limitations of 'justice' efforts through time, wondering why the liberation tactics of rights-based movements and judicial options have produced negligible results and superficial gains over time. In *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently*, Barbara questions "…how can we align social constructs of liberation and justice with emerging cosmic and quantum images? Perhaps solutions to social problems should be linked to our efforts to ascertain the intrinsic aspects of reality" (2020, 73). Instead, she now turns to our intrinsic reality and common ground through the wisdom of science. Finding herself within the dynamics of our evolving universe, she enlivens the story of pure potential with the beauty of dark matter and dark energy as examples of power. "If the beloved community is a dream, it is situated in quantum realms that evince potential as a past, present and future reality accessible to us in a multidimensional Universe" (Holmes 2020, 200).

In the words of Moran, "insisting on the relation of teach-learn presses us to attend to the relation of the organism and environment, and to the political, economic and institutional forces that influence the structure of teach-learn" (Moran 1992, 61). No longer can we promote the nuclear and anthropocentric Cartesian ideal of adulthood fueled by competition. The attempts of character, ethics, and values education (with a goal of right living) are ineffective without attending to the overall context and relationship of the human amidst an unfolding Mystery.

The Healing Vision of Deeptime Mythopoetic Education

> The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience. (Berry 1999, 159)

Geologian[12] Thomas Berry sounded our freedom bells to lead *The Dream of the Earth* forward. In his book, he warns that our cultural coding (our Cartesian cosmology) has become detached

[12] American Passionist priest Thomas Berry (1914-2009) was inspired by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and taught world religion at Fordham University in New York. His interest was to retrieve the sacred quality of our integral 13.7 BY journey, our ongoing cosmogenesis, so called himself a 'geologian'.

[12] A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. A value system is an enduring

from our genetic coding. To heal, to guide our communities back from exile, Berry called for a fourfold Wisdom conversation: "The wisdom of Indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the classical traditions and the wisdom of science" (1999, 176).

This healing conversation is the role for today's religious educator, a personality that "journeys into the far regions of the cosmic mystery and brings back the vision and the power needed by the human community at the most elementary level" (Berry 1988, 211). The religious educator is grounded through, in and with our genetic coding, *Cosmogenesis.* Thus bound, the religious educator is able to lead their community from Cartesian exile and dispossession into freedom, through the vision and practice of mythopoetic education. "Mythopoetic vision achieves the almost insurmountable task of creating consciousness and relationships in a fragmented and isolated modernity" (Rowley 2002, 497). The Deeptime Network is an emerging model evoking cosmogenesis through the experience of mythopoetic education.

The Cartesian Spell

We have "broken the primary law of the Universe, the law that every component member of the universe should be integral with every other member of the Universe and that the primary norm of reality and value is the Universe community itself in its various forms of expression, especially as realized on the planet Earth" (Berry 1988, 202).

This broken Cartesian cosmology has been passed down through generations in our educational institutions of family, school, work, and recreation. Berry describes this phenomenon as our 'cultural coding' stating, "Our cultural coding has set itself deliberately against our genetic coding and the instinctive tendencies of our genetic endowment are systematically negated" (Berry 1988, 202).

Universe as Cosmogenesis

Some background is in order here to align the scientific process of Cosmogenesis with the experiential framework of our Deeptime Pedagogy. By understanding Cosmogenesis, we understand how the Universe is our primary teacher. We also understand how being in alignment somatically with the process, as an Earth body, gives us new language to express our emerging self-understanding, no longer as alienated Cartesians but as 'indigenous' to the process itself.

Albert Einstein described the foundational principle of cosmology as the "Cosmological Principle." Berry and Swimme wrote: "The Cosmological Principle is spatially oriented—every point in space is the same as every other point" (1992, 66). Einstein had found that the distribution of matter and energy was similar throughout the universe. What scientists have discovered since then is foundational for the development of new vision. Not only was the universe created with a *force,* but it is also expanding and growing and creating itself from this *force* on a journey that is open-ended. Berry and Swimme extended the Cosmological Principle to include this dynamic *force* and called it the Cosmogenetic Principle, stating that the "dynamics

organization of beliefs concerning preferable models of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance‖ (Rokeach, in ESD 2010)

of evolution are the same at every point in the universe" (1992, 66). Complementary to the second law of thermodynamics, which breaks down order, cosmogenesis builds up order.

The Cosmogenetic Principle states that the evolution of the universe on a cosmic and planetary scale is characterized by differentiation, autopoiesis, and communion. The terms refer to the nature of the universe in its value and in its reality. The Cosmogenetic Principle is further described by its (a) order, (b) structure, and (c) organization.

(a) **Cosmogenesis is ordered by differentiation**: the variation, complexity, and diversity in the universe. Everything is different, no two atoms are identical. Rather than consistent preservation, what we witness daily is continuous innovation.

Differentiation also refers to the
"… quality of relations taking place in the universe as they differentiate after the symmetry breaking. The diversity of relatedness pertains to human knowing as well—knowledge represents a particular relationship we establish in the world (Berry and Swimme 1992, 74).

Other terms and synonyms Berry and Swimme used to describe differentiation are *diversity, variation, complexity, heterogeneity, and multiform nature.*

(b) **Cosmogenesis is structured by autopoiesis**: Autopoiesis refers to the propensity within living bodies and galaxies to self-organize and "participate directly in the cosmos creating endeavor" (Berry and Swimme 1992, 75). Stars produce elements and light by organizing hydrogen and helium, having a dynamic order within itself. Berry and Swimme note:

> Autopoiesis points to the interior dimension of things…. Things emerge with an inner capacity for self-manifestation. (1992, 75-6)

Other terms used for the cosmic principle of autopoiesis include *subjectivity, self-manifestation, sentience, self-organization, interiority, presence, identity, dynamic centers of experience, and inner principle of being and voice.*

(c) **Cosmogenesis is organized by communion**. Berry and Swimme write:

> To be is to be related, for relationship is the essence of existence. In the very first instant when the primitive particles rushed forth, every one of them was connected to every other one in the entire universe.…Alienation for a particle is a theoretical impossibility. (Berry and Swimme 1992, 77)

Our Universe can now be described as one big learning system. Each interaction is a form of learning, in a teaching Universe. In contrast to previous cosmologies based on a static cosmos and transcendent deity, science now shows us that the universe is moving toward greater differentiation and complexity as it unfolds in motion as Mystery. The creating *force* leads *(educere*) and is not finished moving and expanding 'from, to and towards.'

Experiencing Cosmogenesis

"Our minds will be challenged to make the figure-ground transformation: the inner is looking at the outer, which has given birth to the inner. That is the *heart of cosmogenesis*.…when we look out at the night sky, we are looking out at that which is looking." (Swimme 2022, 315)

Many of us have had a "meadow experience" similar to Berry that became foundational as a guiding sounding board, a place of inner stability and transformation. He shares his own initiation as a young boy into this emergent realm. In *The Great Work*, he describes coming upon a meadow and experiencing a "geophany."[13] Its distinction is an experience of a particular quality, and movement. Reflecting, he shares, "The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember" (1999, 12). He insisted it was not just the amount of time and exposure of his experiences 'in nature' but their 'depth and impact' that had shaped him. "The volume of such experiences may not be the determining thing. It may be rather the quality of the experience" (Berry, in Tucker 2019).

Maria Harris notes in *Dance of the Spirit* this qualitative movement and "bodily awakening which, if followed, can lead into new worlds. For people awaken not only *from* something: people awaken *to* and *toward* something" (1989, 3). Cosmogenesis is the movement of Spirited matter, leading further in depth and breadth of our evolving context.

My own awakening from the Cartesian spell is linked with an adolescent memory, shared here in the style of "auto-cosmology," of cosmogenesis in a biology class. This classroom vignette, which transcended all book learning, became a fundamental anchor in my lifelong search for what we might call "deep knowledge," a radical sense of belonging and concrete religious imagination. Like Berry's experience in the meadow, "…as the years pass this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had in my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life" (Berry 1999, 13). The experience became a cornerstone for my Cartesian recovery, my dissertation in religious education, my work renewing the model of Ignatian Pedagogy for 11 years in India and as founding board member and Vice President of Deeptime Network, and the book I am now writing on mythopoetic education.

In 1970, I was fifteen-years-old and living with my parents in Singapore. The politics of the time in Asia were in upheaval. The 1968 Apollo 8 Mission had recently given us our first home pictures—*Earthrise*—an image of a single Earth community emerging from below the lunar horizon. Down the road from the school, a long line of people snaked around the corner patiently waiting to see the moon rocks brought back a year earlier from the 1969 Apollo 11 mission.

In my biology class, we were learning the seven characteristics of living creatures: feeding, breathing, movement, excretion, growth, reproduction, and *sensitivity.* When we focused on the

[13] Geophany: a word named by Sr Gail Worcello, co-founder with Sr Bernie Bostwick and Thomas Berry of the Green Mountain Monastery.

phenomenon of movement, the teacher used the unicellular protozoa to show us distinctions in motility. Peering down into microscopes, we watched the three types of protozoa—a flagella, with a string like shifting; the squiggling of the cilia; and finally, the pseudopod of the amoeba.

Like the others, the amoeba was transparent, but it was different. It seemed to have no fixed shape. It seemed less rigid. The amoeba moved by pushing its boundary forward, flowing into itself, and moving constantly into these self-extensions, like a mercurial shape-shifter.

Suddenly I felt myself *rising* in a wash of excitement, a deep response of awe and wonder. This tiny creature was just like me. In fact, it seemed to comprise me, and comprised our entire Earth. I was witnessing the Life dynamic at what we now call the micro/macro level. A whole. And behind it all was a luminous mystery, an animating dynamic thread, extending up through the microscope, me, my classmates, through the moon and beyond. It was a figure-ground transformation: the inner was looking at the outer, which had given birth to the inner.

This was perhaps the first time I felt I belonged within this mysterious process called Life. I belonged in what was just starting to be called the "Web of Life." I was part of the territory. I also was a subject in the territory. I was not an alien, I was centered. Life, and the characteristics of Life, was not just an idea. It was a particular somatic feeling, a knowing, and a response, a *visio divina.* Sitting back down on my stool, emerging from the looking glass, I felt a deep sense of respect and reverence. Reverence: an *experience* of the holiness of life. Life as whole, which is the very essence of holiness.[14]

Unfortunately, true to the Cartesian classroom, the test question for the class was "What are the characteristics of living things?" This example reveals the null curriculum at work. In that classroom, I was invited by an amoeba, welcomed into the unfurling dynamic of life, and my body responded. However, "Our cultural coding has set itself deliberately against our genetic coding and the instinctive tendencies of our genetic endowment are systematically negated" (Berry 1988, 202). This initial experience, a cosmic initiation, haunted me for years until I finally surrendered in a quest to know "what it was." Other than finding "home," I now understand the experience/reflection as the 'heart of cosmogenesis.' Myself and all existence as a microcosm of a Universal Self (auto) in the making (poiesis).

Deeptime Mythopoetic Education

> Mythopoetic vision is a view of existence that creates identity and community. In this broad sense, mythopoetic "vision is a way of becoming whole, of affirming one's special place in the Universe, and myth, song and ceremony are ways of affirming vision's place in the life of all people. Thus, it renews all: the visionary and his relatives and friends, even the generations long dead and those yet unborn." (Allen in Rowley 2002)

The Deeptime Network, a model of religious/mythopoetic education evoking cosmogenesis, was founded by Jennifer Morgan[15] and incorporated in 2013. The membership of the network has

[15] Jennifer Morgan President and founder of the Deeptime Network. An award-winning author, storyteller and educator inspired by the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Maria Montessori, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme. Her Universe Story trilogy *Born with a Bang, From Lava to Life,* and *Mammals who Morph* are used in classrooms around the world, particularly in Montessori schools as part of the Cosmic Education Curriculum.

expanded and deepened to encompass all six of Earth's habitable continents. Beginning in 2004, Jennifer and I had shared a friendship in Princeton, New Jersey, and continued it professionally across Skype, Zoom and Whatts App after I moved to India in 2008. Knowing and attending conferences together of the various lineages emerging and teaching a science-based story of origins, we were aware that some members of each lineage were hesitant to bring the subjects of religion and science into conversation. We knew the crucial aspect of this conversation, and that the hesitation of many was from a collective misunderstanding of the term 'religion,' and its cultural manifestations. In these conferences, we saw that this hesitation was being resisted by scientists in non-Western communities, who easily engaged in the science, religion conversation. As we wondered how to gather these various networks together in conversation, Jennifer decided to form the network as a platform for each to share perspectives and strengths and to build community.[16]

The four major lineages represented are: Maria Montessori, New Cosmology, Big History and Gaia Systems. Together, the Deeptime perspective acknowledges our primal questions: Where did we come from? Where are we going? How do we belong to something larger than ourselves?

Understanding a Deeptime perspective connects our personal and communal lives to the larger arc of cosmic evolution. As co-founders of the network, Jennifer and I developed a pedagogy aligned with the Cosmogenetic paradigm. As a start, we acknowledged the experiential model of Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (context, experience, reflection, action, evaluation) which I had been renewing through the context of an evolutionary universe while working with students in India (Hazra 2022). Moving beyond the current anthropocentric application of the IPP model,[17] and remembering Moran and Berry's insistence that Universe is our primary context, we renamed the IPP model, translating it into the language of Cosmogenesis.

COSMOGENESIS	**IGNATIAN PEDAGOGICAL PARADIGM**	**DEEPTIME**
	CONTEXT	CONTEXT Orienting to a vast, evolving Universe.
DIFFERENTIATION	EXPERIENCE	MATRIX experiencing our relationality embeddedness with interdependent Earth community
AUTOPOEISIS	REFLECTION	INTERIORITY reflecting, transforming/ emerging

[16] To build community the Deeptime network is not just about courses, the vision and our mission is fostering community. Our style of our gatherings fosters a sense of communion with one another, we share common ground, with a common Story of origin. We have offered gatherings for alumni on zoom, and are just starting a Deeptime Café where members will gather and share experience.

[17] Currently those engaged with IPP consider 'context' as issue based eg social justice, environmental issues, all the "isms" needing corrective action. However, to effectively engage the Ignatian spirituality of finding G-d in all things and 'a pedagogy to' shape women and men for others', we need to first ground students in our Primary Context, as did Ignatious in his model of Spiritual Direction, and then reflect on our experiences we see around us . Would we be living lives knowing we were all citizens, in an Earth community, working as kin within the dynamic emerging Mystery?

COMMUNION	ACTION	ACTION participating in evolution based on These emergences and cocreating a Vibrant world
	EVALUATION	CONTINUUM: Linking Deeptime learning across all stages and areas of life

Applying a Deeptime context, we honor and bracket the experiential aspects of cosmogenesis (matrix, interiority and action) within the continuum of our 13.8 BY genetic heritage. Beginning with a ten-week course in "Spiritual Leadership, A New Consciousness and a World In Crisis" in 2014, a wide array of classes and sessions have emerged, ranging from cosmology basics, accredited teacher training, cosmic themes in human development, reclaiming cosmic orientation within rituals, quantum wisdom, contemplative stargazing, moongazing and solstice rituals. The selection of topics and instructors is a balance to engage the fourfold wisdom conversation of science, religion, women, and Indigenous peoples.

In 2019, we began our first nine-month leadership course, Deeptime Leadership and Personal Empowerment Program, a certificate leadership course developed by Stephan Martin.[18] He developed the course content and resource materials and coordinated internationally renowned guest lecturers. Martin also guided graduates who served as mentors and spiritual directors. An important aspect of the program is the discussions involving Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI).[19] After our experience with the first two cohorts and hearing the powerful narratives of healing as the result of our mythopoetic religious education, we named the third course Deeptime Leadership and Wellbeing. In total, 250 students completed the courses, with 82 opting to earn certifications.

Remembering the words of Moran, in relation to our model of mythopoetic religious education, I believe we are on the right path, a path suggested by Berry.

> As in much of tribal religion, we seem to be returning to the figure of the teacher as healer; not the one who lays claim to the title of healer but the one whose effect on a community is healing. (1997, 110-11)

Each month's study is divided into three modules based on the experiential blueprint of Cosmogenesis Matrix, Interiority and Action. Depending on the intention underlying the module, the three languages are used: academic (logos), therapeutic (mythos), and homiletic (eros). Knowing our students are entering our program on the spectrum of a fragmented self, without an understanding of and 'faith in the integrity of creation' or themselves within a grand narrative, the use of homiletic language is not dominant until the third module, when students engage their

[18] Steve Martin is an astronomer, educator and director of the Deeptime Leadership Program of the Deeptime Network. Previous books include Cosmic Conversations (2010) and Living a Cosmic Life (2018).

[19] Cliff Berrian, a mentee of Dr Barbara Holmes, has presented twice referring to the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) collective. He also highlighted the work of Dr. Holmes, moving towards Beloved Community in the context of an evolutionary universe as the goal. The work of Cliff and his colleagues emphasize that we live in a universe that actively honors and solicits differences. Elena Pardo, a Quechua shaman from Peru and Yona French Hawk, a full blooded Cherokee wisdom keeper, presented stories of their community survival, resistance and resilience based on inherited collective wisdom. Their cosmologies of interrelatedness were evident as they shared activities welcoming and celebrating life in alignment.

understanding into practical action in their communities. The nine months together is one of 'reinventing the human at the species level,' a conversion."

True to the dance of the Spirit[20] of Cosmogenesis and self-discovery, while engaging the fourfold wisdom conversation we continue, along with our students, to struggle with language to articulate what we have and are coming to know. Shifting our somatic awareness, culturally shaped as 'exteriorly' focused, we are now additionally attending to our "interiority" and emergences. Like Helen Keller, brought to language after recognizing similar somatics with a wide range of water experiences by a patient and healing teacher, we are being brought into expanded awareness of self, and collective citizenship, belonging within Earth, as a voice of Earth. We are attuned with autopoiesis, the self-making current of Universal emergence.

Live weekly sessions offer participation from all time zones, and elements of 'kitchen table' methodology (Walker 2023) are evident. 'Eating together' over zoom with laptops on kitchen tables, some are eating breakfast, some dinner, cats and dogs hop on laps, ill parents in the background, roosters announcing the day, children off to school or coming home. Students are encouraged to continue their exploration and interaction between weekly sessions via discussion formats on the Network. Posts and discussion group forums reveal narratives of selves experiencing and remembering their genetic coding, experiencing ongoing revelation, and being held, led and called upon to lead others.

Module 1 (months 1-3) Introduces the New Cosmology within a relational **(Matrix)**

In this section, the language is primarily academic/logos, the emphasis being to understand and expand and deepen our connections, experiencing our embeddedness within Earth and ourselves as descendants of stars. It is a dialectic of subjects carrying the story through the threshold of space time beginning with our birth in a primary fireball 13.8 billion years ago (physics), the formation of stars (astronomy), the chemical elements (chemistry), planets and Earth (geology), Life (biology), Human Beings (anthropology/religion), Agriculture (archaeology) and Modern Society. Therapeutic languages, to heal a fragmented self are also engaged.[21]

"Splintered shards are now coming together in one place. Body melting with mind, emotions with spirit. The place is centering my body. The body that has always taken a back seat to spirit, its all coming together now."

"I have developed an awareness about the link between religious texts and the consciousness of the times in which they were written. I have more understanding about evolution of thought."

[20] Narratives of our students honor those described by Maria Harris in *The Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Steps of Women's Spirituality.* Awakening, Dis-covering, Creating, Dwelling, Nourishing, Traditioning, and Transforming.
[21] Moran writes "At stake in all the therapeutic languages is a freeing of the individual from its egocentric predicament. As long as a man or woman is striving to control the world, the self is not receptive to what the universe is offering. The cosmos is ready to teach, but the individual has to let go in order to learn…If the natural environment and human accomplishment are to be praised, then what destroys these realities should be condemned" (1997, 113).

"There has been some major changes, starting with 'World view' and context. It's incredible to see how the sciences now deliver a unifying story and as part of the western world/mind that is giving us a new cosmic story that unifies."

"This program has also highlighted my anthropocentrism and our cultural anthropocentrism. I am opening my eyes to the subjectivity of our entire earth community and our dependence on biodiversity to thrive."

Module 2 (months 3-6) Applying the New Cosmology **(Interiority)** introduces various reflections and frameworks for engaging with our experiences, including communication and leadership styles. Therapeutic languages are mainly used here. Content for these months is supplied by teachers engaged in community renewal from the framework of an evolutionary Universe. I am including the reflections of a particular session to show how attending to our interiority, engaging our bodies in a similar style as Cordova did, is a crucial step to take as religious educators. Attending our interiority is the major countercultural tactic to take as resistance to the Cartesian Null Curriculum.

"…this program has changed me profoundly in a number of significant ways. The most significant change is that my Deeptime subjectivity is now forever connected with the context of my belongingness in the universe in concert with the matrix of my emergence out of the Earth. Thanks to the course, this is no longer merely cognitive but is deepening as a somatic realization that is guiding every aspect of my life"

During a Session led by Marianne Rowe on Emergent Dialogue[22], students were asked a question to explore in their breakout pod sessions. Students had already become familiar with emergence and autopoiesis (self-making) and what the somatic experience felt like for them, listening and attending themselves and responding. When the pods reconvened in the larger group, she again asked a question and invited students to silently post their experiences and reflections in the "chat." Marianne was deeply moved by the responses, and she copied them into a file and reposted them in the week's discussion format. She named the groups' response, a poem, "Emergence."

The question she had asked the students, with a self-understanding as Earth body and in the context of an evolutionary Universe, was:

"What does Universe want us to learn or discover in this moment?"

"Emergence"

from the Wednesday Group:
Expansion and deepening of awareness and communication
You are home
In awareness is connectivity
In the silence, great connection occurs, and it's there that great emergence can come forward
We are all together across the globe and on this journey
The physical space where I am can be felt by all of us because we are together
Every body and every part of the Universe is beautiful
Transcendence of space and time in community

[22] Emergent dialogue is a communication model based on the vision of David Bohm's Implicate Order

Universe is within me, not outside
The healing that I and we need is not within me, it's in the connection of all potentialities

from the Friday group:
We are all aspects or expressions of the one reality
Spontaneity
We are deeply connected
Communion appreciated
Sense of belonging
Silence speaks
The natural wonder of young children
Our breaths connect us
Learn about the field
As we become aware of the stupendous achievements of the Universe in the past, we can have confidence in the future
Love
Evolving oneness
We are the creative genius of the Universe unfolding every moment
We are beautiful. Our faces are field. We are each and all beautiful.
Feeling the backbone going down my spine — the ancientness of the animals, the ancientness of the trees, and the modern human world
It's exciting waiting for new language to emerge
We are loved
Our communion leads to caring
Our resting place together for new language
Fulfillment of an unspeakable longing
We belong
We are all useful in the present
Awe and hope

This poem shows the power of the mythopoetic model of religious education applied on the Deeptime network. Students understand the Universe as primary teacher and leader, and have engaged their bodies in use of the academic and therapeutic languages used by teachers and guest lecturers as well as their classmates, and extended nonhuman kin.

Module 3 (months 6-9). Deeptime Leadership Practicum (**Action**)

Students participate in the action of evolution fulfilling their cosmic gifts and tasks, and birthing an Ecozoic Era. Here, the homiletic family of languages (storytelling, lecturing and preaching) arise from the existence of the Deeptime community with a shared set of beliefs. The use of this language is "rhetorical." The language is not directed at the body (as in academic and therapeutic), but towards the beliefs of the Deeptime community, and students are reminded to act based on them. Projects are posted on the network and each week students gather in their pods for support, exchange, and accountability.

It has opened up space for me to fall back in love with being alive again. How I go forward into the mundane world with a heart full of love for the cosmos-that-is-unfolding I do not know, but now I know that I can indeed do so.

I am a community organizer to encourage local groups or individuals to be committed to address climate change, through educational programs and advocacy. At times, I feel anxiety when I see our reality, when I read reports, when I see the passivity of so many. This program gives me new hope and energy to move on…we, as human beings, have the potential to evolve the universe.

The model 3 is making me feel so brave to always move forward. The way to take any step in my life was very hard. But now I feel is easy to take a lot of steps. I hope to transfer everything to the children and let them hear the Universe and understand the purpose and meaning of everything around them.

Continuum[23] Witnessing our lives as a story of interrelatedness within the emerging Cosmos.

Dear Earth,

As our Cenozoic Age ends, some of us realize we had let our membership lapse with you. We are heartly sorry. Many of us have renewed our memberships and are involved in various reparations with your kin, human and non-human. We look forward to growing and celebrating life with you, evolving with you, cocreating our Ecozoic Era.

In hope and respect,
The Religious Education Association

[23] Upcoming courses on the Deeptime Network

Cosmogenesis: Steps Toward Planetary Consciousness, Deep Belonging, and Participation in an Evolving Universe.

6 Week Course with Brian Swimme, PhD and Jennifer Morgan (15 October – 19 November, 2024)

Advanced Deeptime Leadership and Wellbeing Program (15 January-May 2025)

This advanced program will build upon the 9 Month Deeptime Leadership Programs offered 2021-2024. Autocosmology will provide a template and practice for participating in the evolution of the Universe.

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