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Deconstructing Eschatological Violence against Ecology: Planting Imageries of Ecological Justice through Religious Education of the Green Apocalypse

**Abstract:**

This paper explores the relation between ecology and eschatology focusing on how religious education can construct what Catherine Keller calls “the green apocalypse.” This paper first investigates the discontinuity between ecology and eschatology, and then attempts to reconstruct the Christian theology of “ecological eschatology.” In doing so, I develop an imagery of “settling accounts” (Matthew 25) as an effective pedagogical tool to teach Christian ecological eschatology. I argue in this paper that the purpose of teaching ecological eschatology is to help Christian believers realize their ethical responsibility to protect, preserve, and restore our ecological system in an *anticipation* of the full realization of ecological justice in God’s eschaton.

**I.**

One of the charges brought against Christianity regarding the worldwide ecological crisis is its “otherworldly” eschatology.<sup>1</sup> If the earth is inevitably coming to an end, there is no need or responsibility for us to develop any programs or practices of sustainable use of natural resources. The neo-fundamentalist imagination of rapture out of this world renders it even more futile and useless for us to care for our natural environment. The hope for an *afterlife* has effectively diminished our focus on *life itself* at least in Christian world, and as Catherine Keller notes, “the disregard of creation and environment does indeed seem to be endemic to the culture that has called itself Christian.”<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this paper is to address the following questions. “Can there be a greening of Christian eschatology?”<sup>3</sup> Is it possible for us to construct a new ecological eschatology? If yes, how is it biblically and theologically possible? How could Christian religious education facilitate the unlearning of the mundane eschatology as well as the learning of a new ecological eschatology? In this paper, I attempt to answer these questions by focusing on two key fronts: theological examination of different versions of eschatology and pedagogical endeavor to deconstruct eschatological violence against ecology.

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most famous charge against Christianity is presented by Lynn White, Jr.’s 1967 article “The Historic Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155: 1203-7. In this article, White develops an argument that Christianity is blamed for environmental degradation because its anthropocentric message (humans have dominion over creation) has somehow shaped and promoted an “instrumentalist” view of nature.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Keller, “Eschatology, Ecology, and a Green Ecumenacy,” *Ecotheology* 2 (1997): 84-99, 87-88.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

## II.

Eschatology has been traditionally understood as the study of the “last things” (or “end-time”) and the doctrine that issues from such study.<sup>4</sup> According to Peter C. Phan, in the history of Christian theology, there has been a struggle between two basic metaphors in addressing the Christian account of the last things: the metaphor of “ascent” and the metaphor of “migration to a good land.”<sup>5</sup> He calls the former “the spiritual motif,” the latter “the ecological motif.” The spiritual motif is characterized by its total severance of the relation between God and humanity on the one hand and nature on the other, whereas the ecological motif emphasizes the connection and thus humanity’s dwelling in history and rootedness in the earth.<sup>6</sup> There are many different versions of eschatology modelled after the spiritual motif, and they are commonly known as “otherworldly” eschatology. Origen is one of the earliest Christian thinkers who promote the otherworldly eschatology. According to Phan, Origen’s otherworldly eschatology is marked by his dualistic worldview. “The material world was not intended by God in his original creative plan; it was subsequently made as the place into which souls are consigned as a punishment for their pre-temporal fall . . . In the end-time the world will not share in eternal beatitude and will presumably fall back into nothingness.”<sup>7</sup>

The neo-fundamentalist Christian imageries of a total annihilation of this wicked world are largely in this line of Origen’s dualistic theological vision. At the center of these types of eschatology lies a skewed perspective which encourages us to live in orientation toward a spiritualized heavenly home while discouraging us to turn away from this world. Unfortunately, this view has promoted an attitude of indifference toward nature in many believers. If the material world is inevitably coming to an end, there is no need for us to protect and conserve our natural environment and natural resources. This becomes an important reason why the otherworldly eschatology is not just a matter of theological stance on the final status of the material world; it is even more an ethical issue in that it is deeply related to the shaping our ethical attitude toward our natural environment. In this respect, Francis Bridger’s following argument seems convincing: “The rise of a Christian ecological ethic based on eschatology must be set within an understanding of the overall relationship between eschatology and ethics.”<sup>8</sup> We may find a more ecologically friendly version of eschatology in different theological works.

Differing from Origen, for instance, other early Church Fathers such as Irenaeus and Augustine developed a different theological view on the matters of the end-time. Irenaeus, for example, upholds a contrasting view rejecting Origen’s Gnostic dualistic notion. He writes, “neither the substance nor the matter of the creation will be annihilated . . . but the form of this world passes away, that is, in those things in which transgression was committed.”<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Augustine also emphasizes eschatological transformation of the physical world without attempting to spiritualize human resurrected bodies. According to Phan, Augustine rather “insists

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<sup>4</sup> Keith Innes, “Towards an Ecological Eschatology: Continuity and Discontinuity,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 81.2 (2009): 126-44; 126.

<sup>5</sup> Peter C. Phan, “Eschatology and Ecology: The Environment in the End-Times,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 9.2 (Fall/Winter, 1995): 99-115, 103.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Bridger, “Ecology and Eschatology: A Neglected Dimension,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.2 (1990): 290-301, 294.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Peter C. Phan, “Eschatology and Ecology: The Environment in the End-Times,” 107.

strongly on the identity between the earthly body and the risen one, the latter retaining all its organs, even those which have no functions in eternal life, such as the sex organs, and acquiring a great beauty.”<sup>10</sup> From a vantage point of ecological justice, we may discover a much stronger ethical relevance and significance in Irenaeus’s and Augustine’s theological accounts of the last things. According to these views, nature is no longer recognized to have only instrumental value for humanity’s anthropocentric purpose; instead, it has now intrinsic value, and we become aware of our ethical responsibility to protect and preserve our natural environment and natural resources.

According to Timothy Hessel-Robinson, eschatology has been renewed as one of the “defining” themes of twentieth-century Christian theology.<sup>11</sup> Even though the otherworldly eschatological vision, represented by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’ *Left Behind* series or Hollywood style apocalyptic movies, has been widely popular, there has been also a significant theological engagement to develop an ecological eschatology. For instance, Jürgen Moltmann lays a theological ground to develop a new ecological eschatology in light of his theology of hope. Concurring with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Moltmann strongly opposes the dualistic otherworldly eschatology by calling it “religious escapism.” He writes, “Christ doesn’t lead people in the afterworld of religious escapism, flight from the world, but he gives them back to the Earth as its faithful people.”<sup>12</sup> Moltmann makes it clear that Christian theology of hope is deeply earthbound rather than transcendent. According to him, Christian hope leads human beings to the Kingdom of God that comes to Earth, rather than leading them away from Earth to Heaven.<sup>13</sup> He summarizes his earthbound eschatology as follows: “The ‘life of the world to come,’ as the Nicene creed says, is the life at the new earth. I believe in the ‘resurrection of the flesh,’ not only of the human body but also the life of the whole groaning creation (Rom 8:19 ff). Why? God Creator remains faithful to God’s creation even as the God redeemer. God ‘does not forsake the works of his hands.’ God does not give anything up as lost, he does not destroy anything God has made, for God is God.”<sup>14</sup>

Biblical scholars such as Douglas J. Moo ratify Moltmann’s theological positioning on ecological eschatology. According to Moo, “Romans 8:19-22, along with Col 1:20, is the NT text most often cited in literature on biblical environmentalism,”<sup>15</sup> and when Paul wrote this passage in Romans, he was referring to various prophetic expectations, especially those verses in Isaiah 24-27. Paul’s dependence on Isaiah’s prophecy in Romans 8 is important because it suggests that “his conviction about the physical restoration of the entire world is to some extent derived from the prophetic hope for the restoration of Israel to her land—a restoration that in these chapters, and in a manner typical of Isaiah’s prophecy, ultimately encompasses the whole world (esp. 24:21-23; 27:6,13).”<sup>16</sup> Echoing Isaiah’s prophetic hope for the restoration of Israel to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Hessel-Robinson, “Nurturing Hope in the Face of Ecotastrophe: Advent, Eschatology, and the Future of Creation,” *Liturgical Ministry* 19 (Winter 2010): 9-20, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, “The Resurrection of Christ and the New Earth,” *Communio Viatorum*, 49.2 (2007): 141-149, 148.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas J. Moo, “Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 49.3 (Sept. 2006): 449-88, 459.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 463.

her land, Paul's hope for the liberation of creation expressed in Romans 8 clearly implies that "the destiny of the natural world is not *destruction* but *transformation*."<sup>17</sup>

In a similar vein, N.T. Wright and George O. Folarin also point out that creation and environment are within the scope of God's eschatological vision of transformation. For instance, Wright writes, "Paul's expectation was more specific: 'the life of the coming age' (an expanded translation of *zoe aionios*) was to be enjoyed, not in 'heaven' as opposed to 'earth,' but in the renewed, redeemed creation that has itself shared the Exodus-experience of the people of God."<sup>18</sup> According to Wright, it is important to note that when Paul talks of the work of Christ, he uses explicit 'new covenant' language to do it, because according to regular prophetic Jewish literature, the result of the renewal of the covenant is the renewal of creation. In this respect, thus, "When God does for his people what he intends to do for them, the whole cosmos, the whole creation will be renewed as well."<sup>19</sup> Concurring with Wright, Folarin emphasizes that what Paul is saying in Romans 8 is that "God wants the creation transformed and set free from destructive force."<sup>20</sup> Folarin summarizes the theological implication of the biblical eschatology of Romans 8 as follows: "It is the will of God to totally restore the environment to its original state of perfection, fruitfulness and friendliness, and that the empowerment of the Holy Spirit has equipped the redeemed to better protect the creation and the environment in line with God's concern that the creation itself is worthy of being transformed and liberated."<sup>21</sup> Briefly though, we have seen above how it is theologically as well as biblically possible to reconstruct a new ecological eschatology by reviewing some of key theological sources and biblical texts. Our next question is, then, how could Christian religious education facilitate the learning of this new ecological eschatology as well as the unlearning of mundane eschatology?

### III.

I attempt to answer this question by providing a concrete pedagogical approach as well as a clear projected outcome. As for the concrete pedagogical approach, I first would like to focus on the pedagogical significance of *religious imageries*. Religious imageries are powerful in that most people understand the religious concepts more easily through the medium of various imageries, rather than through the doctrinal ideas or pure concepts. For example, we understand the creation stories of Gen. 1-3 through the imageries of the Garden of Eden, rather than through some doctrinal positions on the event. Indeed, imageries are useful and even powerful not because they are necessarily correct, but because they can help us shape our perspective and attitude to the subject matter. In Christian history, various imageries have been employed to help believers understand the concept of eschatology. James Murray, for instance, discusses the imagery of the "urban earthquake" as a "Johannine innovation" in first century apocalyptic. Murray writes, "[T]he apocalyptic urban earthquake demonstrates the victory of God over Caesar, for the cities which once were saved from seismic destruction by imperial benefaction, now experience a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Italics is mine.

<sup>18</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (London: SPCK, 2003), 59. Cited in R.J. Berry, "Eden & Ecology: Evolution & Eschatology," *Science & Christian Belief*, 19.1:15-35, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> George O. Folarin, "From Primordial Curse to Eschatological Restoration: Ecological Challenges from Genesis 3:14-20 and Romans 8:18-25," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32.1 (2011): 1-7, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

divine judgment against which Caesar can offer no help.”<sup>22</sup> Other imageries such as the “rejection imagery” in the synoptic parables (Matthew 13) are discussed by other scholars<sup>23</sup> as a way to understand the concept of eschatology.

In this paper, I attempt to reimage the Christian doctrine of eschatology by proposing a new imagery: the “settling accounts” imagery, which originates in Matthew 25:14-30. I put forward this imagery because it can effectively address the aspect of our ecological responsibility and justice, which has been largely underdeveloped in the previous eschatological educations. Matthew 25:14-30 is often picked up by preachers in order to address the Christian attitude to work in the context of investments; but, this passage has also a strong eschatological theme in that while the returning of the master may be interpreted as the coming of Christ (v. 19), the different amounts of entrusted capital (v. 15) can be analogically viewed as a different set of ecological capital. In this perspective, the behaviors of the three servants may denote how differently they fulfill their ecological responsibilities with their entrusted ecological capitals. The final scene of the master’s act of settling accounts with the servants (20-30) is then the realization of the ultimate ecological justice.

The imagery of “settling accounts” emphasizes that all Christian believers are held accountable for their different amounts of ecological responsibility depending on their social, political, and economic positions as well as geographical and environmental locations. The “settling accounts” imagery renders it possible to interconnect between the ecological eschatology (discussed above) and the ethics of ecological responsibility and justice. How is this interconnection, then, possible? In my view, there are two types of interconnecting between eschatology and ethics: 1) the type of bringing the future events to the here and now; 2) the type of leading the here and now to the anticipated future. While the former is “future oriented,” the latter “future directed.” These two types are not opposite; but there is a meaningful difference between the two. The first type may be represented by Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*. For him, the promise of future is central, and in the promises, “the hidden future already announces itself and exerts its influence on the present through the hope it awakens.”<sup>24</sup> Ethics is then conceived in light of “What the future is bringing . . . through the Christ event of the raising of the one who was crucified.”<sup>25</sup> Moltmann’s theology of hope is liable to a criticism, though, because, as Lucy Bregman argues, he links eschatology so exclusively to hope. She writes, “By linking eschatology so exclusively to ‘hope,’ and then in turn linking both to movements within history for social justice and liberation, the problem of death—individual and collective—is repressed.”<sup>26</sup>

It is not my intention to reject Moltmann’s theology of hope, but I argue there is an alternative way of interconnecting between eschatology and ethics. The key motif of this alternative type is “anticipation” rather than “hope.” Going back to the imagery of “settling

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<sup>22</sup> James S. Murray, “The Urban Earthquake Imagery and Divine Judgment in John’s Apocalypse,” *Novum Testamentum*, XLVII. 2, 142-162, 142.

<sup>23</sup> See, Karl E. Pagenkemper, “Rejection Imagery in the Synoptic Parables,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (July-September 1996): 308-31.

<sup>24</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>26</sup> Lucy Bregman, “The Death of Everyone: Robert Lifton, Christian Theology and Apocalyptic Imagery,” *Horizons* 13.2 (1986): 306-320, 317.

accounts,” what seems to be evident is that their actions are all deeply shaped and affected by their *present* “anticipation” of the master’s returning, rather than their “hope” for his *future* comeback. Differing from the “future oriented” hope, anticipation is basically “future directed,” and it can actually form and reform our actions. Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological account of anticipation is helpful because he clarifies the “future-directed” nature of anticipation. He writes, “In every action we know the goal in advance in the form an anticipation that is ‘empty,’ in the sense of vague, and lacking its proper ‘filling-in,’ which will come with fulfillment. Nevertheless we strive toward such a goal and seek by our action to bring it step by step to concrete realization.”<sup>27</sup> We can say then that the motif of anticipation enables us to strive toward the goal of the eschatological vision of the full realization of ecological justice.

As one can imagine, Christians’ present struggle toward the full realization of ecological justice in an anticipation of God’s eschaton become their ethical responsibility. Indeed, the future directed motif of anticipation helps us have a better understanding of our ethical responsibility and ecological justice. To be more specific, in an anticipation of the full realization of the ecological justice, Christians are to organize their actions to bring it to concrete realization step by step. In this respect, we can say that the development of ecological eschatology and the enhancement of ecological justice are in fact deeply interconnected. As Timothy Hellel-Robinson notes, “earth justice and justice for humans are interconnected.”<sup>28</sup> It is important for us to see that the fulfilment of one’s ethical responsibility to strive toward the full realization of ecological justice in his/her eschatological anticipation should be expressed not only through our efforts to preserve and restore our ecological system, but also through our resistance against ecological violence and environmental destruction. In this respect, the religious education of green apocalypse should ultimately aim at fostering not only the eschatological anticipation, but also ethical commitment to ecological justice.

#### IV.

Above, we have seen that the way we understand Christian theology of the last things (eschatology) has essentially to do with the formation of our ethical responsibility and the realization of ecological justice. We have rejected the otherworldly type of eschatology because it obscures Christians’ ecological responsibility to promote ecological justice. Instead, we have adopted a new ecological eschatology, which emphasizes not only the continuity of this world and the world coming, but also our ethical responsibility to sustain our nature and its ecosystem in an anticipation of the full realization of ecological justice. We have also seen that the imagery of “settling accounts” (Matthew 25) is an effective pedagogical tool to teach Christian ecological eschatology to believers. Christians are to take up their ethical responsibility to protect, preserve, and restore our ecological system in an anticipation of the full realization of ecological justice. The role of religious education of ecological eschatology is then focused on fostering Christians’ ethical responsibility to strive after the full realization of ecological justice beyond one’s own familiar perimeters.

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<sup>27</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Halle: Niemeyer, 1928), 149. Cited in Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh & Frederick Lehnert (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1997), 58.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy Hellel-Robinson, “Nurturing Hope in the Face of Ecotastrophe: Advent, Eschatology, and the Future of Creation,” *Liturgical Ministry* 19 (Winter 2010): 9-20, 13.

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