
Science, Cosmology, and Faith: The Challenge of Climate Change to Christianity

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“**W**e are all in this together” is a refrain that echoes across the globe today in the wake of the current coronavirus pandemic. While it expresses a hope we all share, both the “we” and the “this” are broader and deeper than is commonly known. All life supporting systems and species of the planet are included in the “we.” “This” includes the challenge of climate change. I believe we are standing on a hinge of history, a moment of decision for human civilization that we have never seen before. The urgency of responding to the realities of climate change has not sunk into U.S. political leaders enough to defy the powerful lobbies that prefer business and profit as usual. Likewise, the church-at-large has not understood the significance of its mission in light of the new era we have entered.

Earth challenging faith today

Many have been sounding the alarm for decades. For fifty years Earth Day has been celebrated with consciousness raising events each year. Environmental groups have been lobbying Congress for clean air, water, and fuel efficiency standards for nearly as many years. In spite of the various efforts that have been undertaken so far, we are still on a disastrous course. Churches have made some changes and issued many proclamations and documents on the care of the creation. There are many reasons, including theological ones, why the urgency of our time has not been heard or heeded with appropriate response and action.

Inertia by itself accounts for a large share of the status quo. We’re accustomed to our ways of life and thinking. Habits rule the roost, not all of them healthy. Human greed and ignorance have always brought destruction upon self and others. Income inequality, common in virtually every age, has become massive in our time. The coronavirus has upset all of our assumptions and exposed our vulnerabilities at a deep level. With anxiety this high can we dare to ask, what time is it? With our powerlessness so newly exposed, can we make a difference? I believe we can but only if the reality of our faith corresponds with the reality of science, a science-informed faith if you will.

What does our Christian faith mean when human beings have now become a geological force on the planet, just as earthquakes and volcanoes are? When the present CO₂ levels of 407 ppm have

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not occurred on the planet for 800,000 years? When the rate of ice loss is three times what it was in 2007? When there are 3 billion fewer birds than decades ago? Scientifically it means that we have left the Holocene Age (since the glaciers receded to the present) and entered the Anthropocene Age (of the humans). This has never occurred on the planet before. There have been at least five extinctions in the 14 billion years of our cosmic existence, and none of them were caused by a single species. To continue living without this awareness is to doom future generations to living in the ruins—at best. How do we say on Sunday “with all creation we join their unending hymn” and comprehend the fact that human-caused rapid degradation of the planet’s life systems threatens to end human civilization as we know it in this century? Christianity has adapted to many different political, religious, and cultural contexts, but we have not fully reckoned with what scientists tell us is unsustainable physics for life as we know it today. Even the book of Revelations does not envision a human-caused apocalypse. Living in the Anthropocene Age calls for a radical

re-examination of what Christianity means now, in the face of potential ecological collapse.

Nature and faith: two traditions

Before considering possible courses of action, I think it's important to look at how we got here. Over the centuries there have been two main ways that Christians have understood our relationship to the created order. Rosemary Radford Reuther describes them as covenantal and sacramental. The nature that God creates according to the covenantal tradition begins in right relationships of blessing and abundance where God delights in creation, and the creatures return this rejoicing in joy and praise. Hebrews saw divine blessings in the rain that produced abundant harvests and judgment in droughts that brought famine. These right relationships were enshrined in a moral code that protected all aspects of life including the land and the poor. To stray from the code was to risk destruction and death. Balance and justice meant that even the land could "rest" in fallow periods every seven years. "What modern Western thought has split apart as "nature" and "history," Hebrew thought sees as one reality fraught with moral warning and promise."¹ These covenantal right relationships formed the basis of citizens creating civil society with rights that elected leaders were obligated to respect. Environmental groups today have extended those rights to endangered species, land, and water rights. In 1982 the World Charter for Nature laid out the basic principles of an ecological ethic that would legally protect the planet. It was signed by all members of the United Nations except the United States.

The sacramental tradition sees God not only as Maker but as immanent within the cosmos. Hebrews spoke of Wisdom (feminine) as the word behind creation, "the primeval world orders as the mystery behind creation of the world."² "When he assigned the sea to its limit . . . and marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him like a master workman" (Prov 8:29-30). The New Testament identifies Jesus as the embodiment of this cosmogonic principle: "All things came into being through him . . . in him was life" (John 1:3, 4). This emphasis on the immanence of the divine presence led thirteenth century mystic Meister Eckhart to say, "every creature is a word of God and is a book about God." "Creation not only exists, it also discharges truth . . . wisdom requires surrender, verging on the mystical, of a person to the glory of existence."³ "To be spiritual is to be amazed, and to be amazed is to be spiritual."⁴ Likewise, poet Dylan Thomas wrote: "the force that drives the water through the rocks drives my red blood."⁵

1. Rosemary R. Reuther, Dieter Hessen eds., *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well Being of Earth and Humans*. (Harvard University Press, 2000), 606.

2. Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis*, Rev. Ed. (Westminster John Knox, 1972), 165.

3. Ibid.

4. Abraham Heschel. Reference in a presentation by Larry Rasmussen (date unknown).

5. Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, (Bear and Company, 1983), 35. Quoted in John Malcolm Brinnin, ed., *A Casebook on Dylan Thomas* (New York, 1965), 3.

While the covenantal tradition engenders respect for and obligation to the creation, it can still allow us to see ourselves as separate from nature, or worse, above it all. The sacramental tradition leads us to communion with it, our interconnectedness, and seeing our oneness with all creation.

While the covenantal tradition engenders respect for and obligation to the creation, it can still allow us to see ourselves as separate from nature, or worse, above it all. The sacramental tradition leads us to communion with it, our interconnectedness, and seeing our oneness with all creation. Much of history is a debate between these perspectives dominated by dualisms of mind/body, spirit/matter, evolution/creation. The rift between science and religion has contributed mightily to our current ecological crisis. The time for more mutual respect and listening is not only overdue but vital for the survival, much less flourishing, of all earth's species.

Three myths

In the Creation in Crisis conference hosted by Wartburg Theological Seminary, Larry Rasmussen, professor emeritus at Union Theological Seminary, said we must overcome three myths that have driven our current crisis. The centrality of the human has dominated our western consciousness for virtually all our history. Our anthropocentrism has led us to exploit the earth for our benefit and brought us to the brink of disaster. We can learn from earth-centered Indigenous cultures that are a beautiful exception. Second, the myth of human separation from nature forgets that what happens to the bees affects our food chain. Loss of topsoil will affect food production and toxic runoff will eventually poison groundwater. Third, seeing history as progress ignores the overwhelming facts of human-caused climate degradation thus far. "The heavens declare the glory of God," says the psalmist, but the levels of carbon dioxide in the ice sheets declare that the level of over 400 ppm in our atmosphere has not occurred in 800,000 years. We have entered uncharted territory as an intelligent species confronted with the sober reality of physics. Sea level rise is only the prelude to what is to come if the series of the warmest years on record continue melting Greenland and the polar ice caps.

The urgency of our time

Why is this time urgent? It is because the vast majority of climate scientists agree that we have a maximum of ten years to avoid catastrophic changes in our planetary life support systems. The average temperature of the earth has already warmed by 1.1 degree

Celsius. Warming beyond 2 degrees Celsius will trigger feedback loops of ecological decline that are irreversible. The *Juliana vs the United States* lawsuit has documented proof that our federal government and the oil companies knew about this threat fifty years ago. Many people think it is too late to save our garden planet. Four out of five in the U.S. ages 18 to 23 say they do not plan to have children because of climate change. What will wake up enough people to produce changes in our lifestyle and demand national and international policies that reflect the reality of our crisis? What does Christianity have to do with it? As followers of Jesus we can begin with confession.

Mourn and grieve our destruction of the First Nation people whose spirituality truly meant living in harmony with the plant and animal species, the land and water. The current conditions on reservations still reflect the unspeakable losses they incurred years ago. There is no new relationship (justice) without acknowledging the past and making it right.

The sign of the cross takes on new meaning today in the Anthropocene Age. The triumphalism of the past (“we’ve got the truth and you need it”) must be mourned, and it’s worse than that. The entire biosphere is on the cross now, and we, by our mindless consumerism, million-dollar-a-minute defense spending, imperialism and greed have put it there. In the spirit of the parable, if our master were to return from his journey and ask us to account for what we have done with what has been entrusted to us, what would we say? Truthfully, we would have to say we are living in a way that leads to disaster within the twenty-first century. There is no divine bailout from our human-made crisis. Taking up our cross to follow Jesus today includes engaging in the political fray for policies that bring eco-justice to our garden planet. Only in our weakness would we look the other way or give up in denial.

Integrate the story of the universe in our worship gatherings and daily meditations. We are stardust including particles that were formed in the early emergence of the cosmos. Every molecule of us is earth (Gen 2:7) and our closest star is the only one we know of that produces vegetables in the universe. Until we see and trust our earthiness, we will not see the land and water as the source from which our Creator chose to make us. It’s time to write new creeds that reflect our 14 billion year cosmic and earth story. Our anthropocentric hubris must be checked by recognizing the five extinctions that preceded our arrival.

Make the exegesis of our ecology more important than Bible study. The primary revelation of the cosmos must take precedence over the written revelation for the time being. For too long we have left the gifts of science at the door of our churches as if they had not contributed mightily to the marvelous mystery of our interdependent existence here. While scientific knowledge has led to abuses and destruction, it has also opened our eyes to the vast depths of beauty, wonder, and mystery of life itself. Science and religion must work hand-in-hand in defense of the planet.

Justice is at the center of our Christology. Jesus saw what the sick, blind, and poor needed and he gave it to them. “Justice is what love looks like in the public square.” (Cornell West) Jesus

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lived a sense of our interconnectedness and called everyone to awaken to the intimacy, abundance, and equality that is the cosmic banquet of life. Our human-centered interpretations focusing on God’s love for us have led to a privatized faith disconnected from our essential relationships to the earth. Modern day prophets like Martin Luther King Jr. courageously named our blindness to racism and the injustice of war; “our choice is between non-violence and non-existence.” Today Greta Thunberg embodies the prophet Joel’s vision of “your daughters shall prophesy” (2:28) by calling for countries to step up to their maturity and sanity by enacting policies that are sustainable. God has no hands but ours to support justice (balance, right relationships) among all the species of the earth.

Embrace the wisdom that is in every spiritual tradition. We don’t have time for doctrinal debates. All parochialism and human-centered hubris have impoverished not only our understanding of who and where we are on our evolutionary journey, but our ability to call forth the best that is in our wisdom traditions on behalf of eco-justice. While the ELCA in its recent convention called for inter-religious dialogue, the urgency today calls for swift resolve to join hands and work together. In 1965 Vatican II acknowledged that truth exists outside the Roman Catholic Church. Recognizing the profound depth of our interdependence as planetary species must be the primary foundation of our common work in this pivotal decade of our history and beyond.

The urgency of a radical re-examination of faith and life as we have known it thus far is upon us. How deeply are we willing to look at what we believe, where we are, and what we are willing to do in the name of justice? Our children and grandchildren depend on us to drop our illusions, some cherished habits, and embrace the complexity of reality. The interrelated issues of population, consumption, and ecology call for the greatest creative collaboration and the deepest wisdom that science and religion can bring to bear. No weapons system or trip to Mars can give us another habitable climate or refreeze the polar ice caps. In this decade we either accept that our current way of living on the planet is far beyond ecological sustainability or doom our grandchildren to live in the ruins. Science-informed faithful can work for planetary justice and sustainability guided by the beauty of life, empowered by our creativity, and mindful of our brief time on this garden gift in the Milky Way.