

RESEARCH REPORT 3:

# RELIGION & THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



## An Environment for Fresh Thinking

Our founder James McCord said every aspect of CTI was designed to be an environment conducive to fresh thinking on our global life together in religion, society, and nature.

There are three enduring aspects of CTI's research environment that foster such fresh thinking.



### **CTI is an environment where theology takes risks.**

*Theology today has to earn its place in contemporary academic and public life, and CTI keeps earning a place for theology in its engagement with other fields on pressing topics. Theology takes risks when it opens itself to other disciplines and addresses issues of wider significance. But CTI proves that theology is often truest to itself—and often more interesting as well—when it is willing to take those risks.*

—Professor Gerald McKenny

### **CTI is an environment where theology builds bridges.**

*The Center builds bridges of knowledge and understanding that enrich scholarship and inform public thinking on global concerns. I continue to draw inspiration and creative challenges from the unique contributions unfailingly stemming from this indispensable space for advanced theological and interdisciplinary research.*

—Professor Daniel Schipani

### **CTI is an environment where theology renews service.**

*CTI helps me think better about contemporary issues. Thank you, CTI, for provocation, inspiration, and intellectual community. I give to CTI because of gratitude for the many ways in which it renews my sense of service to students, fellow researchers, and wider public audiences.*

—Professor Esther Reed

It is an honor to introduce this series of Research Reports from the Center of Theological Inquiry. They distill the fresh thinking of our research groups on a range of global concerns. Here you will see theologians taking intellectual risks, building bridges of understanding across disciplines and religious traditions, and renewing our service to the academy and public life.

William Storrar, Director

# RELIGION & THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



This series of Research Reports is designed to go public with the latest research from CTI, through an online, open access format. While scholarly books and articles are highly valued and important, they can be difficult to access for those outside university contexts, especially for those living in the Global South. There is a need for what is called ‘gray’ publishing, which makes research available more quickly, even before it has made its way to the scholarly journals and university publishing houses. CTI’s new series of Research Reports is meant to achieve this goal.

The third entry in CTI’s series of Research Reports comes out of our 2021-2022 Research Workshop on Religion & the Natural Environment. As the capstone year in CTI’s five-year Inquiry on Religion & Global Issues, CTI convened a team of researchers from around the globe to explore the global concern of the environmental crisis, from the perspectives of science, environmental policy, art, ethics, and theology. COP26, the UN Climate Change Conference, was held in November 2021, during the first semester of our workshop. This research report includes reflection on this global climate change conference alongside reflection on the CTI workshop, all centered on the question of religion and the natural environment.

Joshua Mauldin, Associate Director

# CTI@COP26

## GLOBAL VOICES



Pacific region leader Maina Talia speaking at the UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris, 2015

CTI invited theologians, religion scholars, and policymakers in CTI's research network around the world to reflect on the United Nations Conference on Climate Change, COP26, held in Glasgow in November 2021. Their edited reflections are presented here.

For full webinar versions of these dialogues please visit [ctinquiry.org/videos](https://ctinquiry.org/videos).



Maina Talia is a theologian from Tuvalu in the Pacific. He co-chairs the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples' Platform of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

**Maina, what is the distinctive contribution of theology to our understanding of the environmental crisis, especially from the perspective of your own Pacific region?**

Our theological understanding of *tuakoi* (neighbor) is important in the context of the environmental crisis. From a Pacific perspective, neighborly love is not limited to someone living next door to you; rather, it extends to anyone and anything, human and non-human, that is impacted by human selfish actions. *Tuakoi* is both an indigenous and theological reference point. It also has a global implication. The Pacific understanding of the environmental crisis is shaped around an understanding of '*tuakoi*' in the sense of taking care of one's *tuakoi*, showing respect and treating *tuakoi* with love and reverence.

**You will be at the UN Conference on Climate Change in Glasgow this November. What for you are the key issues at stake for the Pacific region in its deliberations and outcomes?**

There are major outcomes that the Pacific region would like to see. The Paris Rulebook provides strategic guidance, outlining individual country commitments to implement fully the Paris Agreement. It must be fully adopted and operationalized in COP26. The release of the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report gives us a clear indication that we are moving to the point of no return if no urgent action is taken to limit carbon emissions. Funding should be made available for indigenous communities who are at the frontline of rising sea levels. This kind of funding should come under the UN's Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples' Platform.

**If you had to make a keynote speech at COP26 as a theologian and global voice for local communities and indigenous peoples, what would be your takeaway message?**

If I were given the chance to make a speech, the theme of the *tuakoi* would be the central message for COP26. It might move the hearts of the heartless and stir the hearts of the powerful. ►



## CHINA

James Miller is Professor of Humanities at Duke Kunshan University, Kunshan, Jiangsu, China, and a leading scholar of Daoism and its view of the relationship between humanity and nature.

**James, what is the distinctive contribution of the study of the Humanities to our understanding of the environmental crisis, especially from the perspective of your own work on Daoism?**

Classical science posits the environment as something outside our bodies. This makes it difficult for us to understand how we impact the environment and how the environment impacts our health. Daoist thought posits an interrelationship of the landscape outside our bodies with the inner landscape of bones, fluids, and energy flows inside the body. The environmental crisis is thus the product of our failure to imagine how what is inside the body is related to what is outside the body.

**As we approach the UN Conference on Climate Change this November, what for you are the key issues at stake for China in its deliberations and outcomes?**

The question of whether China has a more realistic plan for meeting its emissions targets than other countries.

**If you had to make a keynote speech at COP26 as a scholar of religion and environmental concerns in the humanities, what would be your takeaway message?**

The environmental crisis can be understood through science, but this does not mean that it can be solved through technology.



## INDIA

David Haberman is Professor of Religion at Indiana University, Bloomington and a leading scholar of the religions of India and Southeast Asia, with a special interest in religion and ecological issues.

**David, what is the distinctive contribution of the study of religion and ecology to our understanding of the environmental crisis, especially from the perspective of your own research interests in the religious cultures of India?**

What I have learned as a lifelong student of religions is that nothing is naturally anything for humans, but rather is filtered through particular cultural lenses; we experience the world we perceive. The implications of different cultural lenses, however, are significant. Divinity within many of the religious cultures of India is regarded as present in and as natural entities, such as trees, rivers, and mountains, as well as the landscape itself. Therefore, various forms of pollution—including atmospheric—are understood to be grave mistakes, or even deadly sins. Some of these cultures suggest that such things as particular concepts of self (e.g., separate and competitive) are as much a driver of the environmental crisis as is the burning of fossil fuels.

**As we approach the UN Conference on Climate Change this November, what for you are the key issues at stake for the South Asian region in its deliberations and outcomes?**

Two issues immediately come to mind: 1) the future of the rapidly melting Himalayan glaciers, upon which depend the lives of hundreds of millions of people, and 2) how nations that have benefitted economically from the burning of enormous amounts of fossil fuels and concom-



**Nadia Sitas is Senior Researcher at the Centre for Sustainability Transitions at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, and an expert on how scientific research can inform public policy.**

itantly contributed hugely to climate change are going to assist nations that have not had this economic advantage make the transition to cleaner energy production.

**If you had to make a keynote speech at COP26 as a scholar of religion and ecology, what would be your take-away message?**

This is a time to reconsider genuine life values, as so many vital ones seem to have become disallowed by monetary value. Life exists on this planet in glorious diversity and abundance; we need to nurture a more reverential relationship with all its forms and move forward in a way that is beneficial to everybody.

**Nadia, what is the distinctive contribution of your own field of ecology to our understanding of the environmental crisis, especially from your concern to see science inform public policy?**

We have never known more about how intricately human lives and livelihoods are reliant on functioning, healthy ecosystems. As made evident by the increasing number of science-policy assessments, we can say with greater certainty that just and sustainable futures are only possible if we acknowledge the interconnectedness of humans and nature, and we strive to implement policies and interventions that restore ecosystems and address inequality simultaneously. We have overwhelming evidence and recommendations. We just need to start acting on them with urgency.

**As we approach the UN Conference on Climate Change this November, what for you are the key issues at stake for Africa in its deliberations and outcomes?**

While Africa contributes the least to greenhouse gas emissions, it remains the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and many people and ecosystems are already suffering, without sufficient resources to adapt to rapid ecological changes, or mitigate the impacts. African states need to have an equal seat at the table to negotiate climate policies that have direct and indirect impacts on their ecosystems and the people who rely on nature for their survival. A human rights-based approach, that centers on the rights for current and future generations to have the means to thrive needs to underpin all negotiations. This needs to be matched with resources to ensure that people from the global South have the capacity to respond to climate change without compromising opportunities for a good life.

**If you had to make a keynote speech at COP26 as an ecologist and experienced scientific policy advisor on intergovernmental collaboration, what would be your takeaway message?**

My takeaway message would be that there can't be development on a dead planet. The future of humans and nature are intertwined and interdependent. There remain pockets of hope if we take decisive action. ▶





## EUROPE

Celia Deane-Drummond is Director of the Laudato Si' Research Institute, Oxford, UK, and a leading scholar of theology and science who co-led CTI's Inquiry on Evolution & Human Nature.

**Celia, what is the distinctive contribution of Catholic theology to our understanding of the environmental crisis, especially in light of Pope Francis' landmark encyclical, *Laudato Si'*?**

Catholic theology, with its stress on the importance of human dignity, insists on tackling both social and ecological issues together. Pope Francis recognized, along with the two previous Popes, that these interconnected issues require *ecological conversion* at both the individual and structural levels. His most original contribution in *Laudato Si'* is that of *integral ecology*, by which he means a new socio-economic paradigm, rooted in Biblical teaching and Christian traditions on the worth and dignity of creation, which is an alternative to the technological paradigm. The latter presumes technology alone will be sufficient for complex problems and an adequate substitute for genuine human relationships. Pope Francis is not opposed to science or technology but wants them to be put in their proper place. Developing ecological virtues and acting them out is therefore an essential rather than an optional aspect of Christian discipleship.

**As we approach the UN Conference on Climate Change this November, what for you are the key global issues at stake in its deliberations and outcomes?**

International agreement needs to be reached at the political level to enable a just transition to a global zero carbon economy, transforming the dominant existing market economy. In order for such an agreement to be robust and effective, rather than a weak accord, legal and politically binding measures need to be in place to enforce compliance. The stress on *just* transition is important, since that means taking account of the needs of those who are most vulnerable and the impact of specific strategic policies and goals on livelihoods and ecologies.

**If you had to make a keynote speech at COP26 as an environmental theologian and advocate of Pope Francis' urgent call to the world in *Laudato Si'*, what would be your takeaway message?**

Future generations and even the current younger generation will look aghast on this generation of decision makers if action remains inward looking rather than globally responsible.





Rudolf von Sinner is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná (PUCPR) in Curitiba, Brazil.



Lisa Sideris is Professor of Environmental Studies, UC Santa Barbara

**Rudolf, what is the distinctive contribution of public theology to our understanding of the environmental crisis, especially from your perspective in Brazil?**

Public theology seeks to contribute to public discourse from within the convictions of faith. It combines analysis of reality with reflection on the theological resources to be stewards of life on Earth. In the Brazilian context, this means to stand with indigenous peoples and with all creatures that live in the Amazon Rainforest. This is a responsibility our country holds not only for itself, but for the whole Earth. Brazilian and Latin American churches and theology have had a good track record in this regard in earlier decades but have now too often given in to the logics of power and wealth. A new covenant is necessary that puts people and nature before self-interest.

**As we approach the UN Conference on Climate Change this November, what for you are the key issues at stake for Latin America in its deliberations and outcomes?**

The current Brazilian government is failing in its duty to preserve the exuberant nature the country boasts to be its own. Excellent scientists who were co-responsible for the country's environmental policy were dismissed in favor of the predatory invasion of the Amazon region. Such invasion has increased considerably, destroying huge areas, reinforced by catastrophic droughts because of climate change. Alternative energies are underdeveloped on our continent, as is public and environmentally-friendly transport. A politics that connects the local with the global is needed to force a way forward rather than backward, as we see today in our context.

**If you had to make a keynote speech at COP26 as the Chair of the Global Network for Public Theology, what would be your takeaway message?**

The Bible sees care for creation as a human task. Along with those of other religions and convictions, and with Pope Francis, we must be at the forefront of care for our common home.

**Lisa, what contribution would you like to see theologians making to public debate on the environmental crisis, especially in the USA?**

I might have answered this question differently before Covid-19. It's very troubling, how Covid has revealed such an impoverished sense of community or obligation to others, and such bankrupt notions of freedom, particularly, though not exclusively, in the US. These same ideas about individual freedom and disregard for a collective, communal fate don't bode well for the climate crisis either, which is the paradigmatic collective threat. But as far as I know, most religions speak directly to life in community, common destiny, and caring for one another, particularly those in need. So how have religions gotten so far off message, or why are their adherents unable to take this message in? [↩](#)

# CLIMATE CONNECTIONS

CTI's Workshop on Religion & the Natural Environment

The capstone year of CTI's five-year Inquiry on Religion & Global Issues, the 2021-22 Research Workshop focused on Religion & the Natural Environment. CTI convened scholars from a range of disciplines and from across the globe to address this issue that is truly of global concern. This section on Climate Connections features the work of this year's CTI members.

Joshua Mauldin  
Associate Director

PHOTOGRAPH: SAWITRELYAON/AOBBESTOCK

# Mimetic Rivalries & Wars Against Nature

WOLFGANG PALAVER

Peace ethics and environmental ethics have often remained disconnected. Usually, peace ethics is primarily concerned with human relations and does not take nature as such into account. My own work on the relationship between violence and religion has followed René Girard's mimetic anthropology that focuses especially on human behavior. Rivalries caused by imitative desires are, according to Girard, the main cause of human conflict, violence, and wars. Although human rivalry has a tremendous influence on the natural environment, its impact was long unaddressed by scholars dedicated to mimetic theory. The French philosopher Michel Serres, who was also a close friend of Girard, opened our eyes by showing us how mimetic rivalries affect the natural environment. In 1990, Serres published his book *Le contrat naturel*, which came out in English in 1995 under the title *The Natural Contract*. It was a contribution to the Earth Summit of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that took place in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. Serres connects conflicts and wars among human beings with the destruction of the natural environment in his book. His starting point is a famous painting by the Spanish painter Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) whose work frequently depicts the cruelty of modern wars that started with Napoleon. Serres chose Goya's painting "Men Fighting with Sticks" from 1820, which shows how "a pair of enemies

brandishing sticks is fighting in the midst of a patch of quicksand." Remarkably close to Carl von Clausewitz's understanding that wars are like a grudge match that escalates to extremes, Goya shows that both fighters will end in destruction: Goya "has plunged the duelists knee-deep in the mud. With every move they make, a slimy hole swallows them up, so that they are gradually burying themselves together....The belligerents don't notice the abyss they're rushing into." The modern danger of a nuclear war is just a more extreme type of this abyss. Serres also observes that by looking at this painting one easily ignores the "world of things themselves, the sand, the water, the mud, the reeds of the marsh." In former times the natural environment was a threat to human beings. The modern world has turned this relation upside down: "The global change now underway ... makes the power of the world precarious, infinitely fragile. Once victorious, the Earth is now a victim."

Modern consumerism was one of the ways to temper our mimetic rivalries. Many of us were able to get the same consumer goods that we desired by imitating our neighbors. This race of ever-hungry consumers contributed to a growth that went far beyond the limits of sustainability. To protect the natural environment, we need to overcome our futile rivalries as Serres understood so well: "We must decide on peace among ourselves to protect the world, and peace with the world to protect ourselves." ☪

*Wolfgang Palaver is Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Innsbruck, Austria.*




PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



# The Break Space

ELAINE RUTHERFORD

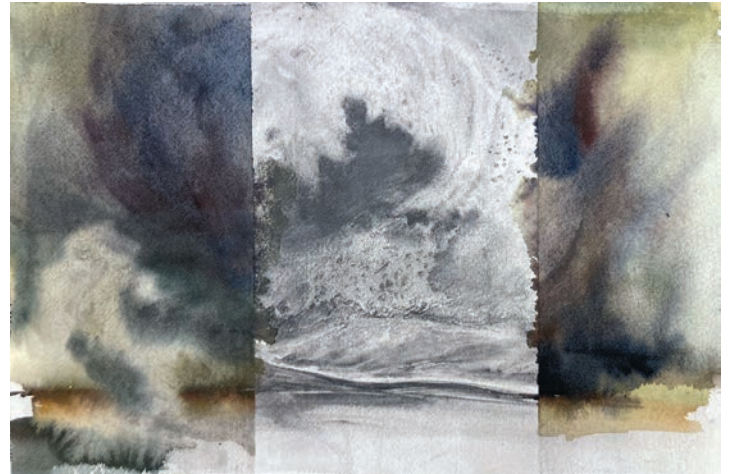
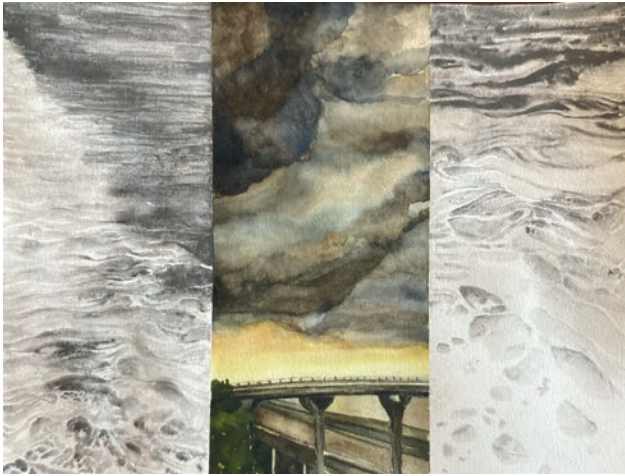
I have learned so much during the CTI workshop and am eternally grateful to my colleagues for the ways in which their insights and questions have stretched my thinking. Our conversations have led me to consider the role of the artist in the age of the Anthropocene and to examine why art making continues to be a dominant and necessary impulse. These conversations have also helped me to recognize that my own research has always been rooted in questions of space and of place. In particular the “third space,” the liminal or the threshold.

The terrain within the threshold is a space beyond oppositional pairings of I and other and as such it is the terrain we must seek to inhabit in the age of the Anthropocene. It is the gray area, the space within the margins or as scholar J. Kameron Carter describes it as the “break space.” As long as we think within oppositional paradigms, we are fated to always see ourselves as separate from the natural world and from nature. When we learn how to inhabit the “break space” we open ourselves up to all possibility and new ways of knowing. 

**Elaine Rutherford** is CTI's Artist in Virtual Residence for spring 2022. She is a member of the art faculty at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University in Minnesota.







*The bridge and the break*

*I've been painting all these bridges to cross the "break space" but maybe what I need is a path to take me into the break.*

*Awake, a wake, a sea path,  
After the bridge.....  
Instead of crossing to the other side  
I need to enter  
The break Space  
The wake of the boat will show me the way.*

*At the threshold  
A bridge or something else  
A boat, a map  
To enter not cross  
This is where I need to be  
Inside the unbounded space  
Of the in-between  
Inside the break*







# Nature and Politics Enmeshed

## Rethinking War in an Environmental Age

MARK DOUGLAS

What do air conditioners, airplanes, cattle farms, and cryptocurrency have to do with Ukraine, Syria, Guatemala, and Sudan? One answer to that question is that the global proliferation of the former set of goods may have exacerbated conflicts in the latter set of countries. Maintaining the former set of goods, after all, not only involves expending significant amounts of energy—most of it coming from fossil fuels—but doing so in ways that intensify growing disparities between the “haves” and the “have nots” around the world. As fossil fuel consumption increases so do greenhouse gases and, therein, climate changes that deleteriously impact agriculture in these and other conflict-ridden countries, creating what environmental security experts call threat-multipliers and exacerbating suffering in such areas as attempts to control the flow of basic goods grows increasingly violent. And as economic disparities increase, so do political tensions and, therein the instability of a global political order shaped by early modern assumptions about the abundance of natural resources and the rights of European countries to take such resources through conquest. Most of us in north Atlantic

countries tend—maybe a bit willfully—not to pay attention to such connections. So perhaps a second answer to that question is that when those of us in the west are enjoying a temperate room on a hot day, a long-anticipated vacation, a good steak, or the freedom to invest in bitcoin, we’d rather not think that our behaviors make us complicit in causing, shaping, or exacerbating conflicts in other parts of the world.

A decade ago, I began research on a project exploring the impact of climate change on war and how Christian traditions of pacifism, just war, and just peacemaking would have to change to address some of the new types, causes, and understandings of war we face in the 21st century as we exit modernity and enter what I have begun to call an environmental age. In that age, environmental crises (accelerating anthropogenic climate change, the catastrophic loss of biodiversity, the explosive growth in pollutants, and so on) will not only become increasingly preoccupying; they will become lenses through which we make sense of the world around us and the other crises we face in it. War and violence, increasing economic inequality, poisonous political partisanship, the dissolution of that basic


PHOTOGRAPH: SCHARFSINN/SHUTTERSTOCK

political unit of modernity, the sovereign nation-state: all of these are connected in complicated ways to our dysfunctional relationships with the non-human natural world. The further I dug into the research, the more I discovered that needed digging into.

Now, two books in—*Christian Pacifism for an Environmental Age* (Cambridge UP, 2019) and *Modernity, the Environment, and the Christian Just War Tradition* (Cambridge UP, 2022)—I am writing the book that I imagined writing when I began my research. *Wars in a Warming World: Religion, Resources, and Refugees* draws from those earlier, historically-oriented books, to make a set of arguments about how persons of faith might understand and respond to climate-shaped conflicts. Among the regulating claims that come out of the first two books and now order my work are:

1. One of the grand orienting myths of modernity—especially as it was shaped by Christian thought and practices—is a myth that separates the political from the natural. This separation has made it difficult for those with power, especially in the west, to see the way that the natural and the political are always interwoven. Recognizing the interwovenness of the natural and the political is, increasingly, a precondition for meaningful political action.
2. Complicity in violence is built into life in an environmental age but not all people are equally complicit. Rather than pursuing projects that involve attempts to separate oneself or one’s community from violence, human beings are called to take up morally ambiguous projects of reparative justice that include reparations towards those most negatively affected by the politico-natural forces that drive life in an environmental age.
3. Climate-shaped wars will look more chaotic, tend towards occasionality, be less oriented around ideological differences, be more widespread, and be exacerbated by the global proliferation of small arms. They may also admit to clearer assessments about when and how to fight because the value of natural resources is more amenable to strategic calculus than, e.g., that of ideological commitments.

4. Though the conventional narratives of the histories of the Christian just war, pacifist, and just peace-making traditions are distorted by problematic modernist assumptions, the resources of these traditions—not to mention those of other religious traditions that take up questions about the relations of morality to violence—may play important roles in shaping responses to climate-shaped violence. As they do so, the distinctions between those traditions will become increasingly blurry and new narratives about the traditions will emerge.
5. Minoritized voices—including those of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other colonized peoples—are among those most in need of amplification, if for no other reason that they have been in locations where the earliest impacts of climate-shaped violence are most apparent and usually impressed upon their bodies. As their voices gain hearing, we will discover that political wisdom, like the natural world, is no respecter of boundaries.
6. Among the ideas and practices most in need of review and critique are those that swirl around three focal points: the roles of religious ideas and practices in a world where they cannot be segregated from wider politico-natural systems, the assumptions about ownership and agency that have funded increasingly destructive neoliberal systems, and the increasing movement of peoples as such movements shape and are shaped by environmental and political forces. Hence, the subtitle of the book begun during my time at CTI.

Writing against the grain of modernist assumptions about the world’s political, economic, religious, and environmental orders is no easy task. For that matter, neither is learning to see and name those assumptions. This year’s “Religion & the Natural Environment” workshop at the Center of Theological Inquiry has afforded me the chance to interact with other fellows who, like me, are feeling their way forward into ways of thinking, writing, and acting that reveal—in the best apocalyptic sense of that word—the world that is coming to be and finding hope in the midst of the political and environmental sufferings being inflicted by wars in a warming world. 

*Mark Douglas is Professor of Christian Ethics at Columbia Theological Seminary, Georgia, USA.*





# Theological Reflections on Climate Emergency

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
PETER SCOTT

## *How does theology connect to the climate emergency?*

There is a lot of theology in action, so to speak. I would not in this context want to restrict theology to academic or technical theology. If we go back to the publication of the papal encyclical *Laudato si'* in 2015 and how that has galvanized a great deal of activity in the churches—that led to a creative intensification of theological effort. Carbon net zero targets—and early targets at that—are widespread in the churches. In the UK, there are some very active para-church organizations—Christian Climate Action seems to me to be especially noteworthy. There are other groups, such as Operation Noah, doing important educative and capacity-building work in the UK context. I do not think that mainstream churches are resistant to this climate change agenda—at least no more resistant than any other sector of civil society. There is of course what Robin Globus Veldman calls a gospel of climate scepticism—but her argument is that this scepticism is not a matter of climate science but of a self-declared sense of cultural marginalization. When COP26 was held in Glasgow in 2021 there was a significant civil society presence in which faith traditions were prominent.

## *What about academic theology in the climate crisis?*

As for academic theology, I think that climate change provokes a kind of *theological crisis*—as suggested by the question. Indeed, we had a theology of crisis arise out of the emergency of twentieth century fascism in Europe on account of the profundity of the questions raised about Christian responsibility. The challenge of climate change is also civilizational and thus no less profound. Plus, there is the matter that many of the key human voices in the crisis are the voices of the vulnerable in the global south. If theology is not able to hear these in some fashion, we must wonder whether the theological responses are framed or structured by a kind of colonial deafness. There is vital work to be done in the area of postcolonial ecotheology—there is an important volume out very recently, edited by S. Lily Mendoza and George Zachariah, titled

PHOTOGRAPH: MARIKAV/ADOBESTOCK



*Decolonizing Ecotheology.* The interaction between ecotheology and political theology is also significant: recent work by Catherine Keller is exemplary here.

A central theological and moral tradition of the Christian Church that is challenged by the climate crisis is “personalism.” Personalism identifies the situation and task of the human understood by reference to personal attributes (will, reason, dispositions, for example). Personalism relates also to human exceptionalism: personalist categories disembody the human from its “natural” environment and thereby render the human an exception. Personalism is central to Christian theological traditions and moral deliberations. Such centrality explains why some religion scholars, such as Bron Taylor, argue that Christianity can never be a “dark green” religion. Having said that, the contrast of naturalism seems unattractive: a sort of monistic model in which Nature is given priority. An associated point here is that climate change is a slow crisis—so the provocation to rethink theologically may not seem so urgent. A slow crisis may be a deep crisis nonetheless.

#### ***Are there reasons to be cheerful?***

My response may strike the reader as complacent or banal, but I think there is a sense in which theology is hopeful; theology is always a theology of hope. That is, as Jürgen Moltmann once said, theology is eschatology or eschatology is the medium of theology. Theology works back, so to speak, from the much anticipated meeting of heaven and earth. Still, as Moltmann has also never tired of saying, hope is not optimism—and I see few reasons to be optimistic. So does hope defeat pessimism? The comparison of climate change with nuclear warfare is interesting: both point towards the end of a civilization. And although the moral issues around nu-

clear warfare have never gone away, the invasion of Ukraine has seen renewed attention paid to the threat of a nuclear war and an end of civilization. In the mid 1980s, Gordon Kaufman already made the connection and I think we need to do the same now.

And that does seem to me to be one conclusion: the coal carbon and petro-carbon civilization we know is using up its key source of energy. And the use of that energy drives warming. So it seems unlikely that this civilization can endure—even if we find a way of retrofitting our current way of life with different sources of energy. A sort of energy conversion, an energy metanoia is required. Religions know about metanoia—and so I find that a hopeful thought. I also find it encouraging that the carbon we are using is compressed or sedimented life; it was organic once although it is now non-organic. That makes me think that there may be processes underway now that may resource future generations of creatures.

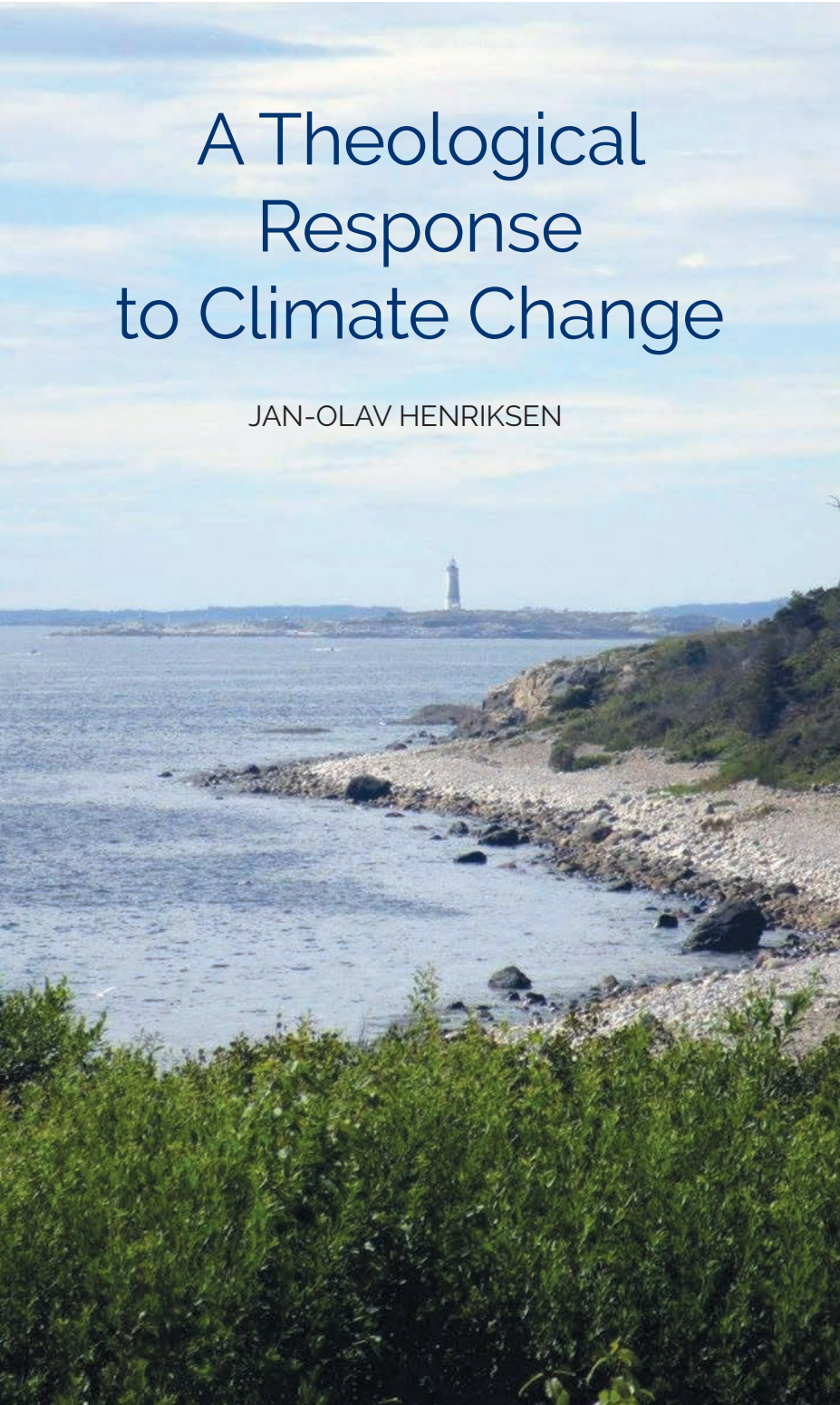
#### ***How does your own theological inquiry connect with the climate crisis?***

Directly and indirectly. I’m the director of the Lincoln Theological Institute at the University of Manchester and we have hosted three projects to date relating to the climate crisis. The first one explored apocalyptic discourse in relation to a warming climate and the second developed a contextual and systematic theology for a changing climate. Most recently, we explored with partners the phenomenon of climate change from interfaith perspectives. In my own writing, not least in a contribution to Ernst Conradie’s and Hilda Koster’s amazing volume on *Christian Theology and Climate Change*, I’ve been exploring the theme of theological anthropology and the vocation of the human in the Anthropocene.

Indirectly, I continue to pursue my inquiry in a theology for a postnatural condition. The climate crisis, and the accompanying ecological crisis, is a societal crisis as well as a planetary crisis—this is my argument. In my *A Theology of Postnatural Right*, I developed an ethics for a condition marked by the absence of sharp boundaries between human and nonhuman, between nature and history, and between nature and technology, and one that does not rely on a fixed natural order. I’m developing that account in my current project on theological materialism. I’m not approaching the climate crisis directly but seek to approach it through the social crisis that, in a sense, generated it. ☪

*Peter Scott is the Samuel Ferguson Professor of Applied Theology & Director of the Lincoln Theological Institute at the University of Manchester, UK.*





# A Theological Response to Climate Change

JAN-OLAV HENRIKSEN

What can theology say about climate change? This question is at the center of my current research, in which I focus on how to understand the conditions for human agency in the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene era is defined as the era of history in which the whole planet Earth is impacted by human activity. This era is the context for the precarious problems we face today: climate change, extinction of species, landslides, forest fires, and clearing of the rainforests, but also social injustice and economic inequality. These phenomena are connected to human activity and place us in a situation in which we share the responsibility for how we deal with them in order to make the future of the planet livable for all.

If we address the problems facing the planet only as examples of how sin affects all areas of human life, this may sound like good theology, but I think it is not. Then these problems are just illustrations of something else. I work from the presupposition that we need to see the problems from another angle, which allows us to address the problems as related to fundamental phenomena in human life, and in other species' lives as well. The two phenomena I have in mind are desire and vulnerability.

Everything that lives strives to continue to live and indeed to flourish. In order to flourish, we need the conditions that can make it happen. The desire to live, and live well, is not restricted to humans but is behind how every living being acts. Desire connects us to what we assume is good. The difference between humans and other species is in how we deal with, order, and orient our desires for the good. Whereas most other species act on instincts, we can act based on reasons and insights, which can help

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us change the society we live in and the values upon which we act. It also entails that humans may be wrong in how we direct our desires. Hence, a fundamental task as human beings is to find the best way to order our desires and act accordingly.

If we act on false premises, we may quickly realize the consequences. These consequences point to our vulnerable condition. Wrong decisions and misdirected desires may cause us a lot of trouble, sometimes with devastating consequences. Moreover, it may not only reveal how humans are vulnerable but also how other species and non-human nature are vulnerable and susceptible to our activity. But vulnerability is not only negative: it is because we are vulnerable and receptive that we can experience ourselves as interconnected with others, respond to what is happening in ways that make us react, and sometimes also protect ourselves or others from harm and misconduct.

We share the desire for goodness and flourishing with other species. But we also share vulnerability with the rest of the living beings on planet Earth. The challenge is to orient our desires so that flourishing for all is possible and take sufficiently into account the vulnerable condition on which all life lives. In other words: desire and vulnerability are connected. But they can be connected in different ways.

Climate change—and the present lack of urgency in the decisions to impede its further development—suggest that humans continue to act based on short-term and more or less exclusively human-related desires, without taking into account how humanity itself is interwoven with other types of life and environments over which we only have limited control. We prioritize the desire for human consumption over the flourishing of all of creation. It is against this backdrop that it makes sense to speak of sin in relation to climate change. Then, what happens is not just another example of sin, but we can understand how sin manifests itself in concrete human practices, in misguided desire, and in the lack of concern for the vulnerable conditions of everything that lives.

To speak theologically about climate change entails that we speak about concrete things that happen and address them in ways that provide us with a more profound understanding of our agency. If we speak only about the sinful human condition as the cause of climate change, we miss out on the chance to understand the basic desires we act on and what and who is vulnerable to and may suffer from these actions.

In my work, I use Western consumerism as an example of how our desires are directed in ways that hide the consequences of our actions while simultaneously also contributing considerably to the planet's deterioration. We know that not all of the Earth's population can enjoy the same level of consumption that we have in the Western world without devastating consequences. Nevertheless, our culture of consumption seems to go on more or less unconcerned. Consumption helps us ignore the awareness of our misguided desires, and the consequences consumption has on our vulnerable planet. Thus, sin is not only about being in a wrongful relationship with God, but it is about how our activity contributes to the destruction of God's creation. Sin has material consequences that can be detected in how we expose other humans and the planet in general to their negative vulnerabilities. It is not only a spiritual phenomenon.

As I write this, in early April 2022, a new report about the urgency of action to impede climate change has just been released. Theology may be a resource for a different understanding of what is good that considers the flourishing of all of creation. We must understand desire as something that can connect us to other values than those presently guiding the actions of humanity. Theology can also point to the precariousness of all that lives insofar as it knows that life is not something we can take for granted. Life is always dependent on sources other than our agency. However, this does not eliminate our responsibility for acting and acting now to counter the worst consequences of climate change. <sup>1</sup>

*Jan-Olav Henriksen is Professor of Systematic Theology at Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society.*






# From Theology to Environmental Studies

KANAN KITANI

In my country of Japan, heavy rain has been falling in recent years, causing some villages to be flooded or houses in the mountains to be swallowed by landslides. Such annual disasters that cause so many deaths were uncommon a few decades ago. The fact that this situation is caused by climate change permeates the awareness of Japanese society in general, and disaster countermeasures are being implemented at a rapid pace. Although people have different opinions about whether climate change is caused by anthropogenic factors or the natural cycle of events, we must know that it is the socially vulnerable who suffer the most from disasters. People often think that natural disasters uniformly impact the people living in the affected area, which is correct in one sense because the rain falls equally under the rain clouds; however, the rainfall does not impact individual people in the same manner. When floodwater inundates a town, those who lose their lives are the sick, the old, and those with disabilities. From this perspective, I am currently researching and teaching at a university on ethical issues such as structural discrimination in climate change.

When I first participated in CTI's Research Workshop on Religion & Migration in 2017-2018, led by Peter C. Phan of Georgetown University, my views on migration were limited to the obvious push-pull factors. My colleague at that time, Seforosa Carroll

from Australia, was researching the issue of sea level rise and displacement in Fiji, which gave me my first insight into the seriousness of forced migration on a larger scale if climate change progresses even further. To learn more about environmental issues, I reentered graduate school and am currently studying for a degree in environmental studies.

Theology is not a discipline that fixes itself on events that occurred 2000 years ago but one that engages in dialogue with the realities occurring in society today. In this age called the Anthropocene, one of the most important practical issues is how to coexist with the natural environment. I am fortunate to be able to immediately return to graduate school so that I can retrain in environmental studies, but there are far more people who cannot. Therefore, as an educator and a pastor, I feel it is part of my role to take the learning I have gained and give it back to students and congregations in my university and church. I cannot change the world alone, but sharing what I know about environmental issues at my university and church may be akin to planting a seed of inspiration, just as Pope Francis stated in his well-respected encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*: "Ecological education can take place in a variety of settings: at school, in families, in the media, in catechesis and elsewhere. Good education plants seeds when we are young, and these continue to bear fruit throughout life." 

*Kanan Kitani is an assistant professor of theology at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan.*

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# Land Rights and Governance

ANDY WIGHTMAN

As humans we are conditioned to respond to threats to ourselves and to our community and fight or flight is one of our most primitive instincts. However, the magnitude, scale, and scope of our current environmental crisis has overwhelmed these instincts. Over half of the anthropogenic emissions of carbon have taken place since the Climate Convention was signed in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Even in the face of overwhelming evidence, the world is not acting with sufficient urgency and commitment.

In part this is a governance problem. Given the scale of the crisis, expecting 192 governments to sit down each year at a climate conference and agree how to implement and finance both existing and future agreements has not and is not likely to produce the progress needed. Without a legal framework that imposes duties and responsibilities with effective sanctions for non-compliance, short-term interests will prevail.

I have enjoyed participating in CTT's inquiry on theology and the natural environment. Having spent 40 years researching

and writing on land rights and governance, it is clear to me that we need a new relationship with the land and with the Earth. That relationship to date has been primarily transactional, commercial, exploitative, and short-term. What is required is a relationship based on nurture, stewardship, responsibility, duty, and reciprocity.

None of that will happen without a huge paradigm shift, but the elements of such relationships have existed for a long time in the world's religions and beliefs, in environmental ethics, classical economics, and philosophy. Whilst science and politics drive the response to the climate crisis, the shifts in public attitudes necessary to tackle the crisis will be driven yes by science but more deeply out of a deep sense of necessity and obligation towards our fellow humans and the natural world.

That is why bringing theological insights and wisdom, visionary scientific communications, literary, artistic, and poetic endeavor, and a renewed humanity is so vital in tackling the most significant crisis that humanity has ever faced. [⤴](#)

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# Theological Ethics & Climate Change

FREDERICK SIMMONS




**M**y scholarship concentrates on theological ethics and the relationships between theology and the natural sciences. In connection with this year's inquiry at CTI, I am conducting research for three essays concerning theology and the natural environment.

The first essay reassesses the ethics of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Heretofore, most ethical misgivings about GHG emissions have concentrated on the subset attributable to luxuries. However, further subsistence GHG emissions alone now seem liable to end the Holocene—the current, roughly 12,000-year-old geological epoch with an unusually stable and clement climate that has allowed agriculture and civilization to emerge. I draw on the principle of double effect and the just war tradition to reevaluate the ethics of GHG

emissions given this new reality. I argue that because culpably insufficient redress of climate change has rendered even subsistence GHGs so harmful, most forthcoming western GHG emissions that are not removed have become unjust, though some forthcoming western subsistence GHG emissions that are not removed remain responsible.

The second essay reexamines Christian hope amidst escalating environmental pessimism. It starts by observing that this pessimism compromises the widespread contemporary Christian hope that God's consummation of creation emerges through historical progress. This pessimism thereby also prompts Christians to reconsider their traditional hope that God's consummation of creation is realized beyond history. Although such supra-historical hope can withstand escalating environmental pessimism, for that reason it has fostered indifference to the environmental destruction driving this pessimism. To uncouple this hope from that indifference, I modify Reinhold Niebuhr's interpretation of the relationship between the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. In particular, while Niebuhr emphasizes faith in God's overcoming of perennial human failure and punctures human pretensions to surmount that failure through love, Augustine orders faith and hope to love. Augustine and Niebuhr agree that such hope does not anticipate historical progress, hence its compatibility with environmental pessimism. Nevertheless, ordering such hope to love clarifies that it does not condone historical indifference and instead properly animates and sustains ameliorative initiatives.

The third essay explores how Christian realism could be extended to environmental ethics generally and what it would enjoin amidst anthropogenic climate change specifically. I maintain that Christian realism combines environmental activists' belief in a constructive human future with environmental pessimists' conviction that human beings are now unable to attain it by integrating Christian anthropology, a Niebuhrian account of sin, politically realist skepticism about social groups' sustained self-transcendence, and Augustinian hope. This conjunction allows Christian realism to confront the severity of the climate crisis and the global order's knowing failure to forestall it without fostering despair, thereby dispelling the denial, distraction, enervation, and desperation that exacerbate this failure even as they emerge to cope with it. I therefore expect Christian realism will have an ever-greater role to play in Christian responses to the looming environmental losses and I develop Christian realism's distinctive interpretation of social ethics and salvation history to prime it to do so. 

*Frederick Simmons is a Research Assistant Professor of Ethics at Boston University School of Theology, the John Templeton Foundation Research Scholar at Princeton Theological Seminary, and the Houston Witherspoon Fellow in Theology and the Natural Sciences at the Center of Theological Inquiry.*





# Unearthly Ethics

LISA SIDERIS

One day in 1966, the environmentalist and tech-visionary Stewart Brand took a dose of LSD and gazed at the San Francisco skyline. He could *feel* the curve of the earth. He imagined drifting further and further into space, taking in the full arc of its curvature. Brand petitioned NASA to release photos of the Earth taken from space. In 1967, NASA released the photo, and Brand placed it on the cover of his *Whole Earth Catalog*, a countercultural do-it-yourself manual for tech enthusiasts seeking to get back to nature. This image, along with the iconic “Earthrise” photo, evoked feelings of global oneness. Astronauts who witnessed this view of the Earth firsthand reported a cognitive shift in awareness, an awe-filled appreciation of Earth’s fragile interconnectedness.

The term “Overview Effect” names the powerful feelings of wonder and interconnectedness elicited by Earth as seen from the “outside.” Celebrated by scientific and spiritual seekers alike, this perspective marks a dramatic leap forward in human consciousness. And yet, at this pivotal moment,

humans began to sense their dual, if somewhat conflicting, obligations: to bond with our home planet and care for it, and—ultimately—to transcend Earth in a techno-spiritual pursuit of other worlds on which to perpetuate our species. To love Earth *and* leave it. The whole Earth vision contains within it a paradox that is reproduced in many high-profile efforts to tackle global environmental problems with emerging technologies. Here technology—or what I call techno-environmentalism—functions simultaneously as a vehicle for drawing closer to nature *and* a means of throwing off natural limits altogether.

Connections between my current project—a book tentatively titled *Unearthly Ethics*—and the themes of the CTI workshop are numerous. In fact, this work draws from my previous participation in CTI’s Inquiry on the Societal Implications of Astrobiology, a topic that proved extremely generative for both my teaching and research. These connections include: questions about home and displacement; the nature of human and nonhuman agency in the Anthropocene; the challenge of defining a new morality, or new narrative, appropriate to our current global crises; the way in which science and technology foster an implicit faith in human exceptionalism; and how wonder might be cultivated in nondestructive ways.

In particular, my work explores issues surrounding extinction and de-extinction; climate change and geoengineering; and the pursuit of “ecopoiesis” (the creation, on Earth and in space, of new lifeforms and novel ecosystems from nonliving or artificial conditions). These initiatives illustrate techno-environmentalism’s odd mixture of intimacy with and estrangement from nature. While these projects routinely tout their concern for nature and desire to improve the planet, they also celebrate portraits of humans that—at best—distance humans from nature and at worst bolster extravagant claims of human exceptionalism. Central to these technological endeavors is a quasi-secular theological anthropology of *Homo sapiens* as a worldmaking animal, a distinctly *planetary* creature whose development as a species both mirrors and *advances* a larger cosmic drama. Our purported power to radically remake our environment, in other words, obviates the need to change *ourselves* at a fundamental level.

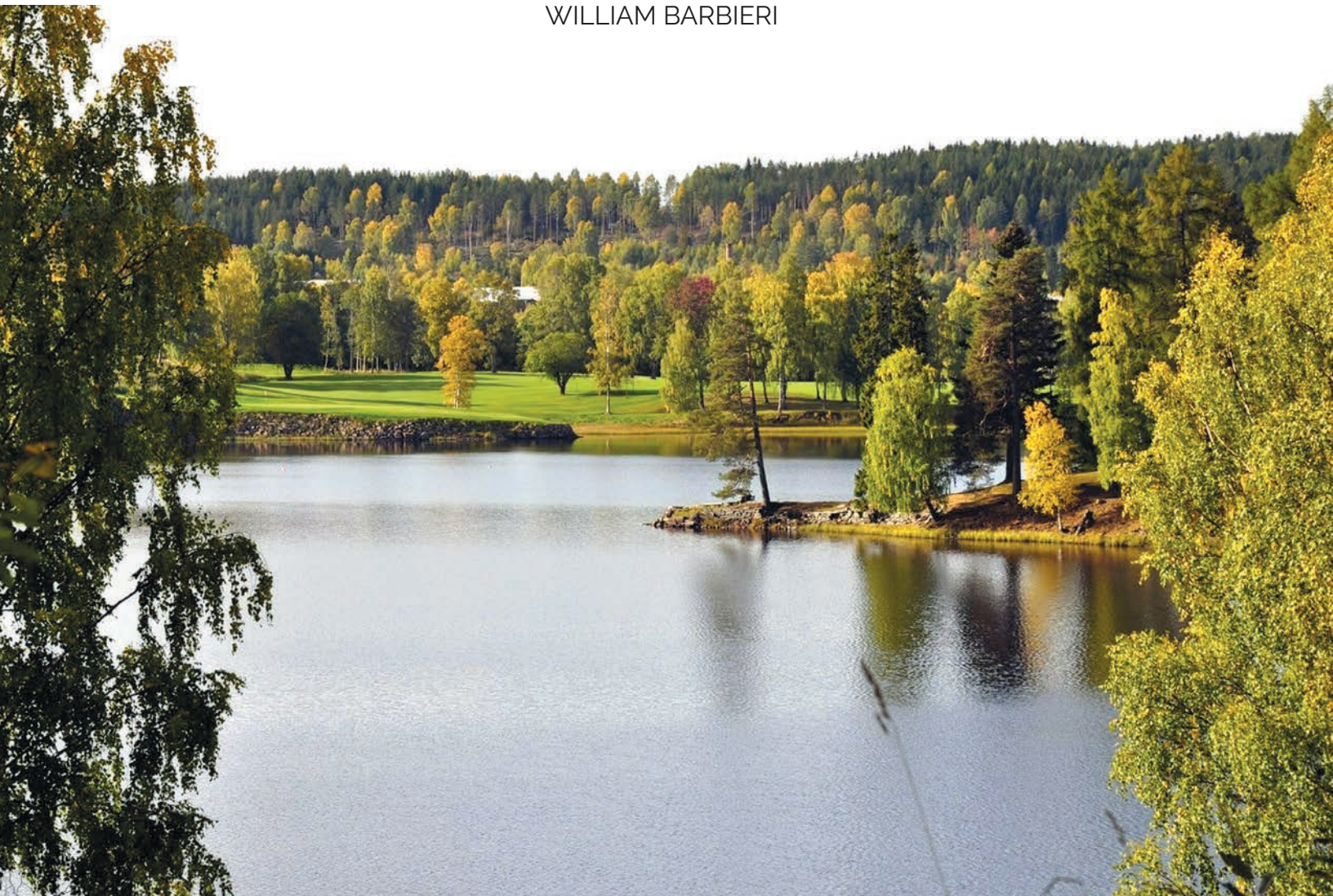
I am grateful to CTI for such a stimulating and collegial environment in which to pursue my research questions and enhance my scholarly networks. ☮

*Lisa Sideris is Professor of Environmental Studies at UC Santa Barbara.*



# Religious Ethics & Integral Ecology

WILLIAM BARBIERI



In recent years, motivated by a sense of mounting urgency, my efforts as a scholar of religious ethics have converged from a number of directions on questions related to the ecological crisis. Ethics as I envision it is a wide-ranging enterprise that trawls through several neighboring disciplines in pursuit of responses to a complex of questions concerning human action, values, meaning, and motivations. Part of the work involves describing what morality is and how it works, and part of it involves mounting normative arguments about what we should take to be good, right, or

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just. Pursuing these questions naturally takes one into the fields of philosophy and psychology, religion and theology, politics and sociology, and beyond—with the charge of dilettantism an ever-present occupational hazard.

One ecological issue that has long accompanied my teaching and research in my home field of religious studies—but has lately come into sharper focus—is the matter of the “greening” of the world’s religions. One after another, major religious traditions have in recent decades belatedly acknowledged deficits in their attention to environmental problems and undertaken to modify their teachings and practices accordingly. This process generates a host of compelling questions for the comparative religious ethicist. How has this shift occurred? Why now? To what extent can religious communities self-consciously embrace the ethos of ecology without damaging the integrity of their traditional commitments? Which traditions are best positioned to cope with this challenge? Does the “greening” of religion constitute an instance of moral progress?

My location at the Catholic University of America has deepened my interest in and engagement with the tradition of social ethical thought known as Catholic social teaching, and here again ecological questions have newly come to the fore. Indeed, on my reading of Pope Francis’s monumental 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato si’*, the Catholic moral outlook is undergoing a paradigm shift that is reconstituting social teaching within a more encompassing perspective that might be termed “earth ethics.” Francis’s own name for this emergent framework is “integral ecology”—a term pointing to how, going forward, Catholicism envisions all matters related to human dignity—from sexual morality and bioethics to social justice and the

ethics of war—as integrated with, and inseparable from, the ecological imperative to care for creation.

As a religious ethicist, I see the conception of integral ecology as pointing to a set of topics ripe for further exploration. On the theoretical side, I have begun investigating the idea of “moral ecology.” This term designates for me the fruitful intersection of two traditionally discrete bodies of knowledge: earth science and ethics. On the one hand, scientific understandings of ecology have begun to engage in an encounter with their moral implications. On the other hand, in ethics a new sensibility has arisen recognizing that morality itself can be thought of as exhibiting certain ecological features. One of my current research projects is dedicated to gauging the prospects for an ecological model of morality as a moral theory that might update aspects of traditional natural law theory.

On the practical side, I see the notion of integral ecology as establishing promising synergies between two traditionally discrete moral projects: the environmentalist movement and campaigns for social justice and human rights. The crucial question becomes: how can ethical perspectives on the ecological crisis—especially religiously grounded ones—help “move the needle” when it comes to changing environmentally destructive behaviors? One small contribution I hope to make on this question stems from my interest in the theme of “visual ethics”: that is, the study of how images can convey moral content and provide ethical motivation in ways that elude texts and discourse. My teaching and research on “ecocinema” suggests that the medium of film can help promote ecological responsibility. 

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