

Anabaptist Environmental Ethics: A Review Essay

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Abstract: This article situates four decades of Anabaptist writing on environmental ethics in relationship to Laurel Kearns and Willis Jenkins's typology of eco-justice, stewardship, and eco-spirituality. It argues that while stewardship discourse dominates the early work, it has faded in significance as Anabaptist theology increasingly appropriates varieties of eco-spirituality such as agrarianism and watershed discipleship. It concludes with a turn towards recent arguments that eco-theology, in all three varieties, has over-emphasized questions of cosmology and worldview at the expense of what Jenkins calls "prophetic pragmatism."

Evidence for anthropogenic climate change and its attendant dangers has mounted over the last several decades to the point where it is now undisputed in the scientific community. In spite of this consensus, large numbers of Christians in the U.S. remain unconvinced.¹ Concern, and increasingly alarm, for this combined state of affairs—ecological crisis and vocal Christian denial—has generated a vast literature. University and seminary programs in religion and ecology or eco-theology now proliferate, as do professorships specializing in them. This literature is united by a sense of alarm at human degradation of the planet, a penitent awareness that the Christian church and Christian theology are complicit in that degradation, and a common concern to construct and recover theologically responsible ways to think and practice healthier relationships between God, humans, and the rest of creation. Yet while

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1. According to the Pew Research Center, while 56% of black Protestants and 77% of Hispanic Catholics believe that climate change is primarily due to human activity, only 41% of white mainline Protestants, 45% of white Catholics, and 28% of white evangelicals agree. See "Religion and Views on Climate and Energy Issues," Oct. 22, 2015.—<https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2015/10/22/religion-and-views-on-climate-and-energy-issues/>.

united against, for example, conservative Christian denials of anthropogenic climate change, this literature also contains vigorous, if sometimes understated, disagreements.

North American Anabaptists have been energetic contributors to this literature. That should be no surprise. Their rural heritage, historic—often rhetorical—affection for simple living, and frequent concern for prophetic ecclesial witness, suggest that they would be as engaged in eco-theology as any other Christian denominations. But how exactly do Anabaptists fit in this landscape? In this essay, I attempt to survey North American Anabaptist eco-theological writings. In order to do so, I proceed in part through a conversation with Willis Jenkins, placing the Anabaptist literature on the map provided by his groundbreaking book *Ecologies of Grace* and through an engagement with his assessment of Anabaptism. At the end of his chapter on stewardship, Jenkins argues that Christians need to develop a stewardship theology that doesn't silence nature. He then goes on to say,

The peacemaking agricultural traditions of Anabaptist communities may offer suggestions for how to do that. For these communities morally organize themselves around kingdom orders of Christ, yet have historically worked in close responsiveness to the land.²

As an Anabaptist drawn to eco-theology, I am very interested in this claim, particularly in that little “yet” that separates the “kingdom orders of Christ” and “responsiveness to the land.” When I first read it, before I embarked on this review of Anabaptist creation care literature, I assumed he was probably right. It turns out, however, that things are more complicated. While early Anabaptist work on eco-theology was dominated by a stewardship paradigm, recently it has become every bit as diverse as the wider field of eco-theology. In what follows, I review Anabaptist approaches to creation care in the context of Jenkins's typology of Christian environmental theologies, in an effort to discern some of the emerging directions among Anabaptists.³

2. Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91.

3. The language here is loaded with minefields. In its less careful uses, the “environment” refers to (non-human) animals and plants but doesn't include humans. “Nature,” too, curiously sometimes seems to exclude humans though we are as natural as spiders, wolves, or tulip poplars. “Creation care” is something “we” do to or for “them” or “it.” So “environmental ethics” takes up what humans do to the “environment” while giving short shrift to what happens to the people who are as much a part of the environment as anything else. “Sustainability” is equally problematic, as conversations around it are riven by arguments about just what exactly should be sustained and at whose, or what's, expense. In this paper, I use the terms interchangeably, aware of how problematic they are but, as yet, not sure of appropriate alternatives.

THREE ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES

In *Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the U.S.*, a mid-1990s survey of religious environmentalism, sociologist Laurel Kearns identified three basic models of Christian environmentalism: eco-justice, stewardship, and creation spirituality, each of which grew out of distinct theological frameworks and tended to align with distinct denominational affiliations.⁴ A decade later in *Ecologies of Grace*, Jenkins took on the task of drawing connections between Kearns's map of Christian environmental ethics with secular environmental ethics as well as developing the theological background Kearns had identified. In doing so he began with the secular analogs to Kearns's three types: nature's standing; moral agency; and ecological subjectivity.

This map is a useful starting point in mapping Anabaptist reflection on creation care. But at the same time, several important cautions about the kind of typology developed by Kearns and Jenkins, cautions that are generally true of all typologies, should be noted. First, it is not the only available typology. Michael Northcott, for example, chooses to divide eco-theologies into "humanocentric," "theocentric," and "ecocentric."⁵ Second, none of the three ethical orientations are mutually exclusive. Few, if any, of the writers cited rely on just one of the strategies. Most draw on aspects of all three to varying degrees even if sometimes there is a clear center of gravity in one or the other. Many, if not most, readers will find that they identify with aspects of each of them even if they also feel most at home in one or another. Second, three could easily be turned into a dozen. Each type has multiple internal distinctions. In what follows, I try to be sensitive to the inherent clumsiness of three types and warn the reader at the outset so they may exercise their own wariness. These caveats are especially in play as I try to place Anabaptist writings within the typology.⁶ Perhaps because environmental ethics is a relatively young endeavor for Anabaptists, it consists primarily of arguments with a common enemy—dominion theology and a soul/body dualism that claimed salvation for humans at the exclusion of the rest of creation—not arguments among themselves. Therefore, the schools that Kearns and Jenkins identify have not yet hardened into distinct positions in the way they may have elsewhere.

4. "Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the U.S.," *Sociology of Religion* 57:1 (1996), 55-70.

5. *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 124-163.

6. Calvin Redekop, a pioneer in Anabaptist environmentalism, used a similar typology at the close of *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

NATURE'S STANDING AND ECO-JUSTICE

Nature's standing emphasizes the obligations humans have to the nonhuman world because of its intrinsic value. In contrast to versions of utilitarianism that view non-human nature solely as objects for human use, nature has moral standing.⁷ Only when we recognize that standing will we come to see non-human creatures as morally relevant others deserving to be treated in particular ways.⁸ Much weight then falls on the appropriate description of nature in order to ground that standing. Eco-justice theologians develop this primarily in terms of justice. Classic definitions of justice define it as desert—namely, what is owed to whom on the basis of who they are. Conventionally this has been confined to humans. Eco-justice claims a standing for nature such that it too falls under the purview of justice. All of nature, not just humans, have claims upon us.

Theologically speaking, non-human creation has this standing because all creatures and all of creation exist in independent relationship to God. They do not have their relationship to God mediated to them by humans. Human violation of the rest of creation is sinful because it is a violation of that God/creation relationship. The inverse is also true: human care for creation draws us into deeper friendship with God. Therefore, Christian justice work must not confine its purview to humans. Everything it has learned about justice for the marginalized and oppressed can and must be extended to non-human others.

MORAL AGENCY AND STEWARDSHIP

The advocates of nature's standing come under criticism from what Jenkins calls the strategy of moral agency. This strategy is skeptical of the kinds of descriptions of nature necessary to secure its standing. Such descriptions present themselves as neutral, objective, and scientific, portraying the world "as it really is." Advocates of nature's standing, acutely aware of the various and contradictory uses to which "nature" has been put, are suspicious of any such claims. "Nature" has been arraigned on the side of slavery, patriarchy, heterosexism, and hierarchy and has also been summoned up in critique of all those things. "Nature," as Jedediah Purdy puts it, "turns out to be flexible like that."⁹ For these critics

7. Not all utilitarianism. Peter Singer is the most prominent living utilitarian, but his work on animal rights is squarely within the realm of nature's standing.

8. Holmes Rolston presents one of the most articulate and persuasive philosophical arguments for nature's standing.

9. *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 12.

such flexibility exposes the modernist nature/culture distinction at the heart of eco-justice, which needs to be replaced with an awareness of just how culturally derivative any account of “nature,” even scientific ones, are.¹⁰ Since bad accounts of nature are the result of bad social practices, they argue, let’s concentrate on human agency and social practices.¹¹

Stewardship theologians share moral agency theorists’ focus on human agency and suspicion of descriptions of nature. That way of phrasing it makes clear the parallels between moral agency and stewardship, but may also obscure the differences. Stewardship theologians focus on one thing: the command of God to properly steward the earth. The primary agenda of stewardship theologians is the re-interpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 to “subdue and have dominion” as a command to care instead of to dominate. That command enjoins human practices of creation care and it is binding because it is God’s word, not because of anything intrinsic to nature itself.¹² The root problem, therefore, is not the biblical story or a misunderstanding of nature. The problem is human sinfulness. Greed and arrogance have produced a catastrophic and self-justifying misreading of God’s will for humans in relationship to the rest of creation. Unlike their secular analogues, the moral agency theorists, the suspicion of appeals to nature is not rooted primarily in postmodernist doubts about a nature/culture distinction but in a Protestant sharpening of the creator/creation distinction and a Barthian suspicion of natural theology. Stewardship also tends to be unapologetically anthropocentric. It is precisely the specialness of the human, understood as *imago dei*, that makes possible a hierarchical structure of steward and the rest of creation.

ECOLOGICAL SUBJECTIVITY AND ECO-SPIRITUALITY

Ecological subjectivity argues that both nature’s standing as well as moral agency, eco-justice, and stewardship are still reliant on unhelpful and damaging dualisms between humans and the rest of creation. Both assume a gap between human and nonhuman and then differ over how to bridge that gap. Ecological subjectivists reinterpret that perceived gap

10. William Cronon and the essays gathered in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: Norton, 1995) are perhaps the best and most influential examples of the moral agency critique.

11. Capitalism, for example, produces deformed descriptions of humans (*homo economicus*) and of non-human nature. We can and should focus on ways to rebel against market logic (through, for example, Community Supported Agriculture) regardless of our descriptions of non-human nature.

12. The foundational work on stewardship was done in evangelical circles and is primarily associated with Calvin DeWitt and the Ausable Institute. A Canadian Mennonite New Testament scholar, Gordon Zerbe, contributed to that work. See “The Kingdom of God and the Stewardship of Creation,” in *The Environment and the Christian*, ed. Calvin DeWitt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1991), 73-92.

as alienation of the human from its true identity. Instead of trying to bridge the gap we should reimagine the human and the rest of creation as a mutually constituting cosmological unity. As Nathanael Inglis helpfully puts it, "It is not simply human beings who steward the earth. . . . The earth stewards us" (174). Central to that reimagination is taking up a universal cosmological perspective. Where the particular cosmology of Genesis emphasizes human significance, the universal cosmology of evolutionary biology emphasizes human insignificance. So not only are humans just another part of the rest of creation, the relationship between humans and nonhuman creation is now egalitarian in contrast to the hierarchical relationship in stewardship strategies. Such a recognition enables, they hope, "an ecologically reimagined humanity" (53), one in which our kinship to all other creatures enables a renewed affection or "biophilia" towards them.¹³

Eco-spirituality, or creation spirituality, combines this with a critique of another dualism: creator and creation. As Thomas Berry puts it, "We bear the universe in our beings as the universe bears us in its being. The two have a total presence to each other and to that deeper mystery out of which both the universe and ourselves have emerged."¹⁴ In doing so it splits into two contrasting forms. On one hand, for Catholics like Berry and Matthew Fox or eco-feminists like Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sallie McFague, this means replacing or modifying the Genesis story with what Lisa Sideris calls "the New Genesis,"¹⁵ derived from cosmology or evolutionary biology while also replacing the transcendent God of "classical theism" (or the "absentee landlord" of stewardship) with the immanent God of Whiteheadian panentheism.¹⁶ On the other, Eastern Orthodoxy shares the fundamental conviction about the unity of human and nature and locates human alienation from nature in developments in Western thought, especially in the medieval sundering of nature and grace. But it grounds the unity of all creation not in evolutionary cosmology but in patristic theology. As such, though Orthodox theology

13. The term "biophilia" is E. O. Wilson's. Jenkins uses it at *Ecologies of Grace*, 56.

14. Quoted in Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 96-97.

15. "Science as Sacred Myth," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 9:2 (2015), 136-153.

16. Panentheism is a notoriously slippery word. Just insofar as it wants to "balance divine transcendence and immanence...it offers a general direction that should be welcomed by Christian theology. The problem is, however, that the concept of panentheism is not stable in itself. The little word 'in' is the hinge of it all. There may be as many panentheisms as there are ways of qualifying the world's being 'in' God." See Niels Henrik Gregerson, "Three Varieties of Panentheism," in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 19.

has “all the trappings of eco-spirituality,”¹⁷ it has been at once an uneasy ally for mainstream eco-spiritualism and a resource for all three strategies as they try to rethink a theology of creation adequate to the ecological crisis.

But eco-spirituality is also the broadest and most diverse of Jenkins’s categories. Eco-spirituality includes New Age movements and eco-feminism, Eastern Orthodoxy and environmental justice.¹⁸ It also includes several of the finest English-speaking “nature writers” such as Helen McDonald, Barry Lopez, and Wendell Berry.¹⁹ This strategy, like the others, has its own dangers. Here, the danger comes in eliding important differences. As Jenkins puts it, in less careful hands eco-spirituality “bends back toward anthropocentrism in its presumption to speak not just for but *as nature*” (56).

One might think of the three strategies as each focused on one aspect of the triad of nature, God, humanity. Eco-justice leans towards describing the ecological crisis as injustice towards nature. Stewardship tends to frame it as disobedience to God. Eco-spirituality emphasizes the alienation, and hence disfigurement, of humanity from the rest of creation.²⁰

ANABAPTISM AND STEWARDSHIP

Jenkins locates Anabaptism in the category of stewardship. He does so because the source he primarily relies upon, Calvin Redekop’s *Creation and Environment*, announces itself as a stewardship text. In his introduction to that pioneering volume, Redekop writes, “We are environmentalists because . . . we have inherited the Judeo-Christian world-view that human beings are given the responsibility to ‘tend the

17. Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 108.

18. By contrast, Kearns considers the possibility that eco-feminism may be a fourth category, but then concludes that “eco-feminist perspectives have influenced all three of the models proposed, and explicitly inform eco-justice and eco-spirituality.”—Kearns, “Saving the Creation,” 57. Kearns also treats environmental justice as part of eco-justice.

19. Berry and Gary Snyder’s argument over Christianity vs. Buddhism as a resource for environmentalism is a fascinating parallel to the argument between the Orthodox and mainstream eco-spirituality. See *Distant Neighbors: The Selected Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder*, ed. Chad Wriglesworth (Berkeley, Calif.: Counterpoint, 2014), 58-78.

20. This way of putting it suggests that one way to read Ellen Davis’s landmark study, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), is as an attempt to hold all these together. “Beginning with the first chapter of Genesis, there is no extensive exploration of the relationship between God and humanity that does not factor the land and its fertility into that relationship. Overall, from a biblical perspective, the sustained fertility and habitability of the earth, or more particularly of the land of Israel, is the best index of the health of the covenant relationship.”

garden,' to nurture creation."²¹ That volume also closes with a 1995 Mennonite Central Committee statement entitled "Stewards of God's Creation," which declared: "We need to hear and obey the command of our Creator who instructed and led us to be caretakers of and at peace with the creation. Faithful stewards of the gospel are also faithful stewards of God's creation."²² But the centrality of stewardship to Anabaptists is present long before this book. Stewardship emerges as a distinct theological strategy with the work of Calvin Dewitt and the Au Sable Institute. A Mennonite New Testament scholar, Gordon Zerbe, contributed to one of the early De Witt volumes and most early Anabaptist writing on creation care was from a stewardship perspective.²³

Two basic criticisms have been leveled at stewardship theology. First, stewardship theology is more vulnerable to accusations of anthropocentric domination than the other strategies.²⁴ Stewardship theologians concede the anthropocentrism when they argue that being created in the image of God "distinguishes us from the rest of creation. . . . It seems that the relationship between God and creation is somehow manifested most intensely in human beings."²⁵ But they vigorously deny that it entails domination. One way that they do this is by a kind of alliance with eco-justice. Humans may have a special role but that role cannot be known independently of a careful study of ecology.²⁶

A second way is through re-readings of the Genesis creation narratives.²⁷ Critics of stewardship often identify it with Genesis 1, which,

21. *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed. Calvin Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2000), xvii.

22. *Ibid.*, 218.

23. Gordon Zerbe, "The Kingdom of God and the Stewardship of Creation," in *The Environment and the Christian*, ed. Calvin DeWitt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker House Books, 1991), 73-92. For other early examples from Mennonite biblical scholars, see Willard Swartley, "The Biblical Basis of Stewardship," in *The Earth is the Lord's: Essays on Stewardship*, ed. Mary Evelyn Jegen and Bruce U. Manno (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 22-43; and Waldemar Janzen, "The Biblical Basis for Stewardship of Land," in *Still in the Image: Essays in Biblical Theology and Anthropology* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1982), 158-169. The writings of Art and Jocele Meyer are also important early examples. See their *Earthkeepers: Environmental Perspectives on Hunger, Poverty and Injustice* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1991).

24. "Anthropocentrism" may run the gamut from an acknowledgment that because we are human we see things from a human point of view to a notion of human superiority to the rest of creation to, finally, arguing that superiority justifies domination of the rest of creation.

25. Joanne Moyer, *Earth Trek: Celebrating and Sustaining God's Creation* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2004), 79.

26. See for example, Luke Gascho, *Creation Care: Keepers of the Earth* (Goshen, Ind.: Mennonite Mutual Aid, 2008), 20.

27. For example, Gascho, *Creation Care*, 43-44; Roy Kauffman, *Healing God's Earth: Rural Community in the Context of Urban Civilization* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 9-16;

according to them, is more vulnerable to the charge of anthropocentric domination. Stewardship theologians respond that contemporary environmentalist critics of Genesis 1 read it from their own perspective of power over non-human nature. The ancient Israelites, however, struggling to maintain an agricultural existence in inhospitable terrain, would have read it from a position of powerlessness and utter dependence. "For most of human history," writes Wilma Ann Bailey, "people dreamed of subduing the earth but only succeeded in very limited ways."²⁸ Whatever "subdue and have dominion over" might mean in an age of chainsaws, combines, and bulldozers, it could not have meant the same for the ancient (or modern) subsistence farmer.²⁹ Moreover, stewardship theologians point out that the "noticeable lack of violence and war"³⁰ in Genesis 1 in comparison with other near Eastern creation stories, culminating in the veganism entailed by Genesis 1:29-30, must surely impose a radical redefinition of "subdue and have dominion over." Another strategy is to emphasize a Christological reading of "subdue and have dominion over." The paradigmatic image of God's rule is Jesus, and so human stewardship should imitate Jesus' relationship to nature.

But even if stewardship theologians are successful in defending themselves against charges of anthropocentric domination, there is still another pressing issue. Stewardship seems to silence nature. As such, even their best efforts at stewarding the earth risk ignorance of the natural systems they are attempting to steward. "Obedient stewards," writes Jenkins, "conform to God's will, not nature's orders."³¹ This requires sustained attention to God's word, not to, or only secondarily to, nature. Here Jenkins correctly, I think, senses genuine affinities between much of Anabaptist theology and the principles of stewardship. Jenkins's inclination to place Anabaptists among the stewardship theologians is perceptive, reflective of genuine awareness of influential currents within Anabaptist theology. Moreover, Jenkins introduces the Anabaptists here at the end of his stewardship chapter because he thinks that the agrarian history of Anabaptism mitigates the risks entailed in silencing nature. But why would anyone want to run that risk in the first place?³²

Ched Myers, "'To Serve and Preserve': The Genesis Commission to Earth Stewardship," *Sojourners*, March 2004, 28-33.

28. "The Way the World is Meant to Be: An Interpretation of Genesis 1:26-29," *Vision: A Journal of Church and Theology* 9:1 (Spring 2008), 50.

29. See also Ted Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," *Direction* 25:2 (Fall 1996).—<http://www.directionjournal.org/25/2/rethinking-dominion-theology.html>.

30. "The Way the World Is Meant to Be," 47.

31. Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 84.

32. Jenkins also makes clear that many environmentalists are also willing to run this risk, primarily out of a philosophically motivated suspicion of over-confident claims to have

The theological issues here have a long and complex history that far pre-date contemporary concern with creation care. But the short version is that Mennonites have always been highly sensitive to the ways in which the doctrine of creation is used to mitigate the radicalness of Christian discipleship. The doctrine of creation has often been the mediator in the perennial conflicts between particularity and universality, faith and reason, theology and science, grace and nature, or special and general revelation. Anabaptists are not alone in worrying that this mediation too often ends up undercutting the former terms in favor of the latter and, moreover, ends up functioning as a theological justification of institutions, particularly the state. Not just the state, but common institutions of race, sexual identity, and family often end up being understood as givens of creaturely existence. The danger, as Kathryn Tanner notes, is that “social relations are assimilated to natural facts” and granted an autonomous value unrelated to redemption and the church.³³ Creation and redemption, nature and grace, become poles of a dualism in which the former terms mitigate the radicality of the latter.³⁴

For Anabaptists, opposition to such reasoning lies behind arguments for a Christological pacifism, arguments forged in opposition to Lutheran accounts of the “orders of creation” that served to cordon off the nation-state from radical criticism. We are nonviolent not because of anything that human wisdom and experience can discern but because of Jesus’ example, an example that was, in Paul’s words, “foolishness to the Greeks.” Steeped in such thinking, it makes sense that when Anabaptists turn from the ethics of war and peace to environmental ethics, they would recognize this pattern of reasoning in stewardship models and would view eco-justice and eco-spirituality as privileging “human wisdom and experience” over Scripture though those strategies might prefer to say they privilege Scripture’s wisdom literature over, say, the prophetic literature.

That analysis, though admittedly brief, explains what Jenkins means by saying of Anabaptists that “these communities morally organize themselves around kingdom orders of Christ.” Kingdom orders of Christ

“gotten nature right.” See William Cronon and the essays gathered in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995); and Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015), 12.

33. Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 82.

34. This does not mean Tanner is uninterested in a theology of creation. Much of her early work is dedicated to providing an adequate account of creation, one that doesn’t weaken critique but strengthens it. As Ben Ollenburger put it, “Creation theology is first of all *critical* and precisely of those institutions that claim authority from the orders of creation.” — “*Isaiah’s Creation Theology*,” *Ex Auditu* 3 (1987), 70.

is the opposite of “orders of creation.”³⁵ But there is that “yet.” Jenkins is suggesting that the Anabaptist history of “close responsiveness to the land” might just save them from the more uncompromising versions of stewardship.

Putting aside the question of whether “close responsiveness to the land” actually describes the dominant modes of Anabaptist agriculture, my question for now is whether Jenkins’s claim is actually what is happening in Anabaptist theology. Over the course of the last year, I reviewed dozens of books and articles by Anabaptist-Mennonite writers on environmental ethics. While stewardship discourse dominates the early work, it seems to have faded in significance as Anabaptist theology increasingly appropriates varieties of eco-spirituality, to which we now turn.³⁶

ECO-SPIRITUALITY

Eco-Pacifism

One emerging trend in Anabaptist theology is eco-pacifism. Frequently, Anabaptist theologians argue that nonviolence pertains not just to human others but to all of creation.³⁷ Eastern Mennonite University’s 2010 Quality Enhancement Plan, a five-year program for sustainability in the curriculum and on campus, was called “Peace with Creation.” Though eco-justice arguments are rare among Anabaptist theologians, sometimes eco-pacifism takes the form of an eco-justice argument. Nonviolence is what is owed to other creatures by virtue of their intrinsic characteristics. But, as both stewardship and eco-justice theologians are quick to point out, it doesn’t take long until this runs up against the problem of predation. The most basic observation of the natural world shows it to be indifferent to suffering and dependent upon violence. For most eco-justice theologians, this would suggest that nonviolence cannot be something that nature teaches us is owed to all of non-human creation (though perhaps leaving room for particular creatures). The stewardship theologian would argue that if it is, it is

35. One example of an eco-theology that relies on “the orders of creation,” but in careful and nuanced fashion well worth attending to, is Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

36. I borrow the three categories that follow from Luke Beck Kreider’s paper, “Varieties of Anabaptist Environmentalism and the Challenges of Environmental Racism,” first presented at the Rooted and Grounded conference in April of 2017, and appearing in slightly different form elsewhere in this volume.

37. The earliest example of this that I have found is Calvin Redekop, “Why a True-Blue Nonresistant Christian Won’t Waste Natural Resources,” *Festival Quarterly*, Aug.-Oct. 1977, 14-15.

something we learn from Scripture (the veganism of Genesis 1:29-30 and its clear echoes in Isaiah 11 and 65) not from nature.

Eco-pacifists respond in one of two ways. First, they may restrict the purview of eco-pacifism to animals. Andy Alexis-Baker and Tripp York's *A Faith Embracing All Creatures* is an argument not so much for a generalized eco-pacifism but for vegetarianism and veganism grounded in theological claims like those of the eco-justice theologians.³⁸ Here the refusal to kill or exploit non-human animals is an inescapable corollary of non-human animals' standing before God. Nekeisha Alexis-Baker's essay in this volume is instructive. "In Genesis 1," she writes,

the Creator makes the world and everything in it and has an intimate relationship with creation. . . . On each day, God alone determines the goodness of creatures and does so independently of human beings, who do not yet exist.³⁹

Like the eco-justice theologians, Nekeisha Alexis-Baker's case for veganism follows from the intrinsic value of creatures, rooted in those creatures' relationship to God, a relationship unmediated by humans. Moreover, like Aquinas, for whom all of creation is salvific, non-human animals "in their own way are necessary for human happiness." The sparrows and lilies "are not only valuable in God's eyes, they are also essential to Jesus' call to trust the Father more fully."⁴⁰

Important in Alexis-Baker's approach is the way she manages to argue for radical kinship as an argument for *theocentrism* instead of biocentrism. Her theocentrism stands in contrast to the other eco-pacifist response that roots eco-pacifism not in eco-justice but in eco-spirituality. For Nathanael Inglis and Matthew Eaton, only this can overcome the anthropocentrism they find to be essential to stewardship theology. Following eco-spirituality's call for a New Genesis in place of the old, Inglis argues for replacing stewardship with a model he calls "kinship anthropology" or "biocentrism."⁴¹ Kinship begins from similarity and interdependence, instead of difference and separation. As such, it is in accord with "the best science of the day" and can see "reality as it is."⁴² Eaton makes the same move, recommending "biocentric egalitarianism," and he also argues that

38. Andy Alexis-Baker and Tripp York, *A Faith Embracing All Creatures* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

39. "Doesn't the Bible Say that Humans Are More Important than Animals?" in *ibid.*, 39-52. Quote from p. 41.

40. *Ibid.*, 42n10, 44.

41. Nathanael Inglis, "The Kinship of Creation: An Anabaptist Ecological Anthropology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 30:2 (Spring 2012), 162-187.

42. *Ibid.*, 175, 174.

it is in accord with the latest scientific research.⁴³ Both then employ biocentrism in an argument for eco-pacifism. "By recognizing that we are all related, we can broaden the sense of loyalty and responsibility often reserved for immediate relatives to our extended family."⁴⁴ Kinship enables us to ask, "How can the Sermon on the Mount be applied to the entire earth community?"⁴⁵

The appeal of this approach to Anabaptists is easy to understand. Similar to the way eco-justice had recourse to decades of work on justice with regard to human others,⁴⁶ eco-pacifism builds on generations of Anabaptist theology of peace. Moreover, it rightly prioritizes, as William Klaassen put it, that the "long melancholy tradition of human violence against the neighbor as being of a piece with the equally long tradition of violence of humans toward the natural world."⁴⁷

But the conceptual problems with the pacifist version begin to pile up fairly quickly. Kinship, whether the literal kinship of family or the metaphorical kinship of people with place, by definition is local and particular. Modifying it with *universal* doesn't seem to expand it as much as change the subject. Moreover, it's not clear that human-on-human violence can be solved by our awareness of a common humanity or even kinship. Cain and Abel were brothers.⁴⁸ Inglis notes this, but it does not give him pause. He approvingly cites Elisabeth Johnson:

If we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, then the range of neighbors now includes the whale, the monarch butterfly, the local lake—the entire community of life. . . . "Save the rainforest" becomes a concrete application of the commandment "Thou shalt not kill."⁴⁹

"Thou shall not kill" with regard to a whale or butterfly or even the groundhog in your garden is straightforward. Less so when it is the deer tick behind your child's ear. Less trivially (perhaps), when an entire ecosystem—such as a lake and its environs—is at issue, things are much more complicated. The health of the ecosystem may require, for example, the death of some invasive species. As Lisa Sideris points out, ecologically

43. Matthew Eaton, "Eco-pacifism and the Anabaptist Vision," *Conrad Grebel Review* 29:2 (Spring 2011), 71.

44. Inglis, "The Kinship of Creation," 184.

45. *Ibid.*, 185.

46. Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 62-63.

47. William Klaassen, "'Gelassenheit' and Creation," *Conrad Grebel Review* 9:1 (Winter 1991), 32.

48. See Russell Jacoby, *Bloodlust: On the Roots of Violence from Cain and Abel to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

49. Inglis, "Kinship of Creation," 185.

speaking, “the good of the parts and the good of the whole cannot be harmonized.”⁵⁰

Eaton is more circumspect than Inglis here. We “must obviously still consume resources, yet consumption would be justified only in a limited, sustainable way.”⁵¹ But that backtracks so much that it now sounds as much like an application and extension of just-war theory as pacifism. It is important to add: “Overcoming the complexities and abstractness of this position will require specific conversations about what constitutes violence toward particular earth-other neighbors.”⁵² This call for specific distinctions with regard to particular creatures is potentially helpful, especially as scholars and activists begin to imagine what restorative justice towards “earth-other neighbors” might look like.⁵³

Here Eaton demonstrates awareness of a critique of the use of “ecology” in religious ethics that Jenkins has deftly summarized. Jenkins writes:

In popular culture as well as the environmental humanities, and especially in religious ethics, “ecology” first names a worldview shaped by appreciation and care for the complex relations supporting natural states such as stability, balance, or beauty. Secondly, it is a natural science that researches the principles of nature’s economy and the problems of human interference, thus providing the information needed for properly “ecological” policies. . . . An ethic of sustainability begins, in this view, by adopting “the ecological worldview” and following its natural laws. . . . However, establishing that worldview from the practice of ecological science proves elusive. Researchers find it difficult to establish structuring principles of biotic communities, let alone the evaluative concepts of stability, integrity, beauty or balance. . . . Ecological science cannot supply an ecological worldview because it cannot provide a picture of a natural order that could also function as a model of a moral order.⁵⁴

Another eco-spiritual argument, one not framed as pacifism, and one more sensitive to Jenkins’s worries about religious uses of ecology, is

50. *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 265.

51. Eaton, “Eco-pacifism,” 83.

52. *Ibid.*

53. See Elaine Enns, “The Relevance of Restorative Justice to Ecotheology,” paper presented at the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature meetings, Baltimore, Nov. 23, 2013.

54. Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 151-152.

provided by Tom Finger, another creation care pioneer among Anabaptists.⁵⁵ Finger pursues an agenda similar to that of Inglis and Eaton and engages many of the same eco-theologians, but with more sensitivity to some of eco-spirituality's pitfalls. Finger's term for kinship or biocentrism is "organicism" and its opposite is not stewardship but the Darwinian or "conflictive." Moreover, while for Inglis, kinship is monolithic; for Finger, "organicism" can take many forms. Part of Finger's task is to evaluate the differences among theologians who fall under the category. Following the lead of Eastern Orthodox eco-theologians, most important for Finger is to contend that a theological account of organicism does not require a process theology panentheistic God but rather is best served by the transcendent God of Christian orthodoxy.⁵⁶

Pantheism emerges as a logical response to the theologies that emphasize the transcendence of God at the expense of the immanence of God. In the terms of our discussion, this means theologies that emphasize God's hierarchical relationship to creation at the expense of God's participatory relationship. Whiteheadian pantheism is what becomes necessary when Christians no longer know how to talk about Incarnation and Trinity. One critical failure is to forget that God did not just become human; "God . . . became matter."⁵⁷ This insight was determinative for ancient Christianity's understanding of the sacraments and icons.⁵⁸ Finger devotes a lengthy and detailed section of his book to outlining a "Trinitarian theology of creation" in contrast to the more common Genesis center, leading to the conclusion that "Through Christ's incarnation, life, death and resurrection, nonhuman nature became as closely interrelated with the divine person . . . as it is with any human person."⁵⁹

55. Tom Finger, *Self, Earth, and Society: Alienation and Trinitarian Transformation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1997).

56. Tom Finger. See also his "Trinity, Ecology, and Panentheism," *Christian Scholars Review* 27 (Fall 1997), 74-98.

57. Elizabeth Briere, "Creation, Incarnation and Transfiguration: Material Creation and Our Understanding of It," *Sobornost* 11/1-2 (1989), 35. Quoted in Weaver, 127.

58. "Because of [the incarnation] I salute all matter with reverence, because God has filled it with His grace and power. Through it my salvation has come to me. Was not the thrice-happy and thrice-blessed wood of the cross matter? Was not the holy and exalted mountain of Calvary matter? What of the life-bearing rock, the holy and life-giving tomb, the fountain of our resurrection, was it not matter? Is not the ink in the most holy Gospel-book matter?... Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable; God has made nothing despicable."—St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 23-24.

59. Finger, *Self, Earth, and Society*, 309. Eastern Orthodox theology is also central to Jenkins's account of eco-spirituality. In a presentation at a 2018 National Council of Churches Faith and Order meeting, a Russian Orthodox priest made this point with reference to an Orthodox icon of the nativity drawn from the non-canonical Gospel of James. In it, Mary gives birth to Jesus in a cave on the road from Galilee to Bethlehem, surrounded by animals. Joseph is absent from the birth, having gone to find a midwife. For Western theology,

If that is the case, then, as Dorothy Jean Weaver points out in her masterful summary of Jesus' sayings and actions with regard to nature, "ordinary matter and natural phenomena—the stuff of touch, taste, sounds, sight, and smell—become the occasions of epiphany, the tangible, sensory means by which Jesus reveals intangible divine reality."⁶⁰ Weaver's essay sometimes sounds like a stewardship essay in its injunction to follow the example of Christ. But like Finger and the eco-spiritualists, she understands the Incarnation to occasion a profound redefinition of the relationship between God, humans, and matter. Jesus' example is inseparable from that redefinition. "If the New Testament writings depict humans nurturing the created world around them . . . they also portray the created world, in reciprocal fashion, assisting and nurturing humankind."⁶¹ We don't just serve and keep. We are served and kept. Therefore, the fact that Jesus' teachings are saturated with models and examples from the world of nature and agriculture cannot be merely pedagogically useful accidents but instead are revelatory of his redefinition of the God/human/matter relationship.⁶²

Finger is acutely aware of the potential problems with eco-spirituality laid out by Jenkins. In particular, he worries that organicism's emphasis on similarity, interconnectedness, and interdependence ends up short-changing diversity. Like race, gender, and postcolonial theorists who argue that classically liberal accounts of common humanity are tools that function to repress gender and racial difference,⁶³ Finger worries that organicism may do the same to other creatures.

Appeals to cosmic oneness underestimate the real differences and conflicting interests between ourselves and other creatures. They inadequately recognize that in making almost any environmental choice, the interests of some creatures must suffer. And they appeal

Joseph's absence from the birth, like his absence from conception, might just be another way of getting rid of human agency to make room for God's. But in this priest's reading, he is absent to make room for creation's agency. The earth provides the cave, the animals provide the warmth. All creation is necessary for the incarnation. This basic insight is behind the Orthodox theology that informs Finger. It may also be behind Sufjan Steven's famous Christmas song, "The Friendly Beasts."

60. Dorothy Jean Weaver, "The New Testament and the Environment: Toward a Christology for the Cosmos," in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 122-138.

61. *Ibid.*, 130.

62. Also instructive in this regard is Susan Classen, "A Spirituality of Creation Care," *Vision* (Spring 2008) 76-83.

63. The Ur-text here is Franz Fanon: "Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them." — *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 311.

to a motive that cannot provide the radical-other directedness needed for the most difficult choices.⁶⁴

By insisting on maintaining daylight between his theological account of creation and the evolutionary biology account favored by panentheist and process thinkers, Finger also leaves himself room for the specific eco-pacifism of veganism we saw earlier in Nekeisha Alexis-Baker. In other words, in the event that “conformity to nature’s processes” as understood by the best science turns out to mean accepting our status as predators, because Finger has not hitched his theological wagon to science, he can still make an argument for veganism.

For Finger, organicism does not lead to eco-pacifism but instead makes him sensitive to the difficulties of deriving actual ethical obligations from the fact of interconnectedness. He avoids both the categories of justice and peace, arguing instead for agape love. Like the eco-justice theologians and unlike the stewardship theologians, this love is “aroused by nonhuman creatures’ intrinsic value.”⁶⁵ More than the eco-justice theologians, Finger seems interested in the transformation of the human enabled by such love. Finger moves in this direction because of his sustained attention to deep ecology, process theology, and eco-feminism. Yet for all his theological and philosophical detail, Finger’s book has little to say about what that extension of love might look like in practice.

Agrarianism

A younger generation of Anabaptists, however, seems to agree that that extension of love looks like the organic farm.⁶⁶ In this conviction, young Anabaptists participate in a significant shift in the North American environmental movement. Whereas a generation or two ago, environmentalist turned for inspiration to the wilderness and to people like John Muir and Henry David Thoreau, today they increasingly turn to the farm and to people like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson. The old

64. Finger, *Self, Earth and Society*, 313-314, 324. Val Plumwood argues a similar point in her discussion of “Difference and Deep Ecology” in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 173-189. J. Matthew Bonzo thoughtfully addresses some of these questions in “A Curse More Ancient?” in *Rooted and Grounded*, 136-143.

65. Finger, *Self, Earth and Society*, 314.

66. Here I take up only those agrarians that seem to me best characterized as eco-spiritualists or who have absorbed the most from eco-spiritualism. But not all Anabaptist agrarians are helpfully characterized that way. Roy Kaufman, one of the most influential of Anabaptist agrarians, fits more neatly in the stewardship category. See his *Healing God’s Earth*. Another fascinating, and unjustly neglected, Anabaptist agrarian is Roger Epp, *We Are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008). Epp laments the loss of and imagines a return to a radically democratic agrarian populism, not of small organic farms but of large farms in revolt against Monsanto and Cargill.

wilderness ideal celebrated and fought for the preservation of places untouched by humans, thereby reinforcing the human/non-human nature gap. The garden, or small organic farm, celebrates places where humans are engaged in mutually constituting relationships with ecosystems.⁶⁷

Again, the Genesis creation narratives are central. Old Testament scholar Ted Hiebert reads Genesis 2 as an agrarian text. Genesis 1, according to Hiebert, is more clearly a stewardship text. Its injunction to “fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over” and its identification of the human with the image of God assigns the human a “powerful, managerial role in creation” from which comes “the modern conception of the human as steward of creation.”⁶⁸ Genesis 2, however, “assigns humans a much more modest position in the eco-system” (120). The human (*adam*) is taken from the humus (*adamah*). The animals are presented to the human as potential partners (2:18-20). And, most importantly, the command is to “serve and keep” not “subdue and have dominion.” Instead of stewarding creation, Hiebert reads Genesis 2 alongside Berry as calling us to “conform our behavior to nature’s own processes and demands if we hope to survive.”⁶⁹

When Jenkins writes that Anabaptists have “historically worked in close responsiveness to their land . . . thus keeping stewardship theology close to the soil of practical questions,” he is footnoting David Kline, an Amish farmer and close friend of Wendell Berry. But a closer reading of Kline suggests not a stewardship ethic informed by eco-spirituality, but an eco-spirituality informed by stewardship:

Anabaptists never much cared for purging from their everyday lives what today would be considered pagan practices. When pagan Europe was Christianized, great efforts were made to eradicate every practice of pagan or earth worship. . . . Since Anabaptists were so rural and closely tied to the land that gave them sustenance, some “earthy” practices survived in their lives and rituals.⁷⁰

67. Among Mennonites this shift was occurring already in Doris Janzen Longacre’s *Living More with Less* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1980), 44. For accounts of the shift, see Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education* (New York: Grove Press, 1991); and Purdy, *After Nature*, 231-234. For one Anabaptist account that continues to make use of wilderness see Todd Wynward, *Rewilding the Way* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2015).

68. Ted Hiebert, “Creation, the Fall, and Humanity’s Ecosystemic Role,” in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 120.

69. *Ibid.*, 121.

70. “God’s Spirit and a Theology for Living,” in Redekop, ed. *Creation and the Environment*, 63-64.

While this description of Anabaptists would be controversial to many historians,⁷¹ it may be true of the Amish. At least Kline is able to back up his claim with reference to several examples of Amish practices: the register of scriptures and hymns are seasonal; seeds are planted according to astrological signs; fence posts are dug during a waning moon (64-65). The Old Order Amish celebrate weddings on Thursday (*Donnerstag*—the old German god Donar was god of marriage and agriculture). “I can easily see why ancient cultures in northern climates worshipped the sun. We farmers in the spring almost do.”⁷²

Jenkins thought that historic Anabaptist proximity to the land might produce a stewardship ethic responsive to nature. It turns out that for contemporary Anabaptist apostles of Wendell Berry that looks like an appropriation of eco-spirituality. Such an appropriation can be seen in the work of David Kline, but it is also present in a younger generation who have returned to agriculture, but to a very different agriculture than the kind that was most common in Anabaptism’s rural history.

Take, for example, Fred Bahnson’s memoir, *Soil and Sacrament*, which carefully undertakes the eco-spiritual task of reconfiguring the God/nature/humanity triad into a seamless whole. There is simply no way of untangling the three objects of his quest. Or, better, any untangling becomes the symptom of disorder. Bahnson was the founding manager of the Anathoth Community Garden in North Carolina, a project of Cedar Grove Methodist Church begun in response to the murder of a neighbor. The garden was an experiment in community reconciliation, gathering church members, local families, especially migrant and low-income neighbors and youth with community service requirements. At Anathoth and in similar communities Bahnson visits in his book, diverse and often deeply wounded people come together around gardens and God, hence the title, *Soil and Sacrament*. A sacrament is a sign, but no sacramental element can be separated from the community and the communal practices of which the element is a part. To say that the soil is sacramental is only intelligible within the community gathered upon it and their practices of gardening, eating, and praying.

71. See Roydon Loewen, “Quiet on the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (January 2005), 151-164; as well as Redekop, “Mennonites, Creation, and Work,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 22 (June 1993), 348-366.

72. Kline, “God’s Spirit and a Theology for Living,” 69. Kline’s essay confounds conventional descriptions of liberal and conservative. It is the “liberal Amish” who have switched their weddings from Thursday to Saturday, from the agrarian to the industrial.

WATERSHED DISCIPLESHIP

Finally, perhaps the most promising eco-theology coming out of Anabaptist circles is the movement known as “watershed discipleship.” “Watershed discipleship,” according to Ched Myers, its primary exponent, intends a triple entendre. First, it knows that we are in a watershed moment of ecological crisis. Second, it locates discipleship in the context of particular bio-regions—watersheds. Third, it demands that we become disciples of our watersheds. Instead of self-identifying with arbitrarily and often violently imposed political boundaries of states, we should instead identify with our watershed, “that area of land, a bounded hydrologic system, within which all things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demanded that they become part of the community.”⁷³ Eschewing the abstractions of “nature,” “creation,” or “environment,” Myers invites us to locate ourselves in specific, particular localities defined by topography.

Borrowing from the Senegalese environmentalist Baba Dioum, Myers writes, “We won’t save places we don’t love, we can’t love places we don’t know, and we don’t know places we haven’t learned.”⁷⁴ In part this reinforces Wendell Berry’s claim that the question is not about saving the planet but about “how to care for each of the planet’s millions of human and natural neighborhoods.” It also adds a strategic claim. Prolonged resistance is more likely sustainable when people are fighting for something they are attached to. But it also points to the third piece of the triple entendre: we must re-learn our places, becoming disciples of our watersheds. Moreover, while the influence of Berry is unmistakable, they read him as a call to a particular *way* of inhabiting a place, not a call to inhabit a particular (rural) place.⁷⁵ Hence, unlike the agrarians, they are able to appropriate Berry for urbanites.

Watershed discipleship has much to recommend it. One feature most worth pointing out is that it is far more attentive to issues of environmental justice than is typical of other Anabaptist writing.⁷⁶ The

73. Myers, *Watershed Discipleship*, 10-11, quoting John Wesley Powell, *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons* (New York: Dover Publications, 1961).

74. *Ibid.*, 16.

75. Joe Wiebe’s study of Berry’s fiction provides a sustained and persuasive argument in favor of this way of reading Berry. The burden of Berry’s fiction, he argues, is to cultivate a critical social imagination through fidelity to place, *any* place in which a reader might find him or herself. Insisting on the primacy of one particular place—the farm—as most readers of Berry do, radically undermines the range of Berry’s challenge.—*The Place of Imagination: Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Community, Affections, and Identity* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017).

76. Canadian writers do better. See Di Brand, “this land that I love, this wide, wide prairie,” in *So this is the world & here I am in it* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2007), 1-10; Roger Epp, *We Are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008);

term “environmental justice” is often used interchangeably with eco-justice, or seen as a more anthropocentric version of eco-justice. But Jenkins argues that environmental justice is better understood in connection with eco-spirituality.⁷⁷ While significantly different in tone and content from much of ecological spirituality, environmental justice shares the conviction that the underlying problem is a misleading human/non-human divide while insisting that some humans are more affected by that divide than others. Like colorblindness and “race-neutrality,” an appeal to human beings in the abstract can only end up reproducing existing power structures. So environmental justice activists insist on the disproportionate effects of environmental degradation on the poor and marginalized and argue that such disproportionality is the most profound symptom of humanity’s alienation from nature. The ecological crisis extends beyond human destruction of the environment. It is that the poor, particularly poor people of color, are being destroyed along with the environment.⁷⁸ By directing attention to the effects of environmental degradation on the poorest and most marginalized, environmental justice activists pick up and extend the central theme of eco-feminism that “dominating and destructive relations to the earth are interrelated with gender, class and racial domination.”⁷⁹

Classic environmental issues such as deforestation and pollution are too often understood in terms of the damage they do to forests, air, and water. From an eco-justice perspective, the problem is that forests, air, and water deserve just treatment as much as humans. But from an environmental justice perspective, deforestation and pollution have disproportionate effects on the most vulnerable people. Deforestation is currently a problem for indigenous communities that lack the political power to protect their land. The people who live in the most polluted environments are most often people of color and the poor.⁸⁰ Climate change is transforming the homes of the Inuit in Alaska and the

and *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2013). See also Mennonite Central Committee’s work on depleted uranium in Iraq as well as on biotechnology.

77. See Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 94-95, as well as his *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 190-231, where he takes up environmental justice in much more detail than in *Ecologies of Grace*.

78. Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013) is one of the most useful introductions to these issues.

79. Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Gaia and God* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1994), 2. See also the opening pages of Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993). While Anabaptist thinkers like Finger, Inglis, and Eaton engage eco-feminists, there are very few who explicitly identify as eco-feminist.

80. The most significant statistical factor in the location of toxic waste sites is race.—Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 200.

pastoralists of Africa, while the wealthy northern countries can afford technological ameliorations. Holland has dikes. Bangladesh has floods.

Many of the essays collected in *Watershed Discipleship* are explicit about their identification with environmental justice movements. Sarah Nahar is clearest about this when she criticizes social justice movements for ignoring the environment and the environmental movement for ignoring people.⁸¹ Lydia Wylie-Kellerman's moving essay on water is never just about polluted water and its effects on aquatic flora and fauna but is always about the poor in El Salvador, occupied Palestine, or neighborhoods in Detroit.

THE POLITICS OF STORIES:

A FUTURE FOR ANABAPTIST ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

With watershed discipleship, the *politics* of environmental ethics starts to move closer to the foreground. By politics I don't mean just the machinations of the state bureaucratic apparatus. I mean it in the broader sense of deliberation and contestation among diverse constituencies about creation and deployment of power to achieve the well-being of the collective—briefly, enabling organized people to challenge organized money. As such it differs from the dominant trend in both religious and secular environmental ethics, including Anabaptist versions, which foreground the metaethical issues of anthropocentrism and nature's standing.

That move has a history, which, like the field of religion and ecology itself, dates to Lynn White's famous essay "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis." Virtually all this work takes for granted White's thesis that the stories we tell ourselves about the human relationship to non-human nature are determinative of ecological practice.⁸² "What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink the old one."⁸³

The field of religion and ecology begins here. Because White placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of Christian theology, he prompted an energetic search for alternative spiritualities, "a new religion," often in Eastern religions or Native traditions. Because by Christian theology he meant specific medieval theological developments and because he ended his essay by invoking St. Francis, rebel against those medieval

81. Sarah Thompson, "An Ecological Beloved Community," in *Watershed Discipleship*, 105.

82. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-1207.

83. *Ibid.*, 1206.

developments, he also helped pave the way for a widespread rethinking among Christian theologians of the old “dominion theology.”⁸⁴ This has had the interesting effect of creating and sustaining an entire subfield of religious studies.⁸⁵ Instead of silencing or sidelining religious studies, it promoted a flood of new work by scholars of religion attempting to find and popularize new stories. This was perhaps stated most succinctly by Thomas Berry: “It’s all a question of story. We are in trouble now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The Old Story—the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it—is not functioning properly, and we have not learned the New Story”⁸⁶ The development of a new story, taken up institutionally by Yale’s Forum on Religion and Ecology among others, required a turn to cosmology, evolutionary biology, deep ecology, and the foundational stories of non-Western traditions or a re-reading of Christianity’s own foundational narratives (in the manner of the Genesis 1 and 2 re-readings outlined above) or, frequently, some combination of the two.

But is it true that, as White puts it, “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to the things around them . . . by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion”?⁸⁷ Is it true that, as Jenkins summarizes White’s legacy, “Religious cosmology produces environmental behavior”?⁸⁸ It isn’t as obvious as it seems at first glance. Hindu veneration of the Ganges, for example, hasn’t stopped the Ganges from becoming one of the most polluted rivers in the world.⁸⁹ Wilma Ann Bailey recalls a visit to the ruins of Copan in the mountains of Honduras, devastated by deforestation by the ninth-century Mayan elite.⁹⁰ While Gary Snyder frequently made use of White’s thesis to privilege Eastern religions over Christianity, he began to question it when he became aware of massive deforestation in medieval

84. Laurel Kearns points out that this is one way to think about the differences between eco-spirituality and stewardship. The former follows White’s call to “find a new religion” and the latter to “rethink the old one.”—“Saving the Creation,” 62.

85. Jenkins reviews the critical literature in both religious and secular environmental ethics in “After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37:2 (2009), 283-309. “Nearly every book on the relation of Christianity to its environment refers to White’s thesis, and most introduce their argument as a definite response to it” (285-286). He develops his own pragmatist alternative to White (and to his own *Ecologies of Grace*) in *The Future of Ethics*, 67-106.

86. “The New Story,” in *Teilhard in the 21st Century: The Emerging Spirit of the Earth*, ed. Arthur Fabel and Donald St. John (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003).

87. White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” 1205.

88. Jenkins, “After Lynn White,” 287.

89. See Kenneth Dickerman, “The Ganges is Our Mother, there won’t be any future if she dies,” *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2017.

90. Bailey, 50.

China.⁹¹ James Cone, after citing biocentrist claims for universal interconnection, asks, "If white ecologists really believe that, why do most still live in segregated communities?"⁹² When the eco-feminist and animal liberationist Carol Adams takes up Genesis 1 her point is not to show us either that this is a story of dominion theology and therefore baleful (verses 26 and 28), or that it is clearly a vegan text (verse 29) and therefore commendable, but to ask why verse 29 has so often been overlooked. How do texts come to be read in particular ways and then become enshrined as justifications for violence? It is overlooked, she argues, because of the ways we are all embedded in the institutional violence of what she calls "corpse-eating."⁹³ The point is not that the stories religious people tell do not matter or that religious people are often hypocrites. The point is that isolating determinative factors—whether religious cosmology or capitalism or heredity—is difficult because such factors "never, in practice, appear in isolation." They only "appear already embodied in an environment" entwined with multiple other factors in ways often too intricate to track.⁹⁴ How humans are centered or de-centered cosmologically and whether we value nature instrumentally or intrinsically surely matter. But, these examples suggest, they matter less, or differently, than White thought because he had too simple a view of the relationship between theory and practice resulting in "the overriding of practical concrete judgements by generalizations."⁹⁵

Worries such as this have prompted a growing number of environmental ethicists—both religious and secular—to turn, in Amanda Baugh's words, to "more critical approaches to understanding the potential connections between religious worldviews and beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors related to the environment."⁹⁶ Jenkins's second book, *The Future of Ethics*, and Baugh's ethnographic work on racial identity in religious environmentalism exemplify that critical approach.⁹⁷ Such considerations are also central to Purdy's *After Nature*. In that book, Purdy

91. "A Conversation with Gary Snyder," American Academy of Religion annual meeting, Nov. 20, 2011, San Francisco, citing Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006).—<https://www.aarweb.org/node/548>.

92. James Cone, "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?" *CrossCurrents* 50, 1/2 (2000), 44.

93. Carol Adams, *Neither Man nor Beast: Feminism and the Defense of Animals* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

94. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 280-281.

95. *Ibid.*, 281.

96. Amanda Baugh, *God and the Green Divide: Religious Environmentalism in Black and White* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 3.

97. See *ibid.* and "'Green is Where It's At': Cultivating Environmental Concern at an African American Church," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 9:3 (2015), 335-364.

canvases four versions of American “environmental imagination”: the providential; the romantic; the utilitarian; and the ecological. The burden of the argument is not to recommend the ecological over all the rest, but to show how each can be equally *de-politicizing*. He doesn’t mean that in each camp one will find people who prefer to work outside of the state apparatus, though that may be true. He means that

Each form of American environmental imagination has called on the natural world to underwrite, to “naturalize,” one version of politics while excluding others from serious debate. Each version has in some ways powered political imagination and mobilization in support of political agendas; at the same time, each version has evaded politics, tried to shut down imagination and mobilization, by claiming that certain collective questions must be decided by nature, not by human judgment.⁹⁸

Some form of this de-politicizing pervades each of Kearns and Jenkins’s three strategies. This is perhaps most obvious with appeals to nature on behalf of eco-justice. But stewardship also evades politics to the extent that stewardship theologians think collective questions must be decided by Scripture, not by human judgment. Stewardship theologians may appropriately appeal to moral agency theorists’ skepticism about eco-justice’s confidence in their interpretations of nature. But stewardship runs the parallel risk of ignoring the politics of scriptural interpretation. The eco-spiritualists combine both kinds of over-confidence. Berry’s “New Story” combines a confidence in a particular interpretation of evolutionary cosmology with a textual essentialism about that story. That would suggest, at the least, that the most promising paths forward for eco-theology are not dependent upon a choice between eco-justice, stewardship, and eco-spirituality. We need to make sure that whatever strategy we choose, we don’t let it become de-politicizing.

Such a move should not be understood to set practice against theory or politics against theology but as a recovery of a material and political description of theology’s task. The critics are not saying that while theology mattered a great deal for those following in White’s wake, it is relegated to a secondary and derivative status in a pragmatist or liberationist approach. They are instead saying that theology at its best is pragmatist in just this way. In Jenkins’s second book, the three strategies of eco-theology have been displaced by two strategies of Christian social ethics: the cosmological one represented by White and his heirs, and the prophetic pragmatism represented by liberation theology and

98. Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 31.

postliberalism. In the cosmological strategy, Christian ethics uses “imaginative resources to reinterpret worldviews and thus alter the pictures of reality by which persons reorient their actions.” In a pragmatic strategy, however, “practical action . . . does not await the outcome of interpretation; it is itself a site of interpretive production.”⁹⁹

As Jenkins makes plain, while this may sound new to eco-theology, it has much in common with liberation theology. Liberationists have always understood that capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and heterosexism are the contexts within which Scripture is read and, often, over-determined, and they have consistently insisted on the mutuality of action and reflection. Postliberalism, too, especially the work of Stanley Hauerwas, famous for urging the importance of narrative but always simultaneously insisting that hearing and telling the story requires a community of distinct social practices because “Our *practices* in all their diversity—including our sinful ones—exercise coercive power over us with regard to our ability to think about these matters.”¹⁰⁰

Signs of such a shift are increasingly evident in Anabaptist circles as well. Justin Heinzekehr, for example, echoes criticisms of White’s legacy when he writes, “In theological discussions, we tend to exaggerate the influence that our religious values have on the way we live, and miss the influence that our material context has on our religious values.”¹⁰¹ While Heinzekehr locates a salutary materialism in the way watershed discipleship “tends to portray human communities as part of their natural context and . . . points us toward an understanding of our environment in its concrete form rather than in the abstract,” Luke Beck Kreider raises some questions for watershed discipleship along lines parallel to Jenkins’s criticisms of White. In an important series of papers delivered at the 2017 and 2018 Rooted and Grounded conferences, Beck Kreider agrees that watershed discipleship has moved further in the direction of environmental justice and concern for environmental racism than other Anabaptist writing on environmental ethics. Yet he worries that it does

99. Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 81.

100. Stanley Hauerwas and John Berkman, “A Trinitarian Theology of the Chief End of All Flesh,” *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 186. Jenkins’s pragmatism is also distinct in important ways from both liberation theology and from postliberalism. “It differs from some liberation theologies in its openness to how communities may understand what it means to overcome” (83). In other words, pragmatists are committed to reform, but not necessarily to revolution. It differs from Hauerwas just insofar as his postliberal “view of culture seems idealized, however; it seems insulated from the flux and border crossing of its participants” (89). For an account of similar themes in relation to Mennonites see Luke Beck Kreider, “Mennonite Ethics and the Ways of the World: Rethinking Culture for Renewed Witness,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 86 (Oct. 2012), 465-492.

101. Justin Heinzekehr, “In Defense of a More Materialist Church: Marx, Mennonites and Bioregionalism.” Presented at the 2018 Rooted and Grounded conference, Elkhart, Ind.

not go far enough and that it risks claiming that certain collective questions must be decided by watersheds, not by human judgment. The call to “become disciples of our watersheds” can give the impression that “the pre-political features of place—climate, topography, and especially water course—are most fundamental and most morally grounding.”¹⁰² In doing so, they risk neglecting sustained attention to the politics of privilege and the long histories of racialized deformation of those watersheds and their inhabitants.

Beck Kreider is quick to acknowledge that “Watershed disciples are attuned to these dynamics, and environmental justice is squarely on their radar,” but he discerns a disconnect between their stated concerns for environmental racism and their definition of watershed.

[T]he ideal of a just and sustainable America maintained through ecologically sound planning principles seems to overlook the power and significance of racism in the formation of our national political ecology. A watershed commonwealth can still be cleared of natives, red-lined, and racially zoned.¹⁰³

Though Beck Kreider doesn’t put it in exactly this way, he is channeling Jenkins’s pragmatism. Where Jenkins says we should begin with responses to concrete problems instead of cosmology, Beck Kreider urges watershed disciples to begin from the resistance movements of environmental justice instead of from hydrology. We don’t need to become disciples of our watersheds so much as disciples of the environmental justice movements of the most vulnerable in our watersheds. It is possible that that might turn out to be a distinction without a difference. But, Beck Kreider suggests, it is only *after* those histories are told and after that discipleship is undertaken that we can even know if the specificity of the watershed is the most useful way to locate environmental ethics.

Environmental justice starts not with the supposed “concreteness” of hydrology but with the *historical* fight against racism and the *political* insistence upon basic human rights. Upon that ground, grassroots politics struggle toward the healing of a region’s ecological relations. The fight for rights to clean water, air, and soil is what grounds concern for a particular *place*.¹⁰⁴

102. Luke Beck Kreider, “Varieties of Anabaptist Environmentalism and the Challenge of Environmental Racism,” presented at 2018 Rooted and Grounded conference, Elkhart, Ind., 8.

103. *Ibid.*

104. *Ibid.*, 9. It is only fair to note that something like this is precisely how Myers (and many others in the Watershed Discipleship collection) describes his journey to watershed

In one reading, Jenkins and Beck Kreider are urging the church to engage more intently with social movements. But that would miss the way they are also suggesting that doing so might prompt the church to recover itself as a social movement. As Jenkins puts it,

“The church” in this [pragmatic] strategy appears not as the community of a certain worldview, story, or identity. It is rather more like a social movement or a mission project, constantly seeking to open possibilities of response to God amidst difficult and changing conditions.¹⁰⁵

One might put it more strongly: it is only when the church ceases to be a social movement that its theology turns toward abstraction, from pragmatism and liberationism to cosmology.¹⁰⁶

It should be noted, in White’s defense, that there is a sense in which he seemed aware of this. Early in his essay, after reviewing the many facets of the ecological crisis,¹⁰⁷ he wrote,

There are many calls to action, but specific proposals, however worthy as individual items, seem too partial, palliative, negative. . . . What shall we do? No one yet knows. Unless we think about fundamentals, our specific measures may produce new backlashes more serious than those they are designed to remedy.¹⁰⁸

It is against this melancholic background that White was driven to step back and “clarify our thinking by looking, in some historical depth, at the presuppositions that underlie modern technology and science.” It wasn’t that White was somehow overlooking the possibility of beginning with responses to concrete problems, but that he had begun to despair of the responses. It was this skeptical pessimism, perhaps, more than a commitment to philosophical idealism or textual essentialism, that produced the argument. One might even venture to say that it is this melancholic uncertainty that produced the philosophical idealism. But if

discipleship as beginning with “Years of solidarity work in the 1980s with the Indigenous communities struggling for self-determination throughout the Pacific Basin.”

105. Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 84.

106. For some this means that theology must become ethnography. One problem with this is that very few theologians have the training to be good ethnographers. The more important point is that it is not always easy to tell when a theology is or is not rooted in Christian practice. The christologies of the early church are in fact careful reflections upon who Jesus must be in light of their worshipping practices, but are regularly mistaken for ethereal abstractions.

107. Importantly, though this was 1967, White notes, among other things, “Our present consumption of fossil fuels threatens to change the chemistry of the globe’s atmosphere as a whole, with consequences which we are only now beginning to guess.” — White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” 1204.

108. *Ibid.*, 1204.

that is the case, moving beyond White will mean more than recovering a healthy materialism. It will mean dwelling with and in the skeptical pessimism. Jenkins knows this, knows his pragmatist “strategy from below” risks “moving too softly and too slowly,”¹⁰⁹ that it may reasonably be suspected of seeming “partial and palliative.” Myers knows it too.

Advocating for and experimenting with models of watershed ecclesiology might seem unrealistic amid the super-concentrations of political and economic power today. . . . We will have to find the spiritual resources, fierce patience, and communal stamina for the long-term prospect of living and working against mainstream culture, while stubbornly incubating radical alternatives that may only germinate in the long-term.¹¹⁰

Myers, like Purdy and many others, envisions a radically democratic environmental movement from below in which drops in the bucket become pebbles in the avalanche¹¹¹—strong enough to break the concentrations of wealth, power, and privilege that maintain the current political stalemate. Because “the long-term” is exactly what is in question, there is no reason to be optimistic about that possibility. Is there reason to be hopeful?

David Roberts, Vox’s great climate journalist, has written as well on this subject as anyone I know.

The Very Serious thing to do is always to predict that things will not substantially change. If you say, “There will be a series of brilliant innovations that make clean energy cheap,” or, “There will be a sea change in public opinion on climate,” or, “Young people will take over and revive politics,” you sound like a hippie dreamer. Those aspirations are a matter of faith, a triumph of hope over experience.¹¹²

Yet Roberts’s claim is not to recommend faith and hope over experience but to get us to see that faith and hope are the products of experience. Myers does not call for incubating radical alternatives in the face of contrary experience, but because of his own long-term experience with radical social movements.

109. “Atmospheric Powers, Global Injustice, and Moral Incompetence: Challenges to Doing Social Ethics from Below,” *Journal for the Society of Christian Ethics* 34:1 (2013), 82.

110. Myers, “Toward Watershed Ecclesiology,” in *Watershed Discipleship*, 214.

111. I borrow this phrasing from singer/songwriter Trent Wagler.—“Four Men, Two Wheels and a Sustainable Vision,” *Bicycle Times*, Aug. 2, 2011.

112. See “Hope and Fellowship,” <https://grist.org/climate-energy/hope-and-fellowship/>; and “The Case for Conditional Optimism on Climate Change.”—www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/12/28/18156094/conditional-optimism-climate-change.

It may be that just such a social movement is now here in the form of the Sunrise Movement, a youth-led movement of thousands of people with hubs in 250 American cities demanding climate justice. The name suggests hopefulness, but their website makes it clear that they mean far more than that. "Together, we will change this country and this world, sure as the sun rises each morning," reads the homepage. Koheleth, the old man who writes what we call Ecclesiastes, opens his book with a vision of the rising of the sun as a harbinger of futility. He ends it by judging the youth for their frivolity. The Sunrise Movement is asking us to rewrite that book from the perspective of the youth with which it ends. They take up the mantle of the prophet. They have had enough of the old, in the form of elected officials from both parties, lecturing them on realism. "One generation goes and another comes," is precisely the realism in which they take refuge.¹¹³

113. Ecclesiastes 1:4.

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