

# The transformation of theology in the present climate crisis

**Author:**Jürgen Moltmann<sup>1,2</sup> **Affiliations:**


<sup>1</sup>Department of Systematic Theology, Faculty of Protestant Theology, University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Jürgen Moltmann,  
profjbuitendag@gmail.com

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Humanity is facing an ecological catastrophe. Culprits include a linear understanding of time which looks only to the future and the human belief in progress. This ideology has remained the same in the search for solutions; technological progress must provide the answer. However, the article argued that a green transformation is needed. Ecological justice is required. Not only the rights of humans but also of nature, the earth and animals should be respected. Ecological justice and social justice are connected. This pertains to the rights of future generations to achieve a green transformation of urban life (Moltmann 2019:87). The article proposed three changes. Firstly, nature should no longer be seen and treated by humans as an object to be exploited but instead as a fellow subject in the green creation community. Secondly, humanity should be seen as embedded in this community of creation. Thirdly, a new cosmic spirituality with a deep respect for life and everything that lives is needed.

**Contribution:** This article exposed and overturned the much taken-for-granted paradigm of progress towards the future that currently dominates humanity. It illustrated the consequences of this way of thinking. It proposed a radically different yet simple, spiritual and highly respectful alternative view of creation.

**Keywords:** ecological crisis; technological progress; spirituality; nature as a subject; community of creation.

## The technological transformation

After 200 years of ruthless progress in the industrial history of humankind, the planet earth and its inhabitants are facing a catastrophe. Air pollution with CO<sub>2</sub> gas is rising so rapidly that the dangerous two-degree mark has already been reached; the oceans are filled with plastic trash, which has a detrimental effect on marine life; the human population has grown excessively; the rainforests are being depleted; farmlands in Africa and Asia are approaching desert conditions. Urbanisation is on the increase. Cities with more than 10 million inhabitants are now considered mega-cities. The ecological damage is growing exponentially. Consequences include global warming, climate change, the extinction of species, melting glaciers in the Arctic, Antarctica, and Greenland, rising sea levels, and the flooding of islands and coastal cities. Winds at the Pole are changing. Europe is facing a drought. It is as though nature is fighting back and the atmosphere is taking charge. Humankind has never really had 'dominion' over weather and climate.

With its linear understanding of time, the human belief in progress only looks to the future. It forgets about the past. It disregards the waste that inevitably follows progress. We now have to face the fact that after 200 years of industrialisation, the air, earth and oceans are thoroughly polluted and filled with trash. Space is an example: outer space is cluttered with debris due to space travel. A linear understanding of time can be countered by the cyclical time of the nature of the earth. Such an understanding can prompt a circular economy and recycling. In that sense, our future lies in the trash (eds. Baumgart & McDonough 2008). Industrial transformation is underway: renewable energy, recycling industries, e-mobility, organic farming and 'green' hydrogen.

In the modern world, it is assumed that all problems can be solved through technology. The ideology has not changed. Still, we rely solely on industrial and technological progress. The more human beings of the modern era exert dominion over the earth and 'rule' over other creatures, the more they feel in control, like God. This ideology has plunged us into an ecological crisis. It will not lead us out of it. On the contrary, we will only become more deeply entangled in the problem (Moltmann 2021:58–59). A wholly different outlook is needed:

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- We need a green transformation and ecological justice. The rights of nature, the earth and animals should be respected. Ecological justice is related to social justice. This pertains especially to the rights of future generations.
- We need a new understanding of nature that liberates the earth from its alienation and object status.
- We need a new understanding of humanity, namely that human beings are embedded in the community of creation.
- Finally, we need a new cosmic spirituality which sanctifies lived life and engenders 'respect for life', for everything that lives.

## Ecological and social justice

Justice must be put into practice through rights and laws. Laws without justice can soon turn into injustice, as the race laws of Nürenberg in Nazi Germany demonstrated. For this reason, the combination of 'law and justice' is essential. However, justice is also meaningless without rights. Ecological justice, for example, is pointless if the rights of nature are not honoured, and social justice is indeterminate if the rights of future generations do not form part of the discussion. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights mediates between justice and law. Following the destruction of the Second World War, the United Nations formulated the Declaration on Human Rights in 1948. The time has now come to declare the rights of future generations and nature because we face an ecological catastrophe.

In August 1989, the Plenary Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, at their meeting in Seoul, passed a proposal to the United Nations to 'expand human rights' to include the 'rights of future generations' and the 'rights of nature' (see Lochmann & Moltmann 1976; ed. Visscher 1990:12–13).

The Rights of Future Generations include the following:

- Future generations have a right to life.
- Future generations have a right to possess unaltered human genetic material, that is, human genetic material which was not artificially altered by human intervention.
- Future generations have a right to enjoy a resourceful planet and wildlife, and thus a right to live in an abundant natural habitat and to preserve diverse genetic resources.
- Future generations have a right to enjoy clean air, an ozone layer in good order, and sufficient thermic exchange between the earth and the cosmos.
- Future generations have a right to enjoy clean and sufficient water, especially healthy and adequate drinking water.
- Future generations have a right to enjoy healthy grounds and healthy forests.
- Future generations have a right to access essential resources and non-renewable energies (or those which renew themselves only slowly).
- Future generations have the right to be protected from the products and waste of previous generations, which

endanger their health or demand incalculable costs for protection and control.

- Future generations have the right to a 'cultural heritage' and to encounter the culture that previous generations have built.
- Future generations have a fundamental right to enjoy physical conditions which allow for human existence in dignity. They mainly have the right not to be forced to accept wilfully inflicted material changes which unduly limit their individual or collective self-determination in cultural, economic, political, or social matters.

The Rights of Nature include the following:

- Nature – animate or inanimate – has a right to exist, that is, preserved and to be able to develop.
- Nature has a right to have its ecosystem, species, and population protected in their global interconnectedness.
- Living nature has a right to have its genetic heritage protected and developed.
- Organisms have the right for their species to live. This includes reproduction within ecosystems appropriate for each.

Interference with nature requires justification. This is only allowed if the presuppositions of such interference are determined in a democratically legitimated process and with due consideration of the rights of nature; if the interests causing the interference to outweigh the interests in the comprehensive protection of nature; and if the interference is not disproportionate:

- Damaged nature must be restored wherever and in whatever way possible.
- Rare ecosystems and especially those with an abundance of species, must be placed under absolute protection. The extinction of species is forbidden.

One day, natural subjects will be declared 'legal entities' in analogy to corporations. In that case, not only animals would have rights, but also forests, mountains, and landscapes such as marshlands.

## A new understanding of nature

Wilhelm Dilthey emphasised the difference between explaining and understanding: science explains, whereas hermeneutics understands. Objects are explained, and subjects are understood. So far, it has been left to the sciences to explain nature. It is becoming increasingly important to understand nature as a subject. This presupposes that nature and the earth should be liberated from their object status – the object of human curiosity. We must understand nature as a subject.

Since the enlightenment, reason was understood as merely 'instrumental reason'. Nature was and is still treated as an object by and of human beings. Science explains nature. Technology subdues nature. Commerce and industry exploit nature. This alienates both the exterior living environment and the nature of the interior living environment of human

beings. Max Horkheimer and Adorno (1969) call this the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*:

Humans pay for the proliferation of their power with the alienation from that over which they exercise power. The Enlightenment relates to things like a dictator to human beings. He knows them insofar as he can manipulate them. Scientists only know things insofar as they can produce them. (p. 15)

Bloch (1985:814) explains it: 'Our current technology exists in nature just like an occupation army in enemy territory. It does not know anything about the heartland'. In the biblical creation story, nature and other living beings also function as objects. The human is instructed to:

[B]e fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. (Gn 1:28)

The narrative connects this dominion with being an 'image of God' – a quality only attributed to human beings. This *imago Dei* – *dominium terrae* complex was the driving force behind the modern Western conquest of nature.

The Roman principle of rule has provided another important source for the modern usurpation of nature: *divide et impera* [divide and rule]. The mechanistic world subdivides the interrelations in nature into small pieces (called parcels), investigates them, explains them, and then pieces them back together according to human standards. In this way, human beings are responsible for a 'second creation'. This can be termed the 'reification' of nature.

In the long run, however, nature does not allow this but fights back. Human beings are inducing a natural catastrophe. They who want to create everything are now making their demise. This is the 'god complex' of modern humans. They 'explain' everything, even themselves, but do not understand anything. Should nature then be regarded as a subject rather than an object? Everything points to it. According to the modern worldview, the earth is a spiritless resource of material goods and energy supplies, full of natural resources that can be exploited. However, according to the current geological sciences, planet earth, with its atmosphere and biosphere, is a 'living organism' which produces and sustains life. This is known as the 'Gayahypothesis' or the Gaya theory developed by Lovelock (1972:579–580).

Every living being owed its existence to the fecundity of the earth. According to the creation stories in the Old Testament, the earth is a unique creative creature: 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it' (Gn 1:11), 'let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind'. Of humankind, it says: 'you are dust, and to dust you shall return'. The earth is a living creature not because it reproduces itself but because it 'brings forth' other life. No other creature does that, not even humankind. Not only is the earth the 'natural habitat for a diverse community of creatures', as

described by the Earth Charter of 2000, but it is the maternal womb which generates all life. According to the great prophet Isaiah, the earth also harbours a salvific mystery: 'Let the earth open, that salvation may spring up, and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also' (Is 45:2).

Romanian theologian Staniloae (1985), in his *Orthodox Dogmatics*, writes:

In western theology, there were repeated attempts to separate the redemption of humankind from nature. Eastern Christianity never separated them. As the work of the love of God, the world is destined to be deified. (p. 283, 294)

All of nature is destined for glory.

This is the Christian counter-image to the human destruction of nature. Nature and humankind have the same future. Orthodox Christians call this future theosis, 'deification'.

When Ernst Bloch compared modern technology with an army in enemy territory far from its 'heartland', he was treating nature as a subject. 'Because ultimately, the notion of a dynamic subject in nature is synonymous with the not yet apparent that-impetus (the most immanent agents) in the Real as such' (Bloch 1985:786).

Bloch approaches nature as a subject from a Marxist point of view. With the idea of 'nature as a subject', Bloch opposes the bourgeois 'reification' of nature and the idea that the technician is someone who 'outwits and exploits' nature. When Spinoza spoke of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, he, too, had nature as a subject in mind. However, for Bloch, 'working human beings' must apprehend themselves as 'subjects of history' before they can approach 'the productive cooker of the world of nature'. What Bloch has in mind is a 'possible alliance' [*mögliche Naturallianz*] between nature and humanity, a sort of 'alliance of technology' [*Allianztechnik*]. Orthodox Marxism in the German Democratic Republic criticised Bloch for his philosophy of nature. The students of the Republic ostracised him.

The idea of nature as a subject encourages humanity to abolish the tendency to objectify natural phenomena. Without natural phenomena, humanity cannot explain anything. Therefore, the original subjectivity of nature should be restored. To understand nature, it is also necessary to overturn the 'reification' of nature so that phenomena can be perceived in their original context.

## A new image of humankind

Today, the so-called biblical mandate for human beings to subdue the earth is challenged by many in light of the ecological crisis. This mandate in the creation story implies that humans have dominion over the earth and all animals on land, water and air. Psalm 8:6 takes it even further: 'You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet'. Statues of pharaohs in Egypt show how those who find themselves 'under the

feet' of the powerful are the conquered enemy. According to the Covenant with Noah (Gn 9:2):

[A]nd the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered.

Today, this sounds more like a declaration of war against animals than like a community of creation with them.

The modern world has always related the *imago Dei* to the mandate to have dominion. In the creation story, the mandate to have dominion is closely connected with the assertion that human beings are created in the image of God. The more human beings control the earth, the more they become like God. This would make God the destroyer of nature rather than its Creator. Theologically, it seems preferable to relate the *imago Dei* to the rule of God, in which case the human mandate to have dominion would be oriented towards the authority of God. The first commandment says: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery' (Ex 20:2). The apostle Paul writes: 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay' (Rm 8:21). The rule of God then means redemptive liberation, as was experienced by Israel. In the end, there will be a 'liberated creation' (Leonardo Boff). Human 'dominion' over the earth, nature and animals should therefore mirror the rule of God.

In the third beatitude, Jesus Kyrios says: 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth' (Mt 5:5). The 'meek' are Jesus' disciples. According to Matthew 11:28, Jesus says: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest'. Here, dominion over the earth implies a gentleness that tries to understand the earth, not the power to subdue the earth. After his temptation in the desert and before his ministry began, Jesus 'was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him' (Mk 1:13). One would expect the text to say that he was with the angels and that the wild beasts waited on him, but Mark puts it the other way round as if to say: Jesus was with the wild beasts as if with friends. He spread neither fear nor terror, and heaven waited on him.

To deal gently with plants means recognising their worth and value rather than merely regarding their usefulness to human beings. To deal gently with animals means to recognise them as 'co-creatures' in the creation community and, vice versa, to know oneself as a 'co-creature' with them, as expressed by the *German Protection of Animals Act of 1986*. Gentleness is compassion and empathy, mindfulness and attentiveness, patience and 'reverence for life', for everything that lives. Gentleness aims to collaborate with nature rather than exert violence against it. Love for the other is gentle. Such love is the precondition of all knowledge. In the modern world, 'science is power', and science is connected with technology. Gentleness instead combines science with wisdom.

Gentleness requires courage. Those who leave the protective barrier of the inner self wholly and behind open themselves up and become highly vulnerable. Violent people wear armour to protect themselves in their battle against nature. However, the armour hinders their ability to see. The gentle 'power of love' recognises reality without bias. It has longevity. It allows others to live and come alive.

In contrast, violence is rather short-winded. Gentleness is patience, whereas the recourse of impatience is violence. Gentleness grants other creatures their Lebensraum and their time to live. In the community of creation, gentleness treats the weaker creatures with care. The 'weaker' creatures are a necessary part of the community of creation where everything is related to everything else. A blade of grass can achieve what a human being cannot, namely photosynthesis – the process that produces the oxygen humans need to live.

## Cosmic spirituality

The word 'spirituality' implies that the Spirit of God touches human beings, and they experience and expect the Spirit. If 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rm 5:5), a piety of the heart develops. Such a heart is characterised by trust in God and kindness towards everyone.

If the Spirit of God is poured out into the human soul, the spirituality of an 'interior life' develops. Knowledge of self leads to knowledge of God. In the Soliloquies, Augustine wrote: 'I want to know God and the soul. Nothing else? Beyond that, nothing at all'. With this statement, Augustine became the father of the Western spirituality of the soul (Grabmann 1967; Moltmann 2013:71–95). The soul is not searching for God in bodily experiences but rather in the soul itself. The soul is a valid subject of the human person. Through self-awareness, human beings become intuitively aware of themselves and God.

If God 'pour[s] out [God's] Spirit upon all flesh' (Ac 2:17), a spirituality of lived life develops. 'All flesh' refers to every living being (Jl 3:1–5). 'When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground' (Ps 104:30). The metaphor of 'pouring out' is more evocative of God's 'breath' than of 'the work of thy hands'.

Calvin ([1536] 1845) (*Institutes* I/13/14) describes the Spirit as:

[H]is being [is] diffused over all space, sustaining, invigorating, and quickening all things, both in heaven and on the earth [...] while his transfusing vigour into all things, breathing into them being, life, and motion, is plainly divine. (p. 127)

Human beings perceive the sensuous world with their five senses. The original sense is the sense of touch. We touch and feel with the nerve cells of our hands. From the skin cells, other cells develop, i.e., the taste cells of the mouth, the olfactory cells of the nose, the acoustic organs, and the cells of the eyes. Near and far are distinguished through

sensing. The near senses of touch, taste and smell create direct contact with things. The far senses of hearing and sight require the media of sound and light. All sensory experiences impact the human condition, just as people's health affects their minds. For example, those who grieve intensely experience a sensory lapse – it is as though they no longer sense anything. The opposite is also true. The life force of love enlivens people from the inside and opens up their senses.

It is not only the state of people's health that determines their sensory experience. Culture also has an impact. Culture stimulates certain senses and tends to have a weakening effect on others. Modern media activate the far senses. Those who want to participate need to be able to hear and see. Modern means of transportation, such as cars, require that the senses of seeing and hearing are operational. Human beings are highly responsive to the light and sound signals that stimulate the far senses. The question is: What happens to the near senses? In modern culture, the near senses are often underdeveloped or suffer.

Human beings need not only to use their senses but also cultivate them. The eyes can see many things, but they discern little. People have to learn how to look. Their ears can hear much, but they often do not listen. Music teachers can attest to this. People need an education of the senses. The silence of outer space and the coldness of the universe cause a person to feel gloomy. Blaise Pascal (*Pensées* [1670] 1905) describes his reaction: 'The eternal silence of these infinite spaces makes me shudder'. Are human beings necessary in the process of the universe, or are they just a product of chance in the evolution of life on the small planet earth? If Kauffman (1995) is correct in that nature has a 'strong anthropic principle', then human beings could feel 'at home in the universe'. Scientifically, this thesis has been disputed, however. Then the question is: How can humans affirm their existence if they live in a meaningless world? Perhaps, there is no 'strong anthropic principle', but there is a solid 'Christological principle' which allows human beings to feel at home in the cosmos. There is a 'cosmic Christ'.

According to the apostle Paul's doctrine of reconciliation, God first reconciled the cosmos by surrendering Christ to death and through his resurrection into the new creation. Only afterwards, God instituted the 'ministry of reconciliation' for human beings: 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself' (2 Cor 5: 19). Human beings, therefore, exist in a cosmos that has been reconciled to God. For this reason, they can feel 'at home' in the universe. In the Letter to the Ephesians, the second act which follows after the reconciliation of the cosmos 'through his blood' (Eph 1:7), is called *anakephaleiosis ton panton*, 'a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' [εἰς οἰκονομίαν τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν, ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ, τὰ ἐπὶ τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐν

αὐτῷ] (Eph 1:10). Here the theological foundation for a 'cosmic spirituality' is to be found. Christ also died for the redemption of the cosmos. We are ushered into God's 'wide space' if we meditate on this.

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J.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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