


# Forgiveness and pastoral care in social justice and 'biocultural' relations in the Anthropocene

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Social justice is a central and fundamental principle for fostering peaceful and thriving coexistence in 'biocultural' relations. Its scope has expanded beyond ensuring equal access to the Anthropocene to encompass all spheres of life, including addressing the aftermath of past historical trauma, erupting military powers, global biodiversity, wealth distribution, well-being, privileges, health, justice and responsibility. Despite 'biocultural' differences that may result in inequality and injustice, every individual should be included in a universal principle of human dignity within our interconnected *glocal* world to foster sustainable living in all spheres of life. Amid ongoing conflict and extensive social and political challenges, forgiveness has gained prominence in addressing injustices in the Anthropocene and plays a vital role in building peace and unity. The article explores collaborative efforts to develop nonviolent and restorative solutions for peace and unity by emphasising the interconnectedness of human communities and ecological challenges in the environment. By focussing on forgiveness to redress historical trauma, current living conditions, and social and 'biocultural' relations within society, this article presents an approach to practical theological perspectives aimed at guiding pastoral care responses to injustices in the Anthropocene, offering hope for meaningful and positive change.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article offers practical theologians a theoretical and conceptual framework to understanding the role of forgiveness in addressing social injustice and promoting sustainable life in the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** inequality; injustices; Anthropocene; eco-theology; social justice; restoration; forgiveness; peaceful coexistence.

## Introduction

The Anthropocene has sparked a variety of overlapping and sometimes conflicting discussions, interpretations and worldviews (cf. Crutzen 2002:23; Slaughter 2012:119). McCarroll and Kim-Cragg (2022:1) describe this geological epoch as a 'period in which human activity has irrevocably altered the geology, biosphere and climate of the planet'. As humans have become dominant within the planetary system, the Anthropocene can be understood in two ways: narrowly as a geological concept and more broadly as a cultural concept (Trischler 2016:312). By examining the interconnected relationships between nature and culture, as well as between the environment and society, we can better understand the cultural dimensions of the Anthropocene and question the role of anthropocentrism in shaping our worldview.

The Anthropocene presents a new perspective on humanity's anthropogenic distinctiveness – our uniqueness among other species on earth. One of humanity's greatest challenges is to develop a globally accepted strategy that promotes biodiversity and maintains environmental sustainability in the face of human-induced stresses. This endeavour requires the practical application of research within the 'noösphere' – the sphere of human thought – which Crutzen and Stoermer (2000:18) define as society's collective knowledge, necessary 'to guide humankind towards global, sustainable, environmental management'. As Conradie (2022) rightly observes:

[T]he human [*anthropos*] has always formed part of nature but has now become a geological force of nature, so much so that the side effects [*not merely the artefacts*] of culture will be inscribed in rock layers for many millions of years to come. (p. 2)

A rich and diverse discourse emerges when nature, ecology, culture and religion converge. Christian 'eco-theology' has long viewed the ecological, economic and social aspects of coexistence on earth as interconnected within the family of God (*oikos* [household]) (cf. Conradie 2020b:2, 2022:18). Miller-McLemore (2020:434) coined the term 'the living human web' to yield a more accurate comparison for the subject of pastoral theology known as the 'living human document'. This term broadens the scope of pastoral care, extending it beyond an individual's internal experience to include the social, cultural and political interdependencies of both individuals and groups, along with the care practitioner (cf. Miller-McLemore 2020:434). The 'living human web', which encompasses more-than-human ecological influences, is a vital concept in practical theological perspectives and essential for pastoral care responses (cf. Hoskins 2023:205; Miller-McLemore 2020:424).

This article examines how practical theology can be reimagined within the 'ecological' context of human dependency and interconnectedness within creation rather than solely focussing on humans. The challenge posed by the Anthropocene stems from the interconnection of populations and communities and the various ecological issues they encounter. This includes dealing with heterogeneous spheres of life and encompasses aspects such as the aftermath of past historical distress, erupting conflict between military powers, global biodiversity, wealth distribution, well-being, privileges, fuel and food security, health, justice, and responsibility within an 'ecological' framework. Olff (2023:2) notes a concerning trend towards violent conflict as a means to achieve or maintain dominant or equal control of the Anthropocene. Therefore, this article will explore collaborative efforts to develop non-violent and restorative solutions for peace and unity by addressing the interconnectedness of human communities and ecological challenges in the environment.

Although the value of forgiveness within the 'ecological' context of the interconnectedness of communities and 'biocultural'<sup>1</sup> changes appears to be a neglected and underdeveloped concept in the current discourse on conflict and violence, particularly concerning dominant or equal control of the Anthropocene, this article explores the importance of practical theological perspectives on forgiveness and essential pastoral care responses. A transdisciplinary approach will highlight the transformation and restoration of social justice and 'biocultural' relations within the Anthropocene, where humans and human activity have become a 'dominant ecological force' (cf. Ellis 2011:38) or a 'planet-altering force of nature' (cf. Hamilton 2020:113).

This article presents a literature review that draws upon Browning's foundational insight of practical theology grounded in practical philosophy [*phronēsis*] to establish an interpretive hermeneutical process. Browning (1991:9)

<sup>1</sup>The term 'biocultural' describes the combination of biological, social, and cultural factors that affect human behaviour. *Bioculture* refers to the dynamic, continually evolving and interconnected nature of people and places (biological, cultural, and linguistic), with the premise that social, biological, and ecological systems are interrelated within a complex socio-ecological adaptive system (cf. Pretty et al. 2007:269).

delineates the interpretive process of practical reasoning and moral thinking [*phronēsis*] in praxis, highlighting a movement of 'practice-theory-practice' to structure the descriptive, systematic, ethical and strategic phases (cf. Ganzevoort 2009:7). According to Browning (1991:36), 'the sub-specialities of descriptive theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and strategic practical theology become movements within a fundamental practical theology'. Firstly, the article briefly explores descriptive perspectives on social justice in the Anthropocene, drawing from transdisciplinary research sources and highlighting social justice as a central and fundamental principle for peaceful and thriving coexistence. Secondly, it discusses the systematic perspectives on social justice and 'biocultural' relations in the Anthropocene, offering normative reflections and ethical syntheses. Finally, the article examines strategies to foster sustainable living in all spheres of life in the Anthropocene. These strategies include practical theological perspectives on forgiveness and essential pastoral care responses in praxis, aiming to transform and restore social justice and 'biocultural' relations.

## Descriptive perspectives on social justice and 'biocultural' relations in the Anthropocene

### Accountability in the Anthropocene

Practical theology has broadly been described as a field focussed on human-centred flourishing, suffering and justice, emphasising an anthropocentric ethos aimed at transforming human experiences and practices within the 'living human web' (McCarroll & Kim-Cragg 2022:1). However, as Moore (2022:4) suggests, it is crucial to broaden this focus to address the challenges posed by humans, nature and destructive ecological disasters. A transdisciplinary approach is essential for protecting, restoring and preserving the earth and its distressed inhabitants. Conradie (2020a:44) distinguishes between 'what is anthropogenic (generated by humans) and what is anthropocentric (centring around human needs)', raising the critical question: 'What enables human beings to become so destructive?' In response, Olff (2023:2) further asks, 'Can we contribute to reversing some of the consequences of anthropogenic contributions to the crises of the Anthropocene?'

The Anthropocene continues to be the subject of intense debate and scholarly inquiry, sparking discussions that seek to redefine the anthropocentric position and the evolving role of human beings within the earth's complex web of life. The ongoing discourse is rooted in the foundational values of accountability and social justice, both of which are essential for creating and fostering a society that thrives in peaceful coexistence despite challenges and opportunities. The Anthropocene reveals humanity's interconnectedness with the environment through 'ecological' interfaces. Instead of abundance, the new leitmotifs of the 'biodiverse life on earth' increasingly centre on thresholds, limitations and boundaries. Addressing anthropocentrism, Miller-McLemore (2020:436) argues that humans are not the epicentre of God's creation,

explaining that ‘humans are not just personally selfish, socially greedy, or politically evil; we are human species obsessed. Again and again, Christianity and popular culture persist in placing man at the centre of the universe’. McCarroll (2022:10) adds that in terms of theological anthropology, ‘the modern *imago hominis* of the “human as master” of the earth, has been replaced by the late-capitalist “human as consumer” of the earth’.

Recognising that the structural underpinnings of a human-centred life have an overwhelming environmental impact on many non-human species and ecological systems, humanity must become more aware of the threats posed by anthropocentrism to the earth and its inhabitants (cf. Burke 2022:3; LaMothe 2022:2; Moore 2022:4). As Coffey (2022:1) notes, while anthropocentrism has often been linked to global environmental challenges, it can also have a positive influence when it motivates people to conserve and improve the environment for the well-being of future generations. Therefore, humanity needs to revise its *modus operandi* and take responsibility for the need-addicted and self-centred principles that have contributed to the global crises of geopolitical tension, inequality and biopolitical exclusion (cf. Nel 2024:49).

In this context, the reciprocal relationship between socio-political processes, such as wars and political instability, and environmental processes, like climate change and natural disasters, has exacerbated eco-anxiety,<sup>2</sup> social dysfunction and despair for billions globally (cf. LaMothe 2021b:11; McCarroll 2022:5). For example, ongoing armed conflicts in Africa (e.g. the Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC], Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, Uganda, etc.) (Eberechi 2009:54) continue to devastate the region. Additionally, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, which was declared a pandemic in 2020, remains a threat (Burke 2023:3). The year 2022 will be remembered for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and 2023 as the year of the escalating war in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which involved nuclear threats and posed a global risk of further conflict escalation (cf. Olff 2023:1).

The complex involvement of dominant global powers – including the United States of America, Iran, Russia and China – in both socio-political and environmental processes has created a widespread reluctance to take decisive action in addressing escalating humanitarian disasters (Mejia et al. 2023:2). This complex entanglement of competing dominant nations and the rest of the world’s hesitance to address humanitarian crises has led to increasing trauma, loss of life and injury (cf. Javanbakht 2022:2; McCarroll 2022:3). As a result, the ongoing displacement of people and the growing refugee crisis have intensified global tension, distress and turmoil. Consequently, global social instability, poverty, and

shortages of fuel and food have worsened, particularly for those directly affected by ongoing conflict, which further deteriorates their already dire circumstances (Javanbakht 2022:2; Olff 2023:1; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2022).

The large-scale violations of human rights and escalating humanitarian crises in the Russia-Ukraine war, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict with its deep historical tensions, and the persistent armed conflicts in Africa are not the only threats to global peace and stability (cf. Eberechi 2009:55; Nel 2024:48; Vorster 2023:152). In a world marked by increasing global instability and social unrest, these situations frequently intensify into violent confrontations, which can escalate into more destructive conflicts and trigger new outbreaks of war. This growing instability may also lead to the emergence of rival military powers, further complicating an already volatile global geopolitical landscape (cf. Denton 2020:211).

Against this background of global instability, violence and escalating conflicts, people’s engagements, actions and attitudes emerge when accountability, fairness, equality and justice in the Anthropocene take centre stage, raising questions of existential and theological significance (cf. Thesnaar 2020:123). The impact of violent conflicts, particularly on the environment, is most acutely felt by vulnerable populations already facing difficult conditions, entrenched inequalities, and the struggle for economic and social survival. As a result, these populations are at greater risk of being defencelessly exposed to insecurity, marginalisation and systemic injustices.

## Social justice and equal access to the Anthropocene as fundamental principles

Social justice and equal access to the Anthropocene encompass more than a discussion of scientific theories; they prompt a reassessment of fundamental ethical perspectives (cf. Trischler 2016:321). According to Hamilton (2020:114), the earth’s state is no longer predominantly determined by the ‘blind forces of nature’, but by the guided decisions of intelligent, technology-enabled individuals directed by the conscious choices of humankind. The global political and economic networks of power and environmental tensions are intertwined realities that challenge ‘biocultural’ relations and expose people’s vulnerabilities for financial gain, such as predatory greed and egocentric pursuits of political and economic power. These factors contribute to increased inequality, injustice, environmental degradation and a loss of ecological accountability and responsibility, impacting individuals’ psychological health, personality, motivation and actions (cf. Hoskins 2023:212).

Conradie (2022:15), Kotzé (2014:267) and LaMothe (2019:430) emphasise that some societies, cultures and nation-states are unstable because of the real-life consequences caused by environmental deterioration, global warming, and the Global North’s exploitation and maltreatment of the Global South (as well as between the Global East and West). The imperialism

<sup>2</sup>LaMothe (2021b:11) stated that ‘eco-anxiety for Western individuals may also be connected to a conscious or unconscious realization that our illusions of superiority, dominance, and independence no longer effectively hide or distract us from our existential vulnerability and dependency’.



and domination of powerful nation-states at the centre of power over those on the periphery highlight people's challenging 'biocultural' relations that could incite conflict and hinder any significant progress towards mutually beneficial solutions for long-term sustainability in the Anthropocene. Parenti (2011:7) argues that we face a catastrophic 'collision of political, economic, and environmental disasters'. The continuous re-emergence and manifestation of conflict, social injustices, maltreatment, economic exploitation and alienation from equal access to the Anthropocene create a slow but certain process of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion (cf. Denton 2018b). This situation highlights the fragile coexistence among countries, communities and groups.

## Systematic perspectives on social justice and 'biocultural' relations in the Anthropocene

### Systematic perspectives from a normative reflection

Social justice and 'biocultural' relations have expanded from being concerned with equal access in the Anthropocene to include other spheres of life, such as global biodiversity, well-being, security, health, justice and responsibility. From a theological anthropology perspective, humans are described as representatives and stewards of God's creation (cf. Van Genderen & Velema 2008:315; Vorster 2023:5). Regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, economic status, political affiliation or any other factor that might lead to inequality and injustice, all individuals should be included under a universal principle of human dignity in the Anthropocene to foster a community founded on respect and moral values. Creating a community based on moral values requires prioritising care for the environment and the well-being of others, upholding human dignity, recognising the interconnectivity and far-reaching effects of human actions on society and the environment, and advocating for responsible and ethical decision-making in all aspects of life (cf. LaMothe 2021a:58).

A religious emphasis on anthropocentrism can be considered acceptable, provided that humans recognise that the term 'dominion' in Genesis 1:26–28 and the 'rule of creation' in Psalm 8:4–5 encompass both the right to utilise natural resources and the responsibility to protect and preserve the environment (cf. Brunsdon 2023:558; Coffey 2022:1). In Genesis 2:15, the concept of stewardship emphasises that humanity is instructed to be responsible for nurturing and protecting the earth. However, in a broader context, LaMothe (2023:9) emphasises that individuals have relied on the Abrahamic Scriptures, theological doctrines and Western political philosophies to establish and uphold a fundamental difference between humans and other species. Conversely, McCarroll (2022:10) argues that humans are intrinsically dependent on their stewardship and care of the earth. The interdependent relationship encompasses not only the careful management and protection of the planet's resources but also a profound dependency of humans on the earth's resources and

ecosystems for their survival and well-being. This intricate connection demonstrates that humanity's well-being depends on the careful and responsible stewardship and care of the environment. McCarroll (2022) emphasises the following:

Traditionally, pastoral theology and some eco-theology have imaged humans as 'stewards' of the earth, caring for the earth. However, this image disconnects humans from the earth, as if earth is an object for humans' care. Additionally, it inverts the deeper truth – that humans are actually dependent on and recipients of the earth's stewarding care, not vice versa. (p. 10)

Although a clear distinction positions humans at the centre of the universe, separate from the rest of creation, it simultaneously underscores the overlooked responsibility of humans, as moral and ethical beings, to reflect the image of God through their actions (cf. Bash 2007:104; Conradie 2022:12; Vorster 2023:5). Uncontrolled greed, desire and hidden motives for personal gain contribute to global inequality and injustices within 'biocultural' relations, which can be considered a moral and ethical crisis. The intentional delineation that puts humanity at the centre of the universe plays a crucial role in reshaping social attitudes and establishing relationships. Given that ethical conflicts, inequality and injustice can result in long-term harm to individuals (LaMothe 2019:428), the psychological and moral ramifications of challenges related to ecological sustainability – particularly in the context of human-induced pressures on the environment, social justice and 'biocultural' tensions – emphasise the necessity 'to experiment radically with new ways of thinking and living because the current paradigm is in a state of exhaustion, depletion, and death' (Crockett 2012:165).

In the midst of suffering caused by conflicts, epidemics, social inequality, injustices, ecological crises and turmoil, a range of distressing emotions emerges, including feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, loneliness and abandonment (LaMothe 2019). In addressing these distressing emotions, Romans 8:20–21 holds significant meaning when read in context:

<sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in the hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. (p. 428)

This passage is crucial for understanding Paul's message during times of crisis, as it highlights God's commitment to preserving and sustaining both humanity and the ecosystem in all its forms (cf. Solon 2016:157).

Amid the many existential challenges in the world, Paul refuses to abandon hope for the restoration of creation through God's intervention. He encourages those who see themselves as part of God's *oikoumene* ('whole household of God') to maintain their hope in the world's restoration (cf. Conradie 2019:1, 2020b:2, 2022:18). God intended creation to be a place of peace, friendship and goodwill; thus, hostility, conflict, revenge and retaliation are unjustifiable and unacceptable in

God's *oikoumene* (cf. Hägerland 2014:104; Rm 12:3–21; Col 3:13–15).

Peace and thriving coexistence are closely linked to each person's right to dignity, respect and a deep sense of fulfilment (cf. Vorster 2023:209). Living as participating members [*oikoumene*] in God's household [*oikos*] challenges injustice and oppression while pursuing justice as a means of fostering renewed ways of being and acting in the world. In order to prevent ongoing conflict and violence in complex social, political and environmental contexts, forgiveness can serve as a vital starting point for reconciliation. It helps bridge the divides between war-torn countries, societies and communities fractured by social injustices, while also addressing the inequalities rooted in past actions. Shifting perspectives on inequality and injustice presents a moral recovery issue, as the ethical framework violated by these wrongs must be repaired before transformation and restoration can occur (Kim 2015:6).

This requires a moral and ethical framework that is diverse, tolerant, inclusive and committed to justice – whether restorative or retributive – to eliminate inequality and injustice, fostering sustainable peace and coexistence in the Anthropocene. Embracing Christian moral values within the context of biblical teachings and the pursuit of justice, forgiveness and reconciliation necessitates the restoration of moral principles concerning good and evil and the ethics of right and wrong, which have been damaged by conflict and war. Horowski (2024:78) emphasises that 'forgiveness from a biblical perspective meets the ethical condition to resolve moral dilemmas'.

### Systematic perspectives from an ethical synthesis

In addressing social justice within 'biocultural' relationships in the Anthropocene, it is essential to explore the influence of ethics as a means of knowing and being in a world marked by significant human impact on the environment and ecosystems (cf. Moore 2022:4). Redefining the anthropocentric position humans occupy within the earth's complex web of life requires ethical values that prioritise the restoration and preservation of ecosystems while acknowledging their fragility, energy and power (Burke 2023:3). Committed to the elimination of injustice and conflict, humans are called to live in peace, with the hope that moral and ethical recovery will lead to justice and, ultimately, forgiveness (and reconciliation). These can play a transformative role in restoring the balance of social justice within 'biocultural' relations (cf. Jones 1995:258; Rm 12:9–21).

The connection between forgiveness (as a moral concept) and justice (whether restorative or retributive) presents challenges to moral and ethical recovery, as restoring the moral order that has been damaged is necessary before healing can occur (cf. Bash 2007:142; Kim 2015:6). Because forgiveness is rooted in the inherent rights to dignity, fairness and equality, its inclusive normative approach is morally and ethically sound

in the practices associated with global peace (cf. Bash 2007:34).

Within the Christian religious tradition, all human beings have equal access to God's creation and possess human dignity as relational beings, relating to God, other people and the rest of creation (Denton 2018a:3; Van Wyk & Vorster 2012:6). Unfortunately, despite being created to protect and sustain God's creation as his representatives, guardians and stewards, people find it challenging to escape the recurring cycles of violence and counterviolence to ensure their survival at the expense of others. The impact of diseases, violence, human rights abuses, militarisation, wars and neoliberalism with a market-driven economy places vulnerable populations at risk of defenceless exposure to social and economic marginalisation and injustices in the Anthropocene (cf. LaMothe 2019:424; Thesnaar 2014:1).

In response to the humanitarian crises resulting from environmental deterioration, armed conflicts and human rights violations, a pressing global demand exists to address social justice and preserve 'biocultural' relations. In this tension-filled world characterised by complex interpersonal, social and environmental challenges, forgiveness offers a powerful and non-destructive approach to addressing these issues. At the core of Christian theology, forgiveness provides a transformative way of life by restructuring and restoring individual and collective existence in the 'whole household of God' [*oikos*] (cf. Conradie 2019:1). The relational values of accountability and social justice are essential for individual and collective well-being, responsibility and connection with the Anthropocene to ensure peaceful and thriving coexistence.

From a practical theological approach, forgiveness highlights the importance of upholding human dignity, pursuing justice and actively seeking reconciliation (LaMothe 2021a:55). An ideal approach to addressing the related global humanitarian crises and effectively responding to the complex challenges of the Anthropocene involves implementing a 'process of forgiveness'. This process should create a safe and supportive environment for both victims and perpetrators to share experiences, gain insight into each other's perspectives, and empower them to work towards healing and pursuing a new future, both 'for the one who forgives and the one who receives forgiveness' (Dreyer 2012:12). In the process of forgiveness, human dignity and humanity play a central role, enabling victims who have suffered harm to release feelings of bitterness, anger, and the desire for retaliation and revenge (cf. Grey 2019:52; cf. Słowikowski 2020:12). It also requires perpetrators to seek and ask for forgiveness from those they have wronged (cf. Bash 2011:loc 2854; Baskin & Enright 2004:2). This process benefits both former victims and perpetrators, as reconciliation can be achieved through forgiveness, laying the foundation for lasting peace (Robles & Kim 2016:229; Thesnaar 2014:7). This aligns with the biblical perspective of repentance and restoration, emphasising reconciliation and healing to address historical injustices. Repentance and restoration are vital to the forgiveness process, as they demonstrate accountability for people's injustices and

their impact on the distress caused to the world, and express a desire for reconciliation and healing in 'biocultural' relationships (cf. Wirzba 2021:1). LaMothe (2021a) underscores that the forgiveness process needs to be a mutual collaboration:

We cannot have hope of surviving if there is no cooperation, no speaking and acting together between communities and societies. This will mean that people of wealthy nations (and especially imperialistic nations) must seek forgiveness for exploitation of other peoples, other species, and lands, while also aiming to repair inequalities and damage. (p. 67)

When confronted with another person's wrongdoing, forgiveness from a Christian perspective is seen as a process rooted in divine compassion rather than retaliation or revenge (cf. Denton 2018a:9). Forgiveness involves the choice to show mercy in response to an offence, opposing the natural urge for revenge. This was exemplified by Christ on the Cross when he prayed: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' (Lk 23:34). Rather than denying the injustices committed, forgiveness envisions a future marked by peaceful and thriving coexistence in the Anthropocene.

However, Paul Ricoeur highlights that forgiveness cannot be bargained for or demanded; thus, asking for and giving forgiveness does not occur on a contractual basis (Wirzba 2021:1). Whenever forgiveness takes place, it is an undeserved gift, much like unconditional love, but exists in a dialectical tension linking love and justice (cf. Dreyer 2012:12; Wirzba 2021:1). In line with forgiveness, as a gracious gift, without restriction, undeserved and unreserved, it does not imply that forgiveness excludes fair justice; rather, restorative justice should always be accompanied by love (Dreyer 2012:12; Junker-Kenny & Kenny 2004:13; Vosloo 2015:369).

## Strategic perspectives on sustainable living in all spheres of life in the Anthropocene

In considering a practice that can serve both practical theology and pastoral care, a transdisciplinary approach offers a hermeneutic response to restore social justice and 'biocultural' relations within the Anthropocene. Practical theology prioritises particular situations and contexts from within the larger Christian tradition as it seeks to recognise God's presence in the midst of life (cf. McCarroll & Kim-Cragg 2022:1). According to Horowski (2024:79), forgiveness 'of the most painful wrongs is possible only through reference to God's love', as it is rooted in God's redeeming and reconciling love through Jesus Christ. It is God's salvation and mercy that shines light on the world's history, revealing how God touches even the most hardened of hearts (cf. Fincham & May 2023:167; Hodge et al. 2024:2; Vorster 2009:369). This enables individuals to live in their society and the world as reconciled individuals, in relationship with God, one another and creation (Denton 2018a:8).

Klaasen (2016:1) underscores the critical role of faith in shaping identity and promoting peaceful coexistence within societies. Accordingly, engaging in the process of forgiveness is deeply

intertwined with the Christian way of life, seeking to manifest the kingdom of God in the world. This process encompasses both a 'horizontal' dimension, relating to interpersonal relationships and community dynamics and a 'vertical' dimension, referring to spiritual and transcendent aspects. Together, these dimensions aid in transforming and restoring social justice and 'biocultural' relations (cf. Levinas 2000:20). As Dreyer (2012:10) notes, forgiveness is a divine gift that should 'not be narrowed to the horizontal level of relationships with self and others but also includes the vertical dimension of restoring our relationship with God'. Reflecting on the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:5–15 and Luke 11:1–13, Morgan (2024:86) notes that 'Divine judgement and human accountability are central to the Christian gospel'. Jesus taught his disciples to seek forgiveness from God and to forgive others, stressing the connection between God's forgiveness and the act of forgiving as a way to imitate God. The Christian imperative to forgive should develop into a persistent journey to survive the Anthropocene and a way of living 'as participating members' [*oikoumene*] in the 'household of God' [*oikos*] (cf. Conradie 2019:1, 2020b:2, 2022:18; Denton 2021:7).

Practical theological perspectives on forgiveness offer an approach to applying forgiveness in pastoral care to transform and restore social justice and 'biocultural' relations in the Anthropocene (cf. LaMothe 2021a:56). Amid the challenges of global calamities and widespread social and political issues, forgiveness as a central and fundamental principle for peaceful coexistence has become associated with a multidimensional process of addressing injustices in the Anthropocene. Understanding the gift of forgiveness is essential to living in a Christian community, which calls on believers to be a participating community [*oikoumene*] that heals, reconciles, restores and transforms (cf. Col 3:13–15). Given this argument, practical theological perspectives on forgiveness could benefit social and 'biocultural' relations within society and strengthen humanity's peaceful and thriving coexistence in God's kingdom [*oikos*] in the world.

In response to God's compassion and forgiveness through Jesus Christ, Christians are required to engage in forgiveness to build peace and unity (cf. Bash 2007:98; Rm 12:9–21). This brings hope that societies can transform their behaviour by restoring human dignity, advancing social justice and repairing 'biocultural' relations. Rooted in forgiveness, the creation of restorative, non-violent solutions to injustices – whether from historical trauma or current living conditions in 'biocultural' relationships within the Anthropocene – becomes possible. Forgiveness, as both a moral and ethical concept, can play a vital role in pastoral care, especially for those who have suffered injustice and draw on their religious and spiritual values for resilience.

LaMothe (2021a:67) emphasises that, 'a radical pastoral theology involves a care that entails asking forgiveness for the sins of anthropocentrism and dominion over nature'. As pastoral counsellors guide victims of inequality and social injustices to find inner healing and peace, forgiveness offers a decisive moment to 'embrace a new way of thinking about one's trauma and the emotions it evokes' (Gobodo-



Madikizela 2002:15). In this way, forgiveness creates a community that values honesty, responsibility, servanthood and compassion, helping victims of social injustices overcome their painful experiences and restore social justice and 'biocultural' relations within the Anthropocene.

Forgiveness is highlighted as a process to transform and restore equilibrium, leading to fostering sustainable living in all spheres of life in the Anthropocene (cf. Conradie 2022:2–3). By facilitating forgiveness to create restorative, non-violent solutions to social and 'biocultural' injustices within society, it may promote sustainable peace, restore human relationships, and halt the uncontrollable and destructive spiral of turmoil and conflict in the Anthropocene. The importance of forgiveness within interconnected human communities and 'biocultural' changes can be understood through the lens of anthropocentric interactions and their influence on our identities, relationships and social norms for peaceful living. To restore social justice and 'biocultural' relations within the Anthropocene, a process of forgiveness should include the following objectives:

- Equal access to the Anthropocene.
- Transforming and restoring the equilibrium of social justice and 'biocultural' relations within the interconnected *glocal* world.
- The eradication of inequality and injustices within civil society.
- A universal principle of human dignity, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, economic, political, or other circumstances that could hinder sustainable living in all spheres of life in the Anthropocene.

Forgiveness is considered relevant when the presence of the right reasons is acknowledged and understood (cf. Schönherr 2024:5). Accordingly, the ongoing conflicts and wars between Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, as well as the continuous armed conflicts in various African countries, highlight the need for strategies to transform and restore social justice and foster 'biocultural' relationships within the Anthropocene. To integrate and apply forgiveness in praxis to address social justice and promote reconciliation while transforming and restoring 'biocultural' relations amid challenging global conflicts, it is important to facilitate and discuss strategies that help war-torn societies re-emerge as thriving entities. On 01 January 2002, during the World Day of Peace commemoration, John Paul II (2022) delivered a message titled *No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness*, emphasising the paradoxical interdependence of peace, justice and forgiveness:

Forgiveness, in fact, always involves an apparent short-term loss for a real long-term gain. Violence is the exact opposite; opting as it does for an apparent short-term gain, it involves a real and permanent loss. Forgiveness may seem like weakness, but it demands great spiritual strength and moral courage, both in granting it and in accepting it. (p. 1)

Granting and accepting forgiveness plays a central role in a society that promotes restorative justice in biocultural

relations, helping to release emotions and create spaces for positive actions. This involves reflecting on the strengths of forgiveness and how pastoral care responses can be implemented in real-world scenarios. As a normative reflection, forgiveness extends beyond anthropocentrism, aiming to overcome hostility and distrust within social contexts. It is an ongoing process with a positive impact that enables societies to transition from a divided past to a shared future, restoring social justice and 'biocultural' relations. To protect and preserve the earth for future generations, McCarroll (2022) reminds us:

[W]e cannot save what we do not love. Love reflects our interconnectivity with other beings. It is a generative energy that builds human and more-than-human communities and can nourish and sustain us even when we face the cataclysmic depths of crisis, and the trauma responses overwhelm us. (p. 7)

## Conclusion

This article presented a literature review that draws upon Browning's foundational insight of practical theology grounded in practical philosophy (*phronēsis*) to establish an interpretive hermeneutical process (cf. Browning 1991:9). It elucidates and advocates for forgiveness and restorative justice, thereby contributing to the growing corpus of literature that seeks to transform and restore social justice. The article emphasises equal access to the Anthropocene, addressing historical trauma, conflicts, biodiversity and wealth distribution while advocating non-violent restorative solutions. By exploring strategic perspectives regarding sustainable living across all spheres of life in the Anthropocene, one can discern the importance of practical theological perspectives on forgiveness and pastoral care in facilitating the restoration of social justice and 'biocultural' relationships. This understanding acknowledges human beings and their actions as a 'predominant ecological force' that ought to foster forgiveness and restorative justice.

Highlighting a strategic perspective, the article offers a practical theological approach for *glocal* societies to apply forgiveness in pastoral care, aimed at restoring social justice and 'biocultural' relations to strengthen and guide the human-environment interface in the Anthropocene. Against this background, to maintain peace, restore relationships, and end the destructive pattern of violence and conflict in the Anthropocene, forgiveness represents a process through which society could transform and restore equilibrium from a divided past to a shared, peaceful future. By fostering forgiveness and social justice, societies can achieve resilience and flourishing, even in the face of significant social and 'biocultural' challenges in the Anthropocene.

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## Author's contribution

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## Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was submitted to the North-West University Ethics Committee, and consent was granted on 25 September 2024. The ethics approval number is NWU-00866-24-A6.

## Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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