

From the theological encyclopaedia to doing ecotheology: On finding and losing the way

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This contribution is situated within the context of a 'Multi-Disciplinary Theological Conference on the Ecological Crisis in Southern Africa' involving colleagues from the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria and Zomba Theological University, hosted at Liwonde, 12–15 August 2025. It refrains from addressing ecclesial responses to ecological destruction (in Malawi) and, instead, focuses on the stated aim to invite multidisciplinary research in the field of ecotheology. It offers a series of 10 statements in this regard with brief elucidation in each case.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: On this basis, in the last of these statements, some constructive suggestions are offered on finding and losing a way and/or the way (forward) in ecotheology.

Keywords: ecotheology; fourfold paradigm; Malawi; interdisciplinary research; metadisciplinary research; multidisciplinary research; theological education; theological encyclopaedia.

Introduction

My contribution to this conference on ecotheology takes cognisance of several parameters: Firstly, it is situated in the context of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria (UP) and Zomba Theological University (ZTU) to foster research collaboration. Secondly, there is the decision of this conference to focus on ecotheology that is prompted by institutional priorities at ZTU but also at UP. Thirdly, there is the stated aim of this conference to invite *multidisciplinary* reflection on the ecological crisis in Southern Africa. Fourthly, there is a stark reality of the many faces of this crisis in Malawi. I presume that this will be amply addressed in other contributions to this conference – with the necessary expertise on ecological destruction and on the state of ecclesial and other responses to that. Fifthly, this is situated in African-wide debates on the impact of colonialism and imperialism and the urgent demand for decolonial ways of thinking. Sixthly, this is situated amid the global recognition that we live in an ominous time of transition, signalled by the shift from the relative stability of the Holocene to the volatility of the so-called 'Anthropocene'. There are ample signs of such instability (coronavirus disease 2019 [COVID-19] is but one example), leading also to political instability (e.g. the wars in Gaza, the Sudan, Ukraine and elsewhere). There is of course considerable debate on naming the 'Anthropocene' as such given diverging perceptions about the 'anthropos' who caused this shift in the earth system. What is at least clear is that any engagement with environmental issues cannot avoid a critique of the current global political economy.

It is a daunting task to address these parameters together. To make this possible, please allow me to focus not so much on the ecclesial responses to ecological destruction (in Malawi) but on the stated aim to invite multidisciplinary research in the field of ecotheology. I will do so by offering 10 statements in this regard with brief elucidation in each case. On this basis, in the last of these statements, I will offer some constructive suggestions on finding and losing a way and/or the way (forward) in ecotheology.

Ten statements with brief elucidation

Statement 1: The departmental structure of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria reflects the so-called fourfold paradigm in theological education introduced in the wake of modernist challenges.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Ecotheology in Southern Africa' under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Johannes J. Knoetze, Prof. Kenneth R. Ross and Dr Gertrude A. Kapuma.

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I am based in a Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape where we now have three areas of specialisation, namely Theological Studies (understood as Christian theology), Islamic Studies (including Muslim theology, philosophy and law) and Ethics (understood as the moral and religious foundations of society). What is in a name? Naming the Faculty of Theology and Religion at UP as such is of course not innocent. The two disciplines of theology and religion studies have long had an uneasy relationship because religious studies used to be incorporated under missiology as part of a *theologia religionum* or, alternatively, theology may be regarded as Christian studies, a study of the Christian tradition from the inside or the outside, but then under the umbrella of religion studies (because that is not necessarily religious in orientation). The word 'and' in the name and the order of the terms theology and religion (to keep churches satisfied or to reflect priorities?) are therefore striking features.

One may capture the history of theological education in terms of three major paradigm shifts. At first, patristic theology had to engage with Greek notions of *paideia* and gnostic notions of true knowledge. It required responses to Tertullian's famous question: What does Jerusalem (faith) have to do with Athens (reason)? In a monastic context, the 'curriculum' focused on the classic *trivium* of reading, meditation and prayer. In medieval cathedral schools, the curriculum changed to grammar, logic and rhetoric. Modern research universities, following Schleiermacher, recognised two contrasting needs for theological education, namely the study of religious experience [*sensus divinitatis*] and ministerial training (see Kelsey 1993). The threefold or later fourfold paradigm [*quadrivium*] followed from that with its classic distinction between biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology (including ethics) and practical theology (including missiology). We may be amid another paradigm shift (for the better or the worse), but for now, the fourfold paradigm still holds at most theological institutions, also in southern Africa (see Conradie 1997).

At UP, this is rearranged as Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures (instead of Hebrew Bible?), New Testament and related literature, Systematic and Historical Theology (why in that order?) and Practical Theology and Mission Studies (why 'studies?'). There is also a Department of Religion Studies. At Zomba, the nomenclature is more traditional, distinguishing between Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology.

Statement 2: The so-called theological encyclopaedia may be understood as a response to and a reinterpretation of the fourfold paradigm in theological education.

In the Reformed tradition, the modernist assumptions of the fourfold paradigm could not be readily endorsed, given the shift from a focus on God's revelation to human religious experience. At the same time, the need for specialisation in theological education and research could not be ignored. The term 'theological encyclopaedia' (from *ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία* – 'encircled' or one may say 'holistic' education) was used in the neo-Calvinist tradition as a way of explaining how

multiple theological subdisciplines are related to each other (see Heyns & Jonker 1974:274–311; Kuyper 1908). The detailed and rather rigid distinctions yield the impression of a neo-scholastic mode of doing theology that is typical of a Reformed Orthodoxy. However, at least for Kuyper (1908:v), the point of departure for theological education is not rationalist notions of *παιδεία* but *παλιγγενεσία* – being born again from the Spirit.

One important insight emerging from this is that, other than in most other disciplines, one cannot attend to any one aspect of theological studies without bringing all the others into play in one way or another. Imagine what would happen if an institution would leave out, let us say, the book of Psalms, the book of Acts (or Pentecost), the Council of Nicaea, eschatology, the role of virtue, environmental ethics, youth ministry or the whole of missiology! Note that the subject 'theological studies' is therefore best understood as a single discipline with multiple subdisciplines. Like philosophy and a study of the performing arts, it is in my view best understood as an academic *discipline*, hopefully a rigorous one and not an (empirical) 'science' (contra Heyns & Jonker 1974:125–228).

In every theological institution where such a theological encyclopaedia was offered as an introduction to theology, there was then the need to explain how the departmental structure is related to such a curriculum, also where that structure consisted of some variation of the fourfold paradigm. As such a theological encyclopaedia is often readily ignored in any further teaching, the question remained how such theological subdisciplines are related to each other. Given modernist assumptions in the various subdisciplines, they typically developed in opposition to each other.

Suffice it to say that the combination of *theos* and *logos* in 'theology' and its subdisciplines can be understood in multiple conflicting ways since God can hardly be the 'object' of scientific investigation: it can be understood as listening to the (living) Word of God anew, words about God (God-talk), a study of human views on God, or experiences of God, or (more vaguely) of religious experience/human spirituality, the study of (the self-revelation of) God, critical reflection on (Christian) praxis, reflections on a divine logic ('divinity'), words *to* God (prayer), words inspired *by* God (poetry) or the imaginative social construction *of* God, even as being taught *by* God (see the Dutch term 'godgeleerdheid' – which cannot mean someone who knows a lot about God!). In my view, it would be best to keep the debate between such views alive to avoid reductionistic traps.

Statement 3: Although the four-fold paradigm is widely retained in theological institutions in southern Africa, it is being challenged on multiple fronts.

The reasons why the four-fold paradigm is retained in any particular theological institution may be many, but these are probably reinforced by the need for transparency in churches and for prospective students and colleagues at other institutions. The role of theological guilds in the form of

academic societies in particular theological subdisciplines and theological discourses (including ecotheology!) should not be underestimated.

The modernist assumptions of the fourfold paradigm are challenged by forms of orthodoxy and postmodern modes of doing theology alike. A serious pedagogical difficulty comes from the far-reaching fragmentation of the theological curriculum, so that the challenge is always to fit everything into an overly filled agenda. The foundational role of biblical studies is challenged by self-consciously contextual modes of doing theology. The churches, as the so-called second public of theological education (see Tracy 1981), are often not satisfied that the three basic aims of theological education, namely spiritual formation, academic excellence and ministerial training (see Conradie 1997), are addressed adequately. At public universities (if not private service providers), the very place of theology is contested, especially given perceptions on the dominance of a confessional orientation of spiritual formation. By contrast, the emphasis on academic excellence alone is challenged by praxis-oriented forms of doing theology.

Add on top of all of this the societal challenges around the first to the fourth industrial revolutions and the cultural impact of that on everyone, the need for democracy and citizenship amid rising populism, the economic triad of poverty, unemployment and inequality, multiple forms of violence and then of course also ecological destruction, now in the midst of a shift from the Holocene to the so-called Anthropocene (Conradie 2022c, 2024). This cannot but pose the question of the relevance of theological education amid such rapid social change.

Statement 4: In a wide range of so-called contextual theologies, Christian theology is understood, instead, as critical reflection on Christian praxis.

Gustavo Gutiérrez introduced what may well be an emerging paradigm shift by defining theology as critical reflection on Christian praxis – in the light of the Word (see Gutiérrez 1973:xxvii). This signalled a recognition of the hermeneutical circle, of the inevitable role of preunderstanding, but also of the (Marxian) epistemic priority of praxis over theory. Reflection and theorising on such reflection are necessarily of a second or third order. At the same time, there is a need for such critical reflection, given the danger of systemic distortions, amply illustrated in Christian praxis. Note the choice of the broader term *Christian praxis* instead of the narrower ecclesial praxis. Also note that Christian praxis is one form of (human) praxis alongside others. In this sense, the anthropocentric shift (to study human experience) is maintained. However, for Gutiérrez, such critical reflection is informed by the light of the Word. Others would want to add other criteria derived precisely from an awareness of such systemic distortions. These include issues of gender, race, class, caste, culture, language and environment.

This is one possible definition of theology but not the only one. It should be noted that the word ‘God’ has disappeared in this definition; the focus is on human praxis so that

modernist assumptions are maintained. Nevertheless, in my view, this is not so much a *de iure* view of how theology should be done but captures a *de facto* description of how any theology is always and necessarily done. It applies to fundamentalism, white theology and Eurocentric theology alike. What is offered as ‘universalist’ or at least ‘global’ is nothing but provincial abstractions from a particular discourse. All forms of theology are contextual, notably also apartheid theology. All constructions of what is ‘from above’ come from below. One may further describe this way of doing theology in multiple ways, including the well-known Act-See-Judge-Act method, the pastoral cycle and so forth, but in one way or another, there is an interplay between action (including doing abstract theology as one rather minor form of action) and reflection on that.

Statement 5: Likewise, Christian ecotheology may be understood as reflection on a Christian ecological awareness, ethos, praxis and spirituality.

As is widely recognised, the term ecotheology (at best without the hyphenation) is derived from the three Greek roots *oikos*, *theos* and *logos*. It therefore entails reflection on the whole household of God. It is necessary to add the adjective ‘Christian’ because one also finds ecotheology in other theistic traditions (Judaism, Islam, various Indigenous religions). This raises a question on the relation between Christian ecotheology and such other forms of ecotheology and religious or religious studies. In my view, it is best to avoid inclusivist umbrella terms, for example, by seeing ecotheology as a subfield within religious studies – given diverging views on that which is of ultimate concern (to use one such umbrella term). The same would apply to the use of spirituality as another umbrella term. Instead, in *Christian ecotheology*, there is an underlying Trinitarian vision embedded in combining the three Greek roots, namely God, Word and the indwelling of the Spirit (see Conradie 2023).

It is important to recognise the emphasis on an ecological awareness, ethos, praxis and spirituality (see Conradie 2003). The argument is that environmental destruction is not only a technological, economic and political problem, it is also a cultural, moral and spiritual problem (see Conradie 2022a; Pope Francis 2015). The problem is not only a lack of awareness but that we find ourselves unable to respond commensurately, despite having the necessary political will, technological means and even the financial ability to do so. Note that an ethos assumes an awareness that an environmental ethos is more important than ethical reflection on such an ethos (although ethics obviously remains important), that praxis is in the same way more important than theoretical reflection on such praxis (theology) and that spirituality is typically the source of inspiration behind such praxis. Any adequate form of ecotheology should include reflection on each of these categories, holding them together to critique and in that way to strengthen that.

Statement 6: The emphasis on doing (eco)theology must be understood in terms of various orders of reflection, including doing theology, studying theology, teaching theology and producing theology.

The Institute for Contextual Theology (see 1991) perhaps did not coin but certainly popularised the term 'doing theology'. The emphasis in *doing* theology is on the role of the laity in reflecting on the content and significance of their faith for Christian praxis not only in the church but also in their daily living and in society. In that sense, all conscious Christians, also youngish children, can and do engage in doing theology. It is not the prerogative of learned theologians who need to teach the laity about Christian living. On this basis, I suggest that one can distinguish between doing theology, studying theology (at various levels but an opportunity that not everyone would have or would enjoy), teaching theology (again at different levels from Sunday school to postdoctoral formation) and producing theology, a term used deliberately in a pejorative way to describe the proliferation of research publications that hardly have an impact on Christian praxis. I do plead guilty in this regard!

For Christian ecotheology, this may be both helpful and rather telling. Everyone may be engaged in doing ecotheology – for better or for worse. There are by now ample (African) students studying ecotheology, especially at the postgraduate level, one may say in recognition of the stark challenges that are there. There is far less in terms of teaching ecotheology, especially at the undergraduate level as there seems to be so little room within the curriculum to do so. While many bemoan the paucity of publications in the field of ecotheology, this is simply not true, at least not in general given the more than 20000 available titles and the impact that this has had on all other theological discourses. It may be true in specific contexts. Whether that is true in the Malawian context is debatable as the sheer number of such publications is often underestimated (see Moyo 2011, 2017; Moyo & Ott 2002; Owens 1997; Phiri 1996; Sindima 1989), although what is published is not always readily available and may be outdated. What is at least clear is that it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel as this often leads to a sermonising approach with its typical three points: (1) there is a serious ecological problem; (2) the Bible and the Christian faith embody some ecological wisdom and (3) the church must address such problems in its practices, ministries and missions. All of this may be true but does not help to take things forward.

Statement 7: Doing (eco)theology must also be understood in terms of various orders of abstraction.

If ecotheology may be understood as critical reflection on a Christian ecological awareness, ethos, praxis and spirituality (at least according to one definition), then one can also identify various levels of abstraction. The reflection embedded in doing theology, thinking on one's feet, involves a first level of abstraction. It inspires a range of further Christian practices, including worship, prayer, the task of up-building Christian communities (ecodomy, building communities of character – see Müller-Fahrenholz 1995), ministries and missions and a life of discipleship that should include caring for God's beloved creation (or 'earth keeping' – Conradie 2011). If so, then I would suggest that practical theology entails a second order of abstraction by

reflecting on such practices, especially where the focus is on description (seeing in terms of the Act-See-Judge-Act spiral). The role of 'judging' involves a range of critical and constructive tasks that may be found in disciplines such as biblical studies, historical theology (retrieving sources from the past), Christian ethics and in practical theology as well. This arguably entails a third order of abstraction. Systematic theology insofar as it entails a critical reflection on the implied content and significance of the Christian faith, together with a theology of mission then represents a fourth order of abstraction. Reflections on methodology in all disciplines, including hermeneutics, historiography, what is called 'fundamental theology' or prolegomena, are then a fifth order of abstraction. The dangers of each level of abstraction should be clear but so is the need that may arise for such forms of abstraction. My contribution here should be understood as in line with such a fifth order of abstraction – with the notable limitations that this implies for having an impact on ecclesial responses to ecological destruction in Malawi.

And ecotheology then? It should be obvious that the full range of abstractions is also found in Christian ecotheology. There may be a blurring of disciplinary boundaries (see the discussion under statement 8), a critique of misconstrued abstractions (or of misplaced concreteness) and a focus on facing ecological challenges, but the same five orders of abstraction are evident from the literature.

Statement 8: A reintegration of the theological curriculum is attempted through biblical, theological and contextual hermeneutics and/or through praxis-based modes of doing (eco)theology but with limited success.

A hermeneutical awareness emerges in contexts where interpretation (e.g. of biblical texts) is troubled by radical plurality and systemic distortions (Tracy 1987). The 'apartheid Bible' is one example, but so is the awareness in liberation theology that it is the winners, not the poor and oppressed, who write history (and the Bible) that the biblical authors (as far as we know) were men reflecting a male perspective and that the whole Bible was written by humans who may (or may not) reflect an anthropocentric bias. The hermeneutical turn in the humanities and social sciences not only shaped the study of Christian theology but also enabled the possible reintegration of the theological curriculum through holding together a biblical, theological and contextual hermeneutics (see Conradie 2020a).

This is at least true at the University of the Western Cape where I am based, following the pioneering work of Bernard Latagan, Jaap Durand, Daan Cloete, Denise Ackermann and especially Dirk Smit. Since 2000, all modules are called theological studies. Theology is understood as relating text with context, God with the world, church with society, the gospel with culture. In evangelical terms, it may then be understood as an ongoing listening to the Word of God, always anew (see Smit 1991). Praxis-based modes of doing contextual theology follow the same pattern to disturb disciplinary boundaries. This applies especially to African

women's theology with its modes of story telling, weaving biblical stories together with the situated life stories of women through various modes of critical reflection (also through artistic and performative expressions).

In my view, such integrative attempts cannot hide the methodological conflict between biblical, theological and contextual modes of hermeneutics. This conflict may be illustrated by the problem posed by doctrinal impositions on biblical exegesis. The establishment of distinct disciplines and subdisciplines in biblical studies was only possible once scholars could liberate themselves from ecclesial and doctrinal authorities and impositions. These disciplines are the product of the Enlightenment. Likewise, the study of the history of Christianity emerged on the basis of forms of historiography derived from secular disciplines that allowed for a critical study of such histories. The subdisciplines of practical theology too had to liberate themselves from the hold of systematic theology to allow for empirical modes of doing theology, that is, by reflecting on the religious experiences/ spiritualities of Christians in Christian communities.

What this yielded is in my view disastrous, namely attempts (e.g. in research proposals) to relate text to context in immediate ways without cognisance of the multiple ways in which contemporary appropriations are mediated, for the better but also for the worse, through the many trajectories of the various confessional traditions and their practices, doctrinal constructs and a range of ethical categories (worldviews, visions, virtues, values, obligations and responsibilities). Such attempts to reinvent the wheel are either naïve or arrogant, given the depth of reflections on such categories. Either way, attempts at integrating the curriculum constantly fail as existing subdisciplines seek to maintain their distinctiveness and autonomy. The call for reintegration is far easier said than done!

Statement 9: A reintegration of the theological curriculum is attempted through an emphasis on inter-, multi- and metadisciplinary approaches, often leading to confusion on the contribution that theology can make.

Philosophy may be the mother of all disciplines and theology the queen of the sciences. In ancient Greece or Rome, all studies culminated in rhetoric since one required the necessary content for public speaking. The distinction between various disciplines is not primary but secondary and the result of ever finer distinctions that are made. Not even the distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities can hold any longer. Human beings form part of the ecosystems that they study so that the distinction between nature and culture cannot be rigid (Descola 2013). In the 'Anthropocene', human impact is geologically inscribed in rock layers for millions of years to come. Advocates for the 'Capitalocene' would insist that geology cannot be separated from economics and politics either. A working mother who stays at home to care for a sick child needs to juggle things that are studied – and pulled apart – in medicine, economics, sociology, psychology and education.

It therefore comes as no surprise that there are multiple calls for interdisciplinary learning, teaching and research, that is, to relate two disciplines with each other because this creates an environment for innovation in either. Interdisciplinary learning is not only very common but is also the default approach in any undergraduate curriculum where students, more than teachers, must relate various subjects and modules to each other. Interdisciplinary teaching is less common and often frustrating to lecturers who recognise the need to develop expertise in any particular discipline. Interdisciplinary research can come in at least two forms, namely where one person has mastered more than one discipline or (more typically) where two or more persons draw on one another's work in conversation with each other. While conversation between disciplines is possible, desirable and fruitful, both forms of interdisciplinary collaborative work are far more difficult than is sometimes assumed in such calls. For one person to contribute to more than one discipline with integrity is exceedingly difficult precisely given the ever-increasing need for specialisation. This clearly applies to Christian theology and its subdisciplines and to discourse in ecotheology as well. The danger is not only disciplinary imperialism but that any one discipline will be hollowed out by underplaying the value of such specialisation. This can only lead to shallow, wishy-washy research where insights are merely reiterated as if novel. It is difficult enough to master any one discipline (or subdiscipline), to be on the cutting edge of that discipline. Note that collaborative interdisciplinary research assumes the existence of well-established disciplines and a solid foundation in each.

There is a danger here for those working in ecotheology, namely to write about deforestation as if one has expertise in that area. The same applies to many other examples. A similar danger applies where two or more persons draw on one another's work in conversation with each other, namely that such conversation remains shallow (not drawing from the cutting edge in the other discipline) or is not really mutual. In ecotheology, one may draw, for example, on research in climate science but do climate scientists find contributions in ecotheology valuable for innovation in their own research? If not, can this really be called *interdisciplinary*?

The term 'multi-disciplinary' is best used with reference to scholarly attempts to address (in the hope of 'solving') complex (or 'wicked'), multidimensional societal problems that require inputs from a variety of disciplines. This requires a common understanding of the problem and collaboration throughout the process. The term 'transversal' is helpful here to indicate how one aspect is often a dimension of another and therefore cannot be treated in isolation. Everything may be political, but politics is not everything (Kuitert 1986). The same applies to economics, hermeneutics, linguistics and ethics. It certainly applies to materiality and positionality – and therefore to issues of gender, race, class, culture and environment. One may argue that all disciplines emerged from philosophy, that all are historical or sociological or linguistic or algorithmic, but that does not mean that, for example, linguistics should swallow up all other disciplines.

The terms cross-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary (which could mean roughly the same) are sometimes used rather loosely and as rough synonyms for interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary research. The term 'cross-disciplinary' may be taken to refer to research and teaching involving and drawing upon two or more disciplines, thus transgressing the artificial boundaries between such disciplines. That is arguably much easier than interdisciplinary research as the latter requires conversation and collaboration between experts in such disciplines.

The preposition 'trans-' can mean 'across' but also 'beyond' in the sense of going past a boundary or limit. Pushing such boundaries is what innovative research is about although some will warn against transgressing boundaries, especially if that is done with limited expertise or in an imperialist mode. In some contexts, trans-disciplinary research is understood as research collaboration involving partners outside of (i.e. 'going beyond') academia, including business and industry, but also organisations in civil society, drawing on their experience and practical wisdom. For ecotheology, this could include churches and other faith-based organisations involved in fostering an earth keeping ethos, praxis and spirituality.

Metadisciplinary research, by contrast, requires reflection on the very nature of academic disciplines and the relations between them. It raises thorny questions about a hierarchy of complexity in the sciences – from subatomic particles, to atoms, molecules, chemical sequences, living cells, multicellular organisms, sentience, consciousness, self-consciousness, social systems, ethics, worldviews and religion. It also stimulates debate on the dangers of reductionism and the possibility of emergence, on how things are (reality), how they could be (possibility), how they might be (probability) and how they should be (ethics) (see Ellis & Murphy 1996). It requires further reflection on how bottom-up and top-down causation, reality and possibility, ideas and matter are related to each other. Why is it so possible to model the world mathematically? This is territory where the proverbial angels fear to tread but which can scarcely be avoided in ecotheology precisely because it requires building bridges between the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, ethics, religion and theology.

On finding and losing the way

Statement 10: Doing ecotheology offers hope for integration and innovation but is itself susceptible to losing its way ... and hopefully finding a way forward, perhaps even the Way.

Ecotheology is *not* to be understood as a subdiscipline of Christian theology. It cannot be reduced to environmental ethics, creation theology, anthropology (the relatedness of human and non-human nature) or earth-keeping ministries. It is a cross-disciplinary discourse in the sense that it criss-crosses across the various traditional subdisciplines of Christian theology. It is interdisciplinary in the sense that it takes cognisance of specific other disciplines although it seldom makes substantive contributions to such other disciplines. These disciplines include the full range of

traditional conversation partners of Christian theology but also ecology (the study of ecosystems), economics, demography, evolutionary biology, cosmology, climate science and geology (given the 'Anthropocene'). Again, one may wonder whether the term interdisciplinary is used appropriately if scholars in Christian theology are unable to contribute to such other disciplines and if such other disciplines do not really take cognisance of developments in ecotheology to the point that this influences such disciplines and leads to innovation there. Scholars in ecotheology may occasionally take part in multidisciplinary research projects but then seldom take the lead in this regard (for one example, see Swatuk et al. (eds.) 2021).

Instead, ecotheology may be understood as a theological *discourse* that emerged around a thematic focus (here ecological destruction), drawing upon most of the traditional theological subdisciplines. This functions in a similar way that stimulated the emergence of liberation theology, feminist theology, Black theology, queer theology, Dalit theology and a range of Indigenous theologies. It offers a similar dual critique – a Christian critique of ecological destruction and an ecological critique of Christianity. As the environment is indeed a transversal, this can enable an integration of (or at least conversations between) such theological subdisciplines and an interplay with other theological discourses around a thematic focus. This may hopefully also yield a twofold constructive contribution to Christian authenticity and, on that basis, to the common good (see Conradie 2020b).

However, a warning is necessary here against over-enthusiasm. All the methodological disputes that were mentioned above are typically downplayed at first but then re-emerge when there is indeed some research collaboration. This does affect not only the various subdisciplines of Christian theology but also an understanding of what kind of discipline theology is in the first place. If so, premodern, modern and postmodern assumptions resurface, while the decolonial critique of such assumptions is then reignited. Where such a critique is absent, this prompts the need to decolonise ecotheology itself (eds. Mendoza & Zachariah 2021). One of the deepest divides within ecotheology is on the question whether either contemporary science or Indigenous worldviews becomes the dominant conversation partner (see Eaton 2005). This divide is not easily bridged. Moreover, the methodological conflict between theological studies and religious studies readily boils over. In the process, the distinctiveness of Christian theology is easily compromised to the point that it does not and cannot make the kind of contribution that it alone can make towards the public good. At the same time, Christian authenticity may be compromised as a witness by people of the Way to the messianic way (for a discussion, see Conradie 2020b, 2023).

Is there another way forward? My sense is that it is important to recognise the role of root metaphors. I am thinking of the kind of metaphors (or 'doctrinal constructs' – see Conradie 2010) that have integrative power to relate text, tradition and

context (as a whole) through a contemporary re-appropriation of the message of the gospel. They therefore need to be quite comprehensive and typically have some soteriological dimension. Here, the focus on biblical, theological *and* contextual hermeneutics may again help (where the 'and' is crucial). Such metaphors need to bring into play all seven the sets of factors arguably involved in any act of reinterpretation: (1) the world behind the text; (2) the world of the text; (3) the world in front of the text; (4) the contemporary context; (5) the world of ideological distortions 'below' text, tradition and context; (6) the act of reinterpretation and re-appropriation and (7) the rhetorical context within which this is situated (see Conradie 2008).

Unless I am mistaken or have missed something somewhere, there are not many such root metaphors available. This is because they are received and not invented. They have staying power, sometimes for centuries (e.g. victory over death, atonement for guilt, justification by faith alone, moral influence, liberation from oppression). All of the more traditional and other contemporary root metaphors are still available within ecotheology. All of them are subject to ideological distortion and in need of rigorous critique.

In Christian ecotheology, there are arguably four such root metaphors at play (see also Conradie 2022b). Firstly, there is the metaphor of stewardship (or priesthood) that is popular in evangelical and Orthodox circles and is duly critiqued for its anthropocentrism and its lack of soteriological depth. Secondly, there is the notion of a sacred gift, namely creation, that must be treasured, guarded and celebrated. This is influential in Indigenous thinking around the world and in sacramental forms of Christianity. It remains an open question whether such a sense of the sacred, perhaps a re-enchantment of nature, would suffice to resist the relentless onslaught of economic growth and development, aided by forms of technocracy (Pope Francis 2015). The third is the whole household of God [*oikos*] – which is popular in some ecumenical circles and in Indigenous theologies (where it is understood in terms of cosmic relatedness – see eds. Vaai & Casimira 2023). It is critiqued for being rather static (not taking cosmic and biological evolution on board) and perhaps still anthropocentric or otherwise all-inclusive and therefore meaningless (a house without walls) (see Conradie 2011). Can an African emphasis on cosmic relatedness by itself help us to cope with the systemic imperial and colonial disruption of such relatedness? The fourth metaphor is that of a journey (of the universe? – see Swimme & Tucker 2011) or a pilgrimage (for justice and peace). Here the church is understood not as citizens of the household of God but as pilgrims and strangers in the world [*paroikia*], a people of the Way, on the way. It may be more dynamic and help us to cope in times of transition (like the momentous shift to the Anthropocene) but can also become alienating and even escapist.

Is there another root metaphor emerging on the horizon? I do not know of any other metaphors that have the necessary integrative power that can stir the imagination,

the rootedness in what is material, bodily and earthly and a soteriological alignment with the gospel as good news for the whole of creation. For the time being, it may suffice to play around with the root metaphors that we have available, to participate in the journey of doing ecotheology (see eds. Bauman, Conradie & Eaton 2013), one where we have a sense of direction and of anticipation for what tomorrow may bring, but cannot see where the journey will end.

On this journey, we now need to negotiate (like a canoeist on a rapid river) the turbulent waters of a transition from the relative stability of the Holocene to the volatility of the Anthropocene in the hope that calmer waters may lie far ahead (see Conradie 2024). In such a transition, it is adaptability more than sustainability that is needed for the sake of habitability (see Chakrabarty 2021:83). There would be obvious concerns over justice, but restorative justice (to restore the land) may not suffice. Should one seek to keep things as they are? Can one maintain Holocene conditions? Should one restore things to what they were previously? If so, how far should one go back? Or should we recognise how things will become and act pre-emptively? Or should one focus how things could and should become and act accordingly? What may be needed is nothing short of re-creation (not to be confused with recreation – see Conradie 2013), but this is not possible without judgement and perhaps something like expulsion from Eden, exile, cross, even apocalypse.

What does this mean for a country like Malawi? How should the church with its ultimate vision of the coming reign of God position herself? What should it focus on today ... and tomorrow? These are hard questions which I trust other contributors to this consultation will address head-on.

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