

Rethinking ecotheology as a practice of relationality

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Dates:

Received: 23 Feb. 2026

Accepted: 27 Mar. 2026

Published: 07 May 2026

How to cite this article:

Biehl, M., 2026, 'Rethinking ecotheology as a practice of relationality', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 47(1), a3817.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v47i1.3817>

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This article explores an ecotheological vision that reframes humanity's relationship with the natural world, rooted in both biblical tradition and modern ecological insights. Human existence is deeply enmeshed in a cycle that sustains the entire biosphere. This is conceptualised as metabolising – a process shared by all living beings, wherein elements are exchanged, transformed and returned to the environment. This perspective challenges theological narratives that treat humanity as separate from or superior to the rest of creation. Instead, it invites a view of humans as one among many interconnected species. Anthropocentrism, the tendency to place humans at the centre of theological reflection and biblical interpretation, is critiqued. This approach has often reduced the environment to a mere resource for human self-realisation and creation as a backdrop for human salvation. Biblical texts, however, offer a broader narrative of interrelationality. The traditional reading of the dominion mandate in Genesis is reinterpreted as a call to decentring the human being in theology. This is set in parallel with recent approaches to recognising nature as a rights-bearing subject. The article argues for a theological reorientation that integrates ecological relationality as a core element of faith. This can foster a renewed spirituality that celebrates creation's diversity and humanity's humble yet meaningful role within it. Such a perspective invites a deeper understanding of the Creator's intention for the flourishing of all life and to understand human practice as an adaptation to this intention.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on ecumenical statements, secular development, religious discourse and biblical exegesis. It reexamines theological anthropology (European tradition) and brings it into conversation with contemporary legal efforts to recognise nature as a rights-bearing subject.

Keywords: Gen2; SDGs; ecotheology; ecumenical movement; theological anthropology; nature as a rights-bearing subject.

Introduction

Ecotheology or a theological reflection on ecology is by no means a novel topic. Conradie (2021:1-13; Conradie & Lai 2021) warns us that we are drowning in a vast body of literature on ecotheology without a leading argumentative thread becoming apparent. Therefore, I will begin my article with a brief review of selected strands in which I root my reflection.

Discourses on ecological concerns

The ecumenical movement

My first strand is the ecumenical movement which celebrates its engagement with environmental issues by tracing it back to the World Council of Churches (WCC) General Assembly 1983 in Vancouver. There, member churches were called upon, 'to engage ... in a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation' (eds. Kinnamon & Cope 1997a:317). Integrity of Creation is here replacing the earlier term (1979) of the sustainable society (eds. Kinnamon & Cope 1997b):

A sustainable society is one in which people live with each other and the physical environment in ways that lead to continuing life rather destruction ... Humanity is one part of the ecosystem (also part of God's creation) and has to live in continuing interaction with it. (p. 304)

This conciliar movement Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) eventually led to the Seoul consultation in 1990. The *Ten Affirmations* of Seoul adopt, in essence, a rights-based approach with eight of them addressing social and human rights issues.

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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Two affirmations specifically address creation and the earth, linking them to the rights-based framework by statements such as (eds. Kinnamon & Cope 1997a):

The integrity of creation has a social aspect which we recognize as peace with justice, and an ecological aspect which we recognize in the self-renewing, sustainable character of natural ecosystems. We *will resist* the claim that anything in creation is merely a resource for human exploitation. We will resist the extinction of species for human benefit; consumerism and harmful mass production; pollution of land, air and waters; all human activities which are now leading to probably rapid climate change; and policies and plans which contribute to the disintegration of creation. Therefore, we *commit* ourselves to be members of both the living community of creation in which we are but one species, and members of the covenant community of Christ. (p. 322)

In hindsight, it becomes apparent that the *Seoul Affirmations* were formulated at the beginning of a decade in which globalisation gained considerable momentum by liberalising markets and opening them to unrestrained extractivism and growth in consumer products – precisely the dynamics the affirmations claimed to resist. At the same time, the ecumenical movement continued to pursue a rights-based social justice approach with even greater emphasis through its so-called ‘decades’: (1) the *Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women* (1988–1998); and (2) the *Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace* (2001–2010). In the *Just Peace* document that concluded this decade, a section on ‘Peace with the Earth’ had been included (2012:58–64). To have such a decade on ecology and the effects of climate change was requested by the *Kairos for Creation* document, drafted in 2019 in Wuppertal in preparation for the upcoming WCC General Assembly (Andrianos et al. 2019:19; see also the Volos-Call from 2016, formulated in the context of 500 years of Reformation, Conradie, Tsalamponi & Werner 2016:99–108). However, it was not picked up by the WCC at its last General Assembly.

Within these ecumenical processes, ecological issues have been addressed, yet they have not been given the significance that the disastrous effects of climate change demand today. One of the reasons for this is that the ecumenical movement wrestled with the question as to whether questions of justice, raised particularly by the churches in the global South, were not more pressing than those of ‘preserving’ the environment. In the earlier decades, such ‘preservation’ could be interpreted as a luxury of those privileged enough to worry about recycling because they already had an overabundance of everything, whereas others lacked so much.

The ecological crisis itself is profoundly a question of justice, as its most devastating impacts disproportionately burden communities in the global South who contribute least to its causes, but it will not be mitigated if it is addressed only as a justice issue. In hindsight, it is apparent that the movement from Vancouver to Seoul remained largely within the paradigm of the limits of growth and the pollution of the immediate environment, rather than engaging with the

paradigm of the possible collapse of our entire climate system. The Seoul affirmations further reveal that, at the time, the theological reflection lagged: They still identified human activity as safeguarding the *integrity of creation*, without sufficiently differentiating between the natural environment, including human beings, and its theological interpretation as creation.

Still, the movement produced a reflection that led to a call for self-critical *metanoia*, why, despite so much thought and so many appeals, the churches have been able to change so little, even in their own practices. Accordingly, the Kairos for Creation document (2019), prepared for the upcoming WCC General Assembly, evaluates the recent past through the lens of the seven deadly sins, of which two will be cited here (Andrianos et al. 2019):

We have been arrogant in assuming that the whole earth centres around us humans and our needs [*pride*].

We have become trapped in an abysmal desire for unlimited material growth, driven by a pervasive culture of consumerism [*greed*]. (pp. 9–12)

The General Assembly in Karlsruhe (2022) picked up on this and other documents and warned that we ‘are running out of time for this *metanoia* to take place’. It affirmed that:

[W]e are all interdependent in God’s whole Creation. As Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity, we are called to *metanoia* and a renewed and just relationship with creation that expresses itself in our practical life. (WCC 2023:175)

Similar calls had been made by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (2021:8–10), and by Pope Francis (2015:34, 83) whose Encyclical is the first in which you will read about worms, insects, reptiles and micro-organisms as siblings of the human.

Religion and development

We can identify a strand of ecotheological reflection in the ecumenical movement leading to calls and appeals. In the 1990s, as globalisation advanced, another strand emerged that examined the contributions of faith-based organisations (FBOs) to development. In this context, religious convictions and attitudes were measured against human development indicators, with studies typically focusing on social concerns, community welfare, justice and human rights issues (Biehl 2013:104–109; see also Haustein & Tomalin n.d.a). Much like the ecumenical movement, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that eventually emerged in 2015 as part of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, brought economic development, social development and ecological concerns together, expanding the latter compared to the earlier Millennium Development Goals (UN n.d.a). Consider, for instance, the SDGs that address the protection of: Life below water (SDG14) and on land (SDG15). Additionally, there are the goals on Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG11), Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG12) and on Climate action (SDG13), all of which are best pursued in partnership as underscored by Goal 17 (UN n.d.b). A close

reading of the SDGs shows how they are infused by a secular version of what some strands of Christian theology are currently promoting.

Christian faith and ecology

The SDGs challenge human actors to change the path of development through the economy which is itself a root cause of the current ecological crisis. Saving the planet through a renewed economy is an interesting parallel to one widely accepted task of ecotheology, e.g. the critique of the traditional attitude of Christianity to the environment by a renewal of theology. In a book, that Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, Kenneth Ross, Risto Jukko and I have recently co-authored, we underscored the challenging task of renewing theology from within a tradition that has, historically often enough, promoted a kind of dominion theology by emphasising progress, growth and success – an attitude that has contributed to the present ecological crisis, to the point of risking self-annihilation. One reason for this focus was an emphasis on the ‘salvation offered to humankind through the coming, dying, and rising of Jesus Christ and the new inter-human relationships that this makes possible’ (Behera et al. 2025:25). Meanwhile, Western Christianity was closely allied to a colonial commercial enterprise that sought to make profit from new resources and new markets with little thought for the future of the environment (Behera et al. 2025:25, 43–54).

I have referred to how the ecumenical movement, working from within Christian theology, and a secular development movement, engaging religious organisations from the outside, have both placed ecological reflection and action on the agenda. I claim that one reason for their limited success lies in the anthropocentric character of both the development discourse and traditional theology, which often confines ecological concerns merely to the realm of ethics and actions.

For those who engage with ecotheology, it has, however, become increasingly recognised that it is not merely about ethical reflections on how to treat the environment better. Rather, it is about discerning the profound truth that the cosmos is God’s, and that human beings are part of God’s whole creation, both in its subjection to destruction and in the hope of its restoration. There is a deep mystery in believing that to be in Christ is to be a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), while also recognising that the ultimate restoration will come only through God’s new act upon the entire cosmos.

Creation and re-creation affect all theological disciplines, for they address the core element of our faith and theology itself, and I argue, even the very foundation of the theological encyclopaedia, that is, the principles that guide the coherence of our theological disciplines. Such a renewal cannot simply be planned in advance (eds. Conradie et al. 2014:2), so the question arises as to how to design a purposeful

and strategic approach that nevertheless can feed into a largely uncoordinated and self-propelling process that may ultimately lead to genuine change. One indicator of this dynamic is the amorphous yet extensive body of literature now being published in what we might call the field of eco-theology.

It has widely been accepted that such an approach asks for at least a dual task which I quote here from Conradie and Bergmann; ‘a Christian critique of the economic and cultural patterns underlying ecological destruction, and an ecological critique of Christianity’ (eds. Conradie et al. 2014:2). Regarding the second line of inquiry, it is a theological perspective to perceive nature as creation. Humans are part of nature, and they exist within the natural environment.

One of my theological teachers (Biehl 1992) was deeply engaged with the natural sciences, and he stated that as nature, the world follows rules and possesses an inherent order; as creation, it also has an origin and a purpose. The first is a factual observation that theology shares with the natural sciences; the second is the attribution of meaning. The frame of reference for this attribution of meaning is the human capacity for thinking and interpreting. Wölfel (1981) writes:

‘Meaning’ only emerges where a subject connects otherwise unrelated mental images – which represent the manifold building blocks of the world – by assigning meaning and thus constructively introducing teleology into the world. (p. 36; *author’s translation*)

In this understanding, the human being participates in creatureliness as part of the created world, to which they themselves belong, and simultaneously participates in transcendence (Gn 1:26f.), having a will and consciousness (Wölfel 1981:38). In what follows, I will in this line focus on the self-critical theological reflection, paying particular attention to the tendency to single out the human being as the only creature to be saved.

The historian Lynn White is frequently cited as the one who identified dominion theology as the root cause of the modern predicament of environmental destruction, doing so as early as 1966, thus preceding Vancouver 1983. In his essay, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, White (1967:1203–1207) begins by highlighting the many large-scale changes that humankind has effected without consideration of the side effects on animal and plant life. He emphatically underscores the point about the now-famous – or perhaps infamous – biblical phrase:

[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 1:2, NRS)

We may be reminded here, of Conradie’s caution that, while there are indeed biblical passages that can be sources of ecological wisdom, several of them are ‘grey’ (Conradie 2020:4). My own understanding is that on nearly every page of the Bible, we encounter references to daily life in nature,

understood in the sense of environment, such as the need for land, food and water, co-existence with animals, and the confrontation with natural disasters like droughts, floods or locust swarms.

The 'world map' of Western Christianity

I want to highlight White's argument that this biblical command needed to be aligned with concepts external to the Bible to gain such widespread influence. More particular, White does not blame biblical Christianity per se, but an elective affinity (Weber) of Western medieval theology and an emerging scientific development as the cultural matrix in which an exploitative attitude to nature was legitimised and then systematically cultivated. This alliance took shape after the 11th century in Western Latin Christianity 'where natural theology was following a very different bent ... it was becoming the effort to understand God's mind by discovering how his creation operates' (White 1967:1206).

I will have a closer look at this fundamental shift by considering some world maps of the Latin Christian tradition. A classical counter-image to the modern conception of nature can be found in the pictorial representation of the geocentric worldview, exemplified, for instance, in a depiction on one of the side walls of the Campo Santo in Pisa, dating from the late 14th century. I am referring to this image because Wölfel uses it as the foundation for his opening meditation (1981:10–13; see also The Ebstorf World Map n.d.)

The artist Pietro di Puccio depicted the world as the *summae* of concentric circles, held by God from outside. At the centre lies the earth, showing the then known three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia. Three heavens follow with zodiac signs indicating the firmament, and the outermost circles depict the nine angelic hierarchies (Cosmographica Theologica n.d.). The basic principles of this world map are measure, order and hierarchy, while God himself remains outside of the created world.

Close to my hometown in Germany, the monastery at Ebstorf owns a well-known map of the world from around the 12th century. These types of *mappae mundi* are called T-E maps; T, because the full circle of the earth's surface, is, like on the Campo Santo map, divided into two halves. The upper half of the circle displays Asia, while on the lower half, the Mediterranean Sea separates Europe on the left from Africa on the right. 'E' refers to the orientation of the map; it is oriented towards the East, not to the North as in modern maps.

The Ebstorf map depicts the resurrected Christ holding the world in his hands which bear the stigmata, as do his feet. Again, we find the three then known continents, Asia, Africa and Europe. This map is, in fact, an encyclopaedia of the knowledge people had about the world at the time (Hahn-Woernle 2008). Such knowledge was often derived from Greek writers such as Herodotus. The specific Christian

perspective, beyond the depiction of Christ holding the earth, is that the events of the *Heilsgeschichte* [salvation history] are present on the map. The creation of the world is signified by the moment in which Adam and Eve eat the apple (to the left of Christ's head), while the centre of the world is marked by Jerusalem. However, it is not merely the historical city but the heavenly Jerusalem, so that both creation and re-creation, beginning and end, are inscribed within the map.

This map is a picture of how the world was understood within Latin Christianity, prior to the profound shift that White identified. White (1967) argues that by destroying the belief in a spirited, living nature, Christianity enabled the exploitation of the natural world:

[H]owever, in the Latin West by the early 13th century natural theology was following a very different bent. It was ceasing to be the decoding of the physical symbols of God's communication with man and was becoming the effort to understand God's mind by discovering how his creation operates. (p. 1206)

He highlighted particularly (White 1967):

The consistency with which scientists during the long formative centuries of Western science said that the task and the reward of the scientist was 'to think God's thoughts after him' leads one to believe that this was their real motivation. (p. 1206)

The thrust of his argument is that it was the elective affinity with this new approach – thinking God's thoughts by examining how creation functions – that led eventually to the one-sided interpretation of Genesis 1:28 as a theology of dominion. White's (1967) conclusion is:

Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny. (p. 1207)

Embodiment, metabolising and rights

I think I have sufficiently demonstrated that while the eco-theological impetus is strong in certain areas, it remains far from having been able to offer such a necessary rethink and refeel. How, then, might the intellectual world map of Christianity appear today? What would be, in such an elective affinity, the contemporary partner for theology today? What corrective could a critically reconstructed faith offer to a one-sided and reductionist approach of the scientific mindset?

One important observation in the attempt to answer these questions is that today, any Christian world map would not only have to include more continents, but also be sensitive to contextual realities. Likewise, the partners for such an elective affinity will differ depending on their context, even though one common challenge across these varied contexts is the urgent need to decolonise the predominance of Western Christianity around the globe. For the European context in particular, a pressing question for a Christian doctrine of creation in light of today's ecological crisis is how the modern

reference point of the subject – as consciousness within the world – can be retained, while simultaneously avoiding the well-known dangers of modern Western thinking: Objectification, reductionism, dichotomies and particularism (Moltmann 1985:52).

I propose some selected scientific strands from sociology and anthropology that could serve as potential partners in an elective affinity for such critical decolonising reading of the European theological reflection that could bring in its voice in an intercultural conversation.

One such partner for an elective affinity could be a revised anthropology – one that incorporates insights from modern biology and chemistry. These sciences depict us as bodies composed of stardust and of the same elements as plants and animals. Indeed, there is a whole wilderness within our own bodies. The bacteria that inhabit us are vital to our life, yet they follow their own logic, impervious to the control of our minds.

The principle of this life is metabolising: Taking in elements, transforming them, and returning them to the environment. This begins with breathing and continues with food and other forms of metabolism. When we die, our bodies decompose and become the nourishment for other living beings, ultimately sustaining the growth of plants and feeding animals.

This metabolising principle of interrelatedness stands in stark contrast to an approach that views nature as something 'out there'. Instead, we are life amid multiple forms of life, all striving to survive, and in order to live, we metabolise other lives. This is what we share with every living being on the planet, including the earth itself. There is a certain similarity to Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life which I cannot discuss here. Suffice to say that the anthropology behind his concept differs from the one I propose here.

We have no real theology of such a close relationship between human beings and animals, plants, stones or water. Some think that more of 'indigenality' will help here, but I leave that to others (Weber 2024). This lack is striking, given that we have long realised that we cannot live as humans without all of these, while they, in turn, would be perfectly fine without us. Even in the approaches of stewardship and caring for the environment – with all their positive practices, such as limiting resource consumption, avoiding waste, reducing plastic pollution or adopting a diet not based on massive meat consumption (which causes immense CO₂ emissions) – we still see ourselves as those who act upon nature, which is perceived as passive and may return to its 'natural' state if we leave it alone. In this perspective, everything becomes a matter of ethics: how we act, how we treat nature, not how we are part of it.

In recent years, a remarkable legal development has emerged in countries beyond the European legal sphere: The formal recognition of nature as a *legal subject*. Constitutions and high courts in Ecuador, Colombia, India, and New Zealand have

granted legal standing to rivers, forests and ecosystems. In Ecuador's constitution, nature (*Pacha Mama*) is recognised as a rights-bearing entity, entitled to regeneration, integrity and protection of its life cycles. In New Zealand, the Whanganui River has been declared a legal person, in accordance with Māori cosmology. These legal innovations reflect an ontological reorientation: Nature is not only instrumental to human wellbeing but possesses intrinsic agency – legal, moral and spiritual (Wesche 2025).

This legal evolution signals a profound rethinking of anthropocentric legal orders and resonates with theological visions of relational creation, where nature is not merely a backdrop to human salvation history but a participant in the divine economy. The affirmation of nature's legal standing is not merely symbolic – it institutionalises the dignity and integrity of creation and challenges dominant Western paradigms of ownership and control.

While these examples arise from non-European legal cultures, they have inspired renewed efforts in European jurisprudence to rethink the normative position of nature within codified law. In this context, Jens Kersten argues that German constitutional law continues to treat nature merely as an object of state protection. He calls for an ecological revolution of law, one that would move beyond the conservative principles of sustainability and risk management. In his view, justice in the Anthropocene requires nothing less than legal subjectivity for nature (Kersten 2020).

Tilo Wesche, on the other hand, drawing on the principle that ownership is justified through contribution to value creation, argues that ecosystems, by providing essential services – such as air purification, water cycles and soil regeneration – are themselves agents of value. Hence, nature deserves ownership rights. From this follows the obligation of humans to treat natural resources not as unrestricted property but as entrusted goods, with an agency of their own (Wesche 2025).

Together, Kersten and Wesche point to complementary trajectories: One rooted in constitutional reform and legal theory, the other in a normative reconfiguration of property. The theological implications of recognising nature's legal subjectivity are profound. It affirms what this paper describes as *ecological relationality*: that the human is a metabolising being within creation's larger web of interdependence. If nature is granted legal agency, this supports a theological anthropology that views humanity not as stewards from above but as kin within the household [*oikos*] of God. Law and theology converge here: Both begin to imagine creation not as a silent backdrop to human drama, but as a speaking, suffering and responsive partner in the divine economy. This movement – like ecotheology itself – constitutes a profound internal critique of Western traditions: Just as ecotheology challenges dominion-oriented theologies from within Christian thought, so the recognition of nature's rights contests anthropocentric subjectivism from within Western legal and philosophical frameworks.

'In the beginning': The garden of Eden

To address the consequences of climate change and environmental issues is certainly part of ecotheology, but I want to reflect on ecotheology by delving into our ways of conceiving theology. My focus will be on one particular strand: The anthropocentric limitation of traditional theology, through which the history of salvation and the history of creation intersect only at the end, in the renewal of the cosmos. Theology has traditionally reflected on these two dimensions separately, because the need for salvation arises in the world after the works of creation have been finished.

I will continue my reflection by returning to the Bible. I aim to identify new layers and arguments by approaching them in the light of the elective affinity I have proposed: The imperative to adapt, to recognise our embodied existence, to embrace the metabolising character of life which includes attributing agency to nature. In other words, this is a different way of saying that we need to look to the plants, the animals, the stones, the water – all of creation.

Job 12:7–9 tells us:

[B]ut ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you.

Even with such exhortations, the Bible does not anticipate modern science, which teaches us what we can learn from animals about ourselves as part of nature. Yet if, as a Protestant, I investigate the Bible from the perspective of being embodied, I may be able to recognise new relationships that have been overshadowed by the elective affinity of theology with a reductionist scientific worldview. Many psalms, in fact, praise the works of creation that themselves speak of their Creator, and the whole Bible speaks of what it means to be part of God's creation and to be woven into the web of life within it. However, in the past, we have too often read the Bible as the story of humankind as the hero of creation.

If, therefore, the ecological 'footprint' of certain biblical texts within the Christian and cultural history of interpretation in the Occident has been nothing short of catastrophic, then this makes a return to the text itself imperative – at least for the churches of the Protestant *sola scriptura* (Knoetze 2021:170–174).

The infamous mandate to 'have dominion' that White refers to appears in the second report, the paradise story. On the Ebstorf map, this garden narrative marks the beginning. Perhaps a reading of the paradise story with what Paul Ricoeur has called a 'second naïveté' is an apt starting point. In this part of the narrative, God is not outside the world; rather, God is moving within creation. God is walking in the garden in the cool of the day and interacting with the

creatures he created (Gn 3:8). This reminds me that we had our conference on ecotheology in a kind of garden, being surrounded by wildlife – plants, trees and creatures. But let us here not ask the animals but ask ourselves, what would we share with God if God were to walk with us in the cool breeze of the closing day? Perhaps the environment we have chosen for our conference would remind us that much around us is not created by us, and that all creatures, living and non-living, adapt, are embodied, and metabolise – they may metabolise us, if we do not respect their way of living. And they exercise their agency so that their life and environment define the rules of the place they inhabit.

Around us, we observe nature that is creative. The New Testament scholar Brigitte Kahl speaks of 'misreadings' of certain biblical passages, readings that have reshaped or darkened their sense. Going back to the 'in the beginning' narrative, Kahl traces how in Genesis 1 the earth itself becomes a co-creator, as it brings forth grass and plants that produce seeds (Gn 1:11). Seeds are to be sown and to work 'each according to its kind', a phrase that occurs three times in verses 11 and 12. God created plants and animals to be creative (Kahl 2017:66–69).

Genesis 1:21–22:

[S]o God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth'.

Genesis 1:24:

And God said, 'Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: Livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind.' And it was so.

On day 3, the earth is thus specifically called upon by God as a co-creator to bring forth the land animals on its own, albeit in co-operation with God. Kahl argues that the fact that greening and bringing forth is done by the earth itself has hardly been noticed in the history of reception and is passed over as insignificant. We overlook that we share the sixth day with the animals who are called upon to be fruitful and multiply. What constitutes the 'crown of creation' in Genesis 1 is neither woman nor man, but their integration into the overall context of all life, together with their fellow creatures on the living and creative earth.

Such a 'green' re-reading does not provide us with direct instructions for our existence and our actions within creation. Rather, its interpretations correct misreadings by revealing an image of a God who has brought into being a world that is interdependent and infinitely diverse, overflowing with complexity, creativity, and even contradictions – and into which God enters. In contrast, the early modern (mis)reading of the garden story lets history begin with the Fall and thus outside the garden and culminates in the dominion mandate.

However, the parallels in the mandates given to the earth, the plants and the animals within the creation narratives help us to read against this standard interpretation. They remind us that the mandate to the human being is given within a productive and procreative cosmos, in which, for instance, the stars are granted the power to govern day and night.

Liturgy

Moltmann (2017:28, my translation) read the first account in Genesis in such a way that the human, as the last creature, would not be viable without the preceding creation: 'The earth is not entrusted to us, but we are entrusted to the earth'. According to Moltmann, the crown of creation is not the human being, but the Sabbath, which points to the future. In this perspective, the creation accounts are not narratives about a paradisiacal beginning that must be regained to restore the integrity (!) of the fallen creation (e.g. by replacing the 'fallen Adam' with the 'new Adam', Christ). Moltmann (2017):

[C]reation in the beginning is merely the first act in an open process of creation that runs towards a goal and can only be properly understood from the goal and the end. We can no longer understand eschatology in the light of creation but must understand creation in the light of eschatology. (p. 35, *author's translation*)

The dynamism within creation can be theologically understood as a reflection of the inner dynamism of the Trinity. In medieval theology, the three persons of the Trinity were conceived as *relationes subsistentes* – not defined by accidental attributes, but by their interrelations. Moltmann emphasised that these interrelations make the Trinity itself a dynamic unfolding narrative, into which we gain only limited insight through Jesus. Trinity is not an object that we could grasp in purely theoretical terms (Moltmann 1977a). This divine dynamism overflows beyond the Trinity itself and becomes creative. Moltmann stressed that creation is not merely what occurred before history begins with the Fall. Rather, creation brought forth time itself, such that 'the act of creation in the beginning is the establishment of the conditions that make its own history possible' (Moltmann 1977b:128, my translation).

Following this approach, change, complexity, and diversity can be regarded as processes inscribed into creation itself – processes that may offer guidance for action. The task is, within the web of life, to promote relationships rather than isolated individuals acting; change rather than stasis, freedom rather than law, complexity rather than binary oppositions, and diversity and hybridity rather than homogeneity. As human beings, we are diverse, and we are embedded within the evolving diversity of all living and existing beings. This diversity forms the very basis of our existence and the context for our actions.

Such an approach would help to identify the co-creative power of the earth and of nature, including its destructive elements – an insight that has made Conradie (2021) to marvel why there are pests and not only pets in the household

of God. Being reminded that all of this occurs within finite creation, to my mind, highlights the need to revalue finiteness itself – as a way of accepting our interrelatedness.

Keeping in mind Moltmann's definition of the Sabbath as the true end of creation, I wonder whether the rethink and refeel White was asking for would first and best be expressed and experienced in liturgy. Orthodox theology would certainly affirm this perspective: To taste, smell, touch, hear and see the glory that God expects us to experience one day in its fullness. Liturgy, understood in such a wide way, could be the place where our different languages, the different challenges of our contexts in words of prayers, our ways of worshipping join in the common praise of God's continuing work for us – in this world and in the one to come.

In protestant thinking, I find my reflection resonating with those of Conradie (2021) who writes:

Through the liturgy worshippers may slowly learn to see the world in a new light, in the light of the Light of the world. They may begin to see the world around them through God's eyes, as God's beloved creation. They may realise that this messed-up world and the messed-up lives in and around them are nevertheless beloved, so much so that for God it is even worth dying for. They may learn to see the invisible, an intuition deeply embedded in Hebrew, Greek and African sensibilities. They may begin to see the earth in the light of 'heaven', in terms of what the world may become and in a hidden way already is. (p. 8)

Ecological theology emphasises this hope for the redemption of creation: The sacraments are not just individual experiences of salvation but express the hope that the whole of creation will one day be transformed into God's fullness. This perspective invites Christians to include plants, animals, water, stones, etc., in their liturgy and to actively work for the preservation of creation because it is a sign of the coming redemption.

Conclusion

The Christian maps of the world, the symbolic representations that we, as reflective beings, create of the world and of God's presence, too, are creative acts of consciousness in the world through which we present facts, things, and experiences to ourselves as something that is meaningful, provided that we do not lapse into a primitive theory of representation (Wölfel 1990:72). It can be helpful, alongside the image of the human community as the body of Christ, to view the world itself as embodied in such a way that creatureliness is not limited to human beings alone. It is not only humankind that waits for fulfilment; the entire creation groans and suffers with us (Rm 8:19–22).

In the face of the ecological crisis – which is also a crisis of the consciousness that generates and reflects it – we must deconstruct images of nature and creation with which we encouraged this development. Moltmann reminds us that we as human beings exist before God [*coram deo*] and also before nature [*coram natura*]. As Moltmann writes, we are eucharistic beings, whose priestly function is not the redemption of

nature but the preservation of creation. I believe that to fulfil this task, we as humans require a renewal by the Spirit.

Yet precisely Beintker's differentiation, following Luther, points to a danger we must not fall into (Beintker 1986:14–20). We must not let ourselves be so overwhelmed by these images that we simply equate nature as described by the natural sciences with theological creation – a danger that, in my view, Moltmann ultimately succumbs to, despite his protestations to the contrary (Moltmann 1985:35, 53, 197). Dialogue with the natural sciences and the perspectives of other religions should proceed under the formula 'the world as creation': In a cosmos that is understood and described scientifically, yet without a subject, Christians step forward with the belief that their subjectivity finds its ultimate ground in the trinitarian God, who wishes to be recognised as an unfolding and creative creativity (Wölfel 1981:22, 35–36).

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a conference paper originally presented at the Ecotheology Conference, held at Kutchire Lodge, Liwonde National Park, Malawi, on 12–15 August 2025. The conference paper, titled 'Rethinking ecotheology as a practice of relationality,' was subsequently expanded and revised for this journal publication. This republication is done with permission from the conference organisers.

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Michael Biehl: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft and Writing – review and editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It

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