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Ecotheology in an Age of Climate Emergency

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1. Introduction

The climate emergency is no longer a matter of future risk but a condition shaping contemporary life. Prolonged heatwaves, unpredictable torrential rains, droughts, floods, and wildfires increasingly shape everyday experiences across the world. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the fragility of human existence and revealed how deeply human economic systems, social structures, and patterns of living have wounded the natural world and the wider communities of life. Despite this reality, many people continue their lives without fully recognising that the created world is suffering. This lack of recognition is not only a moral failure but also poses a challenge for communities and institutions entrusted with learning, memory, and public understanding.

In this context, many Christians raise a fundamental question: what can faith say in the face of the climate crisis? This question is not only practical or ethical but deeply theological. It concerns how God is understood, how humanity is located within creation, and how faith is lived in relation to the world. In response, this article traces several key theological shifts that have shaped contemporary ecotheology, highlighting how these shifts reframe Christian understandings of creation, human responsibility, and faithful practice in an age of climate emergency.

2. Theological Awakening: From Dominion to God's Household

The emergence of ecotheology is closely connected to a wider social awareness of environmental degradation in the twentieth century. For example, Carson's *Silent Spring* played a significant role in exposing the ecological consequences of industrial practices and chemical pollution (Carson 1962). Her work challenged optimistic narratives of technological progress and prompted deeper reflection on the costs of modern development.

From the 1960s onward, ecotheological reflection increasingly focused on ethical questions of environmental responsibility, particularly concerning the human use of environmental resources (Deane-Drummond 2017, 11). This debate was intensified by White's influential 1967 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis". White argued that Christianity had shaped a worldview in which humans understood themselves as standing above nature. He interpreted this theological understanding as providing an ideological foundation for ecological exploitation when it was combined with modern scientific developments.

Although controversial, White's argument was compelling to theologians of his time and continues to provoke scholars to confront difficult questions about Christianity's historical role in shaping human attitudes toward nature. For many ecotheologians, a central concern raised by White's essay was the interpretation of Genesis 1:28, particularly the imperatives to subdue the earth and exercise dominion over it. In response, ecotheological reflections questioned readings that authorised dominance, favouring instead interpretations that emphasised care, responsibility, and humility. These interpretations encouraged theological reconsideration, leading many theologians to acknowledge that certain Christian interpretations had at times contributed to ecological degradation.

However, the ecotheological task extends beyond correcting individual debated verses. An ecological reading invites us to rediscover the 'community of creation,' envisioning humans as fellow creatures bound together in praise and mutual dependence (Bauckham 2010). Scripture offers rich witness to a creation that praises God, a land that mourns in response to human injustice, and a cosmos reconciled through Christ. Read in this light, ecotheological reinterpretation is understood as a

renewed attentiveness to themes and voices already present within the biblical text, contributing to a more expansive theological understanding.

Historically, the Church has often been understood primarily as a place concerned with the salvation of human souls. In this framework, environmental issues are frequently treated as matters belonging to science, public policy, or civic activism rather than to theology. Ecotheology challenges this separation by holding that if Christians confess that God is the Creator of heaven and earth, a faith that remains indifferent to a wounded planet cannot be considered theologically coherent.

As Deane-Drummond comments, ecotheology is not merely about adding environmental ethics to existing dogma. It is a critical reflection on Christian faith that seeks to bridge the gap between theological tradition and the scientific realities of our ecological crisis (Deane-Drummond 2017, 3). This approach frames the climate crisis not simply as an environmental problem but as a theological and spiritual crisis arising from broken relationships between God and humanity, humanity and nature, and between human beings.

Furthermore, this connects to the theological understanding of *Missio Dei*, which refers to mission as God's work in the world. The *Missio Dei* points to God's ongoing work of sustaining, reconciling, and renewing the whole of creation. Therefore, ecological destruction must be addressed as a central concern of faith. The biblical promise that God is making all things new (Rev 21:5) points towards a vision of salvation that includes the healing of ecological relationships. As Moltmann asserts, salvation is not escape from the world but reconciliation within it (Moltmann 1985, 35).

This theological shift redefines human identity. The term ecology originates from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning family, house or household. It is significant that ecology, economy, and ecumenical all share this linguistic root (Rasmussen 2013, 147). Ecotheology asks a fundamental question: who are human beings within the household that God has created, and how are they called to live within it?

In much of modern thought, humans have been regarded as the primary masters of this household, whilst nature has been reduced to a resource existing mainly for

human benefit. This anthropocentric perspective has justified the conquest and exploitation of nature. Ecotheology challenges this assumption: the household belongs to God, not to humanity. Human beings are members of this household alongside forests, oceans, animals, plants, and microorganisms.

Humans are thus not external observers of nature but participants within a complex and interdependent community of life. This perspective resonates with Scott's understanding of creation as a "common realm" (Scott 2003, 13). Within this framework, nature is not a silent backdrop for human activity but a shared space where God, humanity, and the non-human world interact. Consequently, ecological degradation is not merely resource mismanagement but results in the silencing of the voices of our non-human neighbours in our common life.

3. Voices from the Margins: Gender, Race, and Place

As ecotheological reflection developed, it expanded beyond a focus on environmental protection alone. It began to question anthropocentrism more fundamentally and to explore perspectives that affirmed the intrinsic value of all forms of life. Ecofeminist theology played an important role in this expansion by exposing the connections between the domination of nature and the oppression of women (Eaton 2005). These forms of domination were understood as arising from shared structures of hierarchy and control. Ecofeminist theology has further deepened this critique by challenging hierarchical dualisms and, as McFague suggests, by imagining the world itself as the body of God, thereby affirming the theological significance of embodied and ecological interdependence (McFague 1993, 133).

Furthermore, the structures of ecological domination are deeply intertwined with issues of race as well as gender. In *A Liberation for the Earth*, Ranawana argues that ecological destruction is inseparable from colonial exploitation and the oppression of racialised bodies (Ranawana 2022). She emphasises that the climate crisis is not a neutral phenomenon but a consequence of imperial histories that have objectified the non-Western world and its people as resources. Thus, she insists that ecological liberation must be intrinsic to the pursuit of racial justice.

Alongside ecofeminist and post-colonial perspectives, indigenous and contextual theologies have drawn attention to forms of wisdom shaped through long-standing relationships with land and water. These traditions challenge modern assumptions about ownership, progress, and development by emphasising reciprocity, restraint, and responsibility. Together, these voices have contributed to a broader ecotheological vision that resists reducing nature to an object and instead understands creation as a living and relational reality. This emphasis on relationality and interconnectedness resonates with recent ecotheological reflections from Asia and the Pacific (Aruan & Kim 2025, 150).

Much ecotheological reflection has mainly focused on land, soil, and agriculture. Whilst these remain important areas of concern, recent theological voices from Asia and the Pacific have broadened the scope of ecological reflection by turning their attentions to the ocean. Blue theology and archipelagic theology understand the sea not as an empty space or dividing boundary but as a living environment that connects communities and ecosystems (Maggang 2025, 172).

The ocean is central to the emergence and sustenance of life. For many island communities, rising sea levels are not abstract indicators of climate change but immediate threats to homes, cultures, and livelihoods. Their experiences demonstrate that ecological crises cannot be understood solely in local terms. Environmental harm in one region has consequences that extend far beyond national or geographical boundaries. Attention to these perspectives invites a more relational understanding of place and belonging and highlights the interconnectedness of all forms of life. Therefore, a vital task for contemporary ecotheology is to curate and amplify these diverse voices, particularly from the Global South and indigenous communities, ensuring that the wisdom of those most intimate with the wounded earth is heard.

4. From Theology to Practice

Despite these theological insights, within church life, ecological concerns are still often marginalised or treated as secondary concerns. Environmental initiatives are frequently framed as additional projects alongside activities considered more central to faith such as worship, pastoral care, and spiritual formation. In the context of a climate emergency, this approach is increasingly inadequate. If the ecological

foundations of life are being undermined, the social and spiritual structures built upon them are also threatened. Faith cannot remain credible if it fails to engage with the conditions that make life itself possible.

The climate crisis is also inseparable from dominant economic systems and patterns of consumption. Contemporary societies largely operate according to economic models that prioritise continuous growth, efficiency, and profit. These systems treat land, labour, time, and natural resources as commodities and often disregard ecological limits. Within such frameworks, environmental damage is frequently normalised or externalised.

Ecotheology responds by questioning these assumptions and by encouraging alternative ways of living that are grounded in restraint, rest, and mutual dependence. Practices such as reducing consumption, conserving energy, and rethinking food systems are not merely personal ethical choices but express deeper theological commitments regarding what is valued and trusted. Such practices promote ways of life that respect ecological limits and prioritise the flourishing of the whole community of creation.

Ecotheology therefore calls churches and faith communities to engage with structural and economic questions, including climate justice and the protection of communities most affected by environmental degradation. Faithful ecological living involves both personal responsibility and collective action, informed by attention to power, inequality, and vulnerability. This theological emphasis has found renewed institutional expression in the World Council of Churches' recent launch of the 'Ecumenical Decade of Climate Justice Action' in 2025, which signals an intensified ecclesial engagement with the systemic dimensions of the ecological crisis (World Council of Churches).

Furthermore, this theological emphasis is shaping the liturgical life of the Church. A practice already observed in several Christian traditions is now being considered for wider ecumenical reception through the proposed institution of a 'Feast of Creation' in

liturgical calendars, to be celebrated annually on the first Sunday of September (Feast of Creation). This development seeks to address a long-standing gap in the liturgical year by inviting believers to confess Christ not only as Redeemer but explicitly as a participator in the Creator of the cosmos. By formally integrating creation into the rhythm of worship, the Church affirms that care for the *oikos* is not an optional concern, but integral to the mystery of Christian faith.

5. Conclusion

Ecotheology does not seek to provide reassurance in the face of ecological crisis since reliance on technological solutions alone, or theological interpretations that treat environmental degradation as unavoidable, can limit sustained engagement with questions of responsibility. A constructive response of faith begins with attentiveness to suffering, as the ecological crisis is accompanied by experiences of loss and vulnerability across both human and non-human communities. Shaped by reflection on the cross, Christian faith has long understood itself as remaining present to suffering rather than turning away from it. In this light, ecotheology encourages reflection on human participation in ecological harm and invites renewed consideration of human values, practices, and social arrangements.

At its core, ecotheology is concerned with how human beings understand their place within God's household. Humans are not isolated agents but participants in an interdependent web of life. From this perspective, faith in a time of ecological crisis involves renewed attention to connection and responsibility, as well as to practices that support the flourishing of the wider community of creation. In this way, ecotheology contributes to ongoing public reflection on how faith and knowledge are shaped and sustained in an age of climate emergency.

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