

Religion and the Environment

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An Ecological Theology of Creaturely Kinship

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Introduction

[1] Changes in Earth's climate made evident in melting glaciers, thawing tundra, and coastal flooding are putting many forms of life on the planet at risk of extinction. Although the full range of causes for global warming are currently being debated, few scientists would deny that a major contributing cause is human produced carbon dioxide and methane emissions that are accumulating in Earth's atmosphere, causing a slow warming of our planet. The increase in greenhouse gases on the biosphere will impact every region, especially Asia where over sixty percent of the world's human population lives. Climate change brings with it challenges that must be faced, including how to stop global warming, how to plan for the global warming that cannot be entirely avoided, and how to conceive of human progress and development in ways that will result in a more equitable sharing of resources among humans and in the sustainability of life, not only for humans but also for Earth's other species.

[2] Is climate change an issue of religious importance? In most religions, "the natural world" is prominently featured. Indigenous peoples, such as native Americans, widely share belief in the harmony of humans with animals, land, and a spirit world; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam treat the creation by God of material reality in similar texts and incorporate elements in the natural world in their religious symbolism; Hinduism regards natural phenomena to be imbued with sacred presences and manifestations of the divine are held to be integral to the recycling of matter in the karmic processes; Buddhism envisions all beings to be interconnected and interdependent, with each being responsible in some fashion for every

other being. Although these religions place emphasis on nature, many of their practitioners seem oblivious to the religious importance of the ecological decline of the planet.

[3] Some of the reasons for this neglect will be addressed later in this essay with a focus on Christianity. Before this topic is addressed an explanation of the ecological focus for this essay, which proposes a Christian theology of creaturely kinship, is in order. Ecology is featured in the title, rather than environment because the term “ecology,” more than “environment,” draws attention to Earth’s interrelated life systems. Ecology is the chosen focus, mindful that not only is “ecology” a more encompassing term than “environment,” but also it is a more complex one. While a biological science traceable to the study of evolution in the nineteenth century, influential ecologists have sometimes conceived of ecology without incorporating fundamental Darwinian insights. In addition, “ecology” is sometimes used to name a social movement, such as the “Deep Ecology” green movement (see the work of its founder, Arne Naess).

[4] Although the term “ecology” is preferred over “environment,” the term “environment” has a history of being used interchangeably with “ecology.” For example, Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), one of the first American conservationists, often invested similar meanings in the terms “environment” and “ecology” in his classic book, *Sand Country Almanac*. To counter the tendency, common in the United States during Leopold’s time, to treat the environment as something to tame and control in the name of human progress, Leopold argued that the proper way to speak of the environment was as a “living organism” in which all the parts constitute a vital whole. Leopold’s organic-holistic emphasis affirms Earth as a household of life with humans as members of local biotic communities. In the “land ethic” he proposed, the influence of Darwinian evolution theory, including the central explanation of descent of species by natural selection, features strongly, so much so that he speaks of his ethics as “a process in ecological evolution” (203).¹

[5] In addition to taking Darwin’s contributions seriously, Leopold also drew attention to the fact that ecology and the economy cannot be separated. He argued that sudden species loss is inevitably due to human interference, usually for economic gain (194). He decried the fact that choices governing conservation were based on economic motives and when the economic value of something we love, such as songbirds, is not apparent, we create an economic reason in order to validate our decision to conserve them. In one of his few explicitly religious remarks, Leopold provides a “religious reason” for songbirds: “God started his show a good million years ago before he had any men for an audience . . . , it is just barely possible that God himself likes to hear birds sing and see flowers grow” (cited in Flader and Callicott: 96).

[6] This statement may be “tongue-in-cheek” musing on Leopold’s part, but the critical attention he gave to the relationship of evolution and economy is important for the development of a Christian ecological theology. Ecology and economy, of course, are linguistically related terms, sharing the same Greek root, *oikos*, meaning house. Ecology as a biological science is concerned with the household of life, and therefore studies the

¹ Nash points out that Leopold’s ethics is so heavily influenced by Darwin, especially his *The Descent of Man*, that he “nearly plagiarized Darwin” (68).

interaction of all organisms, both with one another and with their environments. Economy refers to a different yet related household, created and maintained by humans with a focus on the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. Put simply, economics is concerned with the human problem of unlimited wants and the limitations of scarce planetary resources. Both ecology and economics address scarcity and competition but from very different frameworks that lead to conflicting notions of sustainability. Economic calculations tend to give little attention to long-term consequences of profit-driven choices. In contrast, scientists, especially biologists, typically think in terms of long-term time frames. As a result, as Donald Ludwig, Marc Mangel, and Brent Haddad point out, economic modeling often assumes substitutability of goods and services in the interest of maximizing profits and dominating global markets; in contrast, ecologists' conceptions give attention to the uniqueness of species and the balance necessary to sustain them in a given habitat over time (500). Therefore, economic growth that damages ecology is ultimately uneconomic and unsustainable in the long term.

Obstacles to an Adequate Christian Response to the Plight of the Earth

[7] Unfortunately, although Christianity holds that all of creation, visible and invisible, has been made by God, "churches in the North," as David Hallman points out, "have not yet come to grips with the degree to which Christian theology and tradition are implicated in the Western capitalist development model . . ." (5). Hallman made this statement in 1994 and although churches have produced official documents with a focus on ecological or environmental concerns and in some locales religious task forces are engaging in practical action, much remains to be done. For one thing, a pattern of thought that virtually ignores Earth in Christian theology and preaching has to be overcome. This pattern, in place for nearly five centuries, ignores "nature" as a *locus theologicus* and instead treats it as merely the stage on which the drama of salvation is to be played out.² This modern phenomenon resulted in Christianity virtually ignoring non-human creation while emphasizing personal salvation directed to an afterlife. Christianity's orientation to the next world in countries that equate progress with scientific and technological advance has contributed to a pattern of insufficient attention to the welfare of Earth and the massive extinction of Earth's species.

[8] As John Haught points out, joining hope for the dead and hope for the natural world is a connection that is not often made in Christian churches (101-10). Yet, biblical faith in the resurrection of the dead does not require us to look upon Earth as a mere point of departure that we leave behind as we embark on a journey of hope into the afterlife. In a perspective that acknowledges the evolutionary dynamics of the universe, human hope cannot be separated from the hope for the Earth. Billions of years before *homo sapiens* evolved, the Creator-God had already seeded the cosmos with promise, pressing toward the future.

² There are many reasons for this, including the Protestant emphasis on the individual search for a gracious God; the philosophical "turn to the subject" traceable especially to Descartes' notion of the self and his dualism of mind and matter as completely distinct, and Kant's "turn to the subject," which treated persons as "ends in themselves" and all other living beings as means for the achievements of human ends; and the challenge posed to medieval interpretations of Christian revelation by new developments in the natural sciences.

Haught stresses, “understanding the cosmos as promise invites us to cherish it without denying its ambiguity” (111).

[9] Haught’s position presumes acceptance of the dynamics of an evolving fifteen billion year old cosmos. A significant obstacle to cherishing the cosmos as creation in ways that extend our ethical concern to Earth by American Christians is the long-standing ambiguity surrounding biological evolution because it is perceived to challenge not only belief in the Creator-God of biblical revelation, but also belief that humans are creatures uniquely made in God’s image. Polemics between Christian groups, especially advocates for forms of so-called “scientific” creationism, such as “Young Earth Creation Science” and “Intelligent Design,” and scientists and philosophers of science, especially those who selectively draw upon Darwinian evolution in support of atheistic scientism (see notably Dawkins; Dennett; Stenger), are drawing Americans away from the study of the natural sciences.³

[10] As a point of fact, all science since Darwin has adopted his commitment to limit science to material explanations of empirical evidence. Although Young Earth Creation Science and Intelligent Design differ on many points, both reject Darwinian evolution for its naturalistic explanations that exclude divine intervention. Darwin, however, when he wrote *The Origin of Species* did not reject a Creator God at work in creation. Rather, although he did not believe God directly created species in their present form, he was open to the possibility of God creating through the natural mechanisms of evolution.⁴

[11] This basic position is compatible with Christian churches that do not interpret the Bible literally and, therefore, do not regard Darwinian evolution to conflict with faith in a Creator-God. Rather, church groups, such as the members of the National Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church⁵ accept the broad notion of God using evolutionary processes to create life. Yet, the theologies of these church bodies are not deeply affected by biological evolution, especially as it is related to ecology and creation theology. Instead, the focus of

³ A recent study of scientific literacy in the United States illustrates the fragility of “the integrity of U.S. science education.” Since 1979, the proportion of scientifically literate adults has doubled to a paltry 17% (Gross).

⁴ In the penultimate paragraph of *The Origin of Species*, Darwin wrote: “To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual” (1993: 647-48). In a reflection in his autobiography, Darwin states: “Another source of conviction in the existence of God, connected with the reason and not with the feelings, . . . follows from the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity for looking far backwards and far into futurity, as the result of blind chance or necessity. When thus reflecting, I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and deserve to be called a Theist. This conclusion was strong in my mind about the time, as far as I can remember, when I wrote *The Origin of Species*; and it is since that time that it has very gradually with many fluctuations become weaker” (1958: 92-93).

⁵ Pope John Paul II in a 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Science effectively accepted biological evolution as scientific fact. While John Paul II wisely noted that not all theories of evolution are created equal and he, therefore, cautioned that there are some troublesome theories dependent on extra-scientific notions borrowed from [atheistic] philosophy, he did make it clear that there is no inherent conflict between evolution and creation faith (see also Fisher).

their attention is on issues related to human history, spirituality, personal morality, and social justice.

[12] Therefore, although many churches do accept evolution as valid science, the neglect of its implications for Christian belief and practice does not remedy the effects of the rejection of biological evolution by their fellow Christians who support Young Earth Creationism or Intelligent Design where theological responses to the looming ecological problems are concerned. That said, a similar critique can be directed to some noteworthy ecologists. For example, Eugene Odum's classic textbook *Fundamentals of Ecology* made very few references to evolution. His concept of ecosystem led him to put emphasis on the cooperative equilibrium among species. Although Odum acknowledged competition among individuals of species, he maintained that the survival of the unified ecosystem depended upon counterbalancing competition with cooperation.

[13] While Darwin did not ignore cooperation in his *The Origin of Species*, for him the primary mechanism of his explanation of descent of species through modification is natural selection.⁶ Integral to natural selection is a struggle for existence that will allow favorable variations to be preserved and unfavorable (non-adaptive) ones to be eliminated. In her critical appraisal of the major thesis of *Fundamentals of Ecology*, Lisa Sideris concludes: "Ultimately, Odum's ecosystem concept (which became an ecosystem idea, as it is popularly understood today) embraced an overt form of holism . . . In its emphasis on cooperation and organism-like self-regulation, Odum's ecosystem concept bears traces of a much older romantic perspective" (165-66). Sideris also points out that like the Romantics before them, many ecologists in the 1950s and 1960s saw their mission as "ecologizing society as a whole," since nature was perceived as the ideal model for human communities (167).

[14] One might conclude from Sideris that an explanation of ecology that ignores evolution, especially the process of natural selection and the suffering associated with Earth's species struggle for survival, can only be regarded as deficient and passé. The same could also be said of many Christian theologians and scholars in religious studies, who are perpetuating an earlier ecological Romanticism by envisioning nature as not only interconnected and interdependent but also as harmonious and, by nature, stable.

An Ecological Reading of Genesis Creation Texts

[15] Any proposal for a Christian theology of creation must envisage the God-nature (both human and non-human) relationship by taking into account the authoritative sources of the Christian faith. No source is more central to theological reflection than the Bible and in the case of creation, the Genesis texts with which the Bible begins. Evolutionary ecology, of course, is beyond the scope of biblical creation texts as is the global economics contributing to dangerous climate change. Yet, as presented in the first chapter of Genesis creation gradually unfolds in a six staged process in which God forms a universe out of a formless chaos. The multi-staged process has led to comparisons of the first Genesis account of creation with other texts from the ancient Near East.

⁶ Darwin also drew attention to how plants and animals in a given habitat are "bound together by a web of complex relations" (1993: 101).

[16] There is a broad consensus among biblical scholars that Genesis 1:1-2:4a was influenced by the Babylonian's *Enuma Elish*, an extended, multi-staged account of the creation of the cosmos and of humans through conflict among the gods. Presuming that at least the earliest form of Genesis 1 was composed in the midst of Judean enslavement in present day Iraq, the authors of this tradition, known as the Priestly tradition, reasserted their belief in God's power to order chaos. Given the rhythmic cadences of Genesis 1:1-2:4a, Terence E. Fretheim argues that this text has a discernable doxological character and may have been honed over time in and through liturgical usage (31). The narrative clearly includes among its intentions the praise of God who provides a Sabbath day of rest for all of creation for this purpose. What could be dearer to exiles in a foreign land than to be in a place where they could freely praise God and rest in the belief that this God creates a world, which God repeatedly reminds them is good, even very good?

[17] As the narrative progresses, on the sixth day God created the animals, and humankind is also made. From the standpoint of evolution, since humans do share the same day of creation with animals (Gen 1:24-26), one might interpret this as compatible with Darwin's recognition that humans share with all life forms a common ancestry. In a sense we are all "genetically kin." Note how this kinship is affirmed later in the passage. God declares that every seed-bearing plant all over the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit are given to humans to be their food. Similarly, to all the animals, birds, and every living creature that crawls on the ground is given green plants for their sustenance (Gen 1:29 and 30). Humans are not told here that they may eat animals. Does this affirm that humans are fundamentally connected to the animals with whom they share creation's sixth day? This seems to be a reasonable conclusion and is a perspective from which the divine directives to humans to be fertile and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth (Gen 1:28) can be given an ecological interpretation. Subduing the earth in an agricultural economy of subsistence farming may simply mean to cultivate the ground for food, a difficult task in those days, and an interpretation supported by Genesis 2:15, in which the first human is directed to till (*'abad*, literally meaning "to serve") the paradisaical garden. Exercising dominion is a reminder not to destroy the fish, birds, and other animals, which implies not destroying their habitats. Dominion, therefore, reflects the core meaning of economics: care of the household of creation.

[18] In Genesis 1:26, humans – male and female – are singled out as the earth creatures made in God's image. The text picks up a recurring use of the word "let," which according to Fretheim, "means that God's speaking does not function as an imperative; it leaves room for creaturely response" (31). In the case of humans, surely that response can take the form of cooperation with God in service of the flourishing of life.

[19] This perspective is reinforced in the second, but earlier, account of creation identified as the Yahwist tradition. From the standpoint of evolution, Genesis 2 provides grounds for affirming that humans and all animals share the same building blocks of life, drawn from the soil of the Earth. There are details of the story that are worthy of attention. In this earlier presentation of God as creator, God first forms the human, (the human earthling), out of the clay of the ground (*'adamah*) and breathes into it the breath of life (Gen 2:7). After which, God forms out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air. To the

human creature, God brings the animals and entrusts the human with the responsibility of naming them (Gen 2:17-20).

[20] Genesis 2 both affirms a common origin of humans and animals, and sets humans apart from other creatures. Christians have often interpreted the latter, coupled with Genesis 1 in which humans are made in the image of God, in a way that locates humans at the top of a hierarchy of life forms, over which they are charged by God to exercise power. This interpretation, however, presumes a correlative notion of who God is.

Beyond an Outdated Anthropocentrism to Creaturely Kinship Solidarity

[21] The widely held assumption that the God of biblical revelation is essentially a solitary agent who creates and who as sovereign ruler exerts power over creatures is an anthropomorphic response to the question: who is God? As Gordon D. Kaufman has pointed out, God has been construed in terms of distinctively human activities, “as choosing, setting purposes, willing, thinking, creating, making covenants and the like” (25). This anthropocentrism rooted in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions clashes with evolutionary and ecological thinking. This is an emphasis that begs for deconstruction so that God can be re-imagined in terms appropriate to the processes of nature and to the emerging understanding of human interconnectedness with Earth’s other species that evolutionary ecology provides.

[22] It is important, therefore, to raise the question, “who is God?” and to explore the implications of the response for creation as a whole and for humans, in particular, since humans are made in God’s image. Terence Fretheim’s insights are again helpful here. He argues that how Christians conceive of God in the Bible has tended toward two major extremes:

On the one hand, in a kind of deistic move, God is imaged as a sovereign and aloof landlord, removed from too close a brush with the world; on the other hand, God is imaged as being in absolute control of the world, even to the point of micromanagement. If one or the other image is the primary way in which to portray the biblical God, then we human beings, created in the image of God, are encouraged to be either a passive overseer or a dominating subject in control of the created order (14).

Both of these interpretations reflect Enlightenment influences. The reference to a deistic notion of a distant and disinterested divine monad is reflective of Enlightenment thinking and the human as a detached observer of nature and its processes. This can lead to the notion, as Charles Pinches as pointed out, that “the welfare and interests of nonhumans are their own but [have] nothing to do with my own [welfare and interests]” (189). The second interpretation of God as controller with humans analogously entrusted with dominion, interpreted as domination of nonhuman nature, is traceable to Francis Bacon, a precursor of the Enlightenment, who conceived of the purpose of science to extend the heretofore narrow limits of human control over nature to their proper bounds. He conceived of dominion as domination of nature for the benefit of humans (cited by Harrison: 24). Both God imaged as aloof landlord, removed from the world, and God imaged as absolute

controller of the world, in different ways and to differing degrees are germane to the ecological problems that must be responded to today.

[23] Neither extreme interprets the God of biblical revelation appropriately. Freitheim's study of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the insights of major scholars, such as Walter Brueggemann and Walther Eichrodt, leads him to conclude that the Old Testament God is fundamentally relational. God creating in Genesis 1 has a transcendent relationship to the world, but is not in isolation from it. In the creation story of Genesis 2, God's immanence is evident, especially in God's intimate mode of forming creatures from the clay of Earth. Citing Abraham J. Heschel, Freitheim stresses, "God remains transcendent in his immanence, and related in his transcendence" (16).

[24] For Christianity, a relational God is affirmed in the New Testament in the person of Jesus, through whom God is made flesh, entering the realm of creatureliness. In the person of Jesus, God is not only one with humanity but also is one with all creatures. Even though Jesus' teachings were not focused on ecological concerns, Jesus has implications for ecology. Jesus cannot be spoken of without reference to Earth, and without recognition that the triune God revealed in Jesus is immanently present in creation. Therefore, one may say of Christianity's belief in a Trinitarian God that God creates, indwells creation, and, through the Holy Spirit, is continually giving creatures the gift of life. Emphasis on a biblically rooted notion of a relational God provides insight into the content of the Christian symbol for the human person "*imago Dei*."

[25] This symbol, rooted in Genesis 1:26, bears the weight of centuries of interpretation that have set humans apart from the rest of nature. The critical difference between humans and Earth's otherkind is sometimes spoken of as an "ontological difference." In the midst of the current ecological crisis, the challenge to reformulate what is meant by an ontological difference cannot be avoided. The deconstruction needed requires that we cast a critical eye on early Christianity's interpretation of *imago Dei*, which due to Christianity's appropriation of classical Greek philosophy emphasized the transcendence of God and selected attributes, especially rationality, which set humans apart from and above other creatures. Gregory Bateson, an anthropologist, has pointed out the problem with this conception, arguing:

If you put God outside and set him vis-à-vis his creation and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit (472).

[26] To counter this flawed interpretation of *imago Dei*, the concept of the human person as steward of the Earth, acting on God's behalf as God's vice-regent has been put forward by many Christian theologians, as well as by Jews and Muslims. Its wide usage has led Christopher Southgate to refer to stewardship as the "default position" of our time for persons concerned about the environment (185).

[27] Christians who connect *Imago Dei* to stewardship are to be praised for recognizing that this traditional theological "indicative" in our present world situation implies an imperative.

Care for the Earth is a human responsibility and a justice issue. But, even granted that our care for God's property is to be benevolent through and through, this anthropocentric emphasis is not without problems. Aside from the picture of God as an absentee landlord with humans as the landlord's steward, the relationship of humans to the rest of nature can be construed as one of management.

[28] Ruth Page applies a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion to the stewardship interpretation of *imago Dei* by drawing attention to "a danger of one-sidedness in the exclusive use of the [managerial] stewardship model" (97). She stresses that a steward is other than the objects of stewardship, so this model implies difference, a difference reflective of hierarchical dualism that perpetuates the vision of humanity as superior to other life forms. Human superiority is fundamentally flawed because it made the exploitation of the rest of nature possible in the first place. Citing Page further: "stewardship, even when enlightened by modern knowledge, chastened by past excess, and Christianized, is still basically about manipulation of the natural world, although it substitutes a kindly paternalism for egocentric tyranny" (97-98).

[29] One of the examples Page cites to illustrate this point is reforestation in Scotland, in which the government, against the advice of scientists, introduced a faster growing alien species of trees, the Sitka spruce, which has crowded out native plants and eliminated the habitats of native birds and other animals. She reflects, "[c]leary ecological disasters have accompanied the drive to afforestation . . ." (103).

[30] To counter anthropocentrism, including that of the stewardship model, ecofeminists draw attention to the connection between patriarchy and androcentrism directed toward women (and to others of secondary status on the basis of race and class) and to that directed to Earth's otherkind. Ecofeminism emphasizes kinship among all humans and with other life forms. Kinship is integral to the elimination of patriarchy in human affairs and makes explicit the biological connection of humans with all other species and the Earth itself. Kinship affirms that humans are a part of an interconnected web of life.

[31] From the standpoint of an ecofeminist conception of kinship, the recognition that humans are different from other species – after all we are those creatures in which "evolution become conscious of itself" (de Chardin: 243) – does not necessarily rule out that other life forms and Earth's many inanimate elements image the divine. Psalm 148 implies as much when it calls to sea monsters and all deep waters, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, storm winds, mountains and hills, fruit trees and all cedars, animals wild and tame, creatures that crawl and fly, young men and women too, old and young alike to praise God's name (Ps 148:7-13). The problem with the assumption that only humans image God is that humans, therefore, have a God-ordained superiority over creation. That superiority, even if exercised in the form of benevolent stewardship, may be but a pale reflection of a concept of God that envisions the divine primarily as a transcendent sovereign acting from a distance, present to creation only when God chooses to intervene, either directly or indirectly through appointed emissaries (Page: 102).

[32] Jürgen Moltmann provides a basis for a corrective to this interpretation by stressing: "Human beings are *imago trinitas* and only correspond to the triune God [of Christian revelation] when they are united with one another" (216). *Imago trinitas* draws attention to the Christian conviction that the Trinitarian mystery of communitarian love is the very heart of

reality. But in a Christian ecological theology, Moltmann's statement must be expanded: Human beings are *imago trinitas* and only correspond to the triune God of love when they recognize the imprint of the Trinity on their fellow earth creatures and live in kinship solidarity with them.

[33] The term "solidarity" is deliberately chosen; it affirms that humans come to fulfillment in the formation of community. Interpreted through the lens of creaturely kinship, solidarity draws attention to humanity's profound bondedness with all people, all forms of life, and with God, who in Christian revelation is triune. Emphasis on solidarity provides a corrective to the shortcomings of an anthropocentric stewardship interpretation of human identity. Solidarity proposes that the "right relationship" of humans with the Creator and with the Earth is marked by the humble awareness, brought to our attention by biological evolution, that like the rest of creation, we are made of elements found throughout the cosmos. A solidarity relationship to all other creatures of Earth is not one of sameness but of mutual connectedness and interdependence. As such, every aspect of creation, alone and collectively, reflects the glory of the triune God.

Conclusions and Implications

[34] I have put forward a proposal for an ecological theology of creaturely kinship as a corrective to the anthropocentrism driving the global economic decisions that are contributing to degradation of the environment and the climate change of global warming. Earth's fecundity, although great, has limits that cannot be transgressed by the goals of a globalized economy. If we do not become purposeful about these limits, the global ecology upon which we and all other species depend for life will continue to slide toward disaster.

[35] Creaturely kinship draws attention to the fact that the human species is part of a greater evolving global whole. This awareness has the potential for transforming our relationship to God, ourselves, and Earth's many living species. This transformation requires of us an active solidarity with Earth's otherkind. The solidarity proposed recognizes that species have their own intrinsic value in themselves as members of complex biotic communities (see Ruether: 101). In keeping with this position, the Christian symbol *imago Trinitas* has been proposed, not only in the interest of drawing attention to relationality being constitutive of who God is, but also to draw attention to its implications, namely, that each species in its own way and known best to God images the Trinity and therefore is sacred.

[36] Creaturely kinship further lends itself to reflection on the goal of solidarity: the common good of Earth's diverse and varied forms of life. In the Catholic tradition, as noted in the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace's *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, the principle of the common good gives pride of place to humans, describing the common good in terms of "the dignity, unity and equality of all people" (#164). The *Compendium* relates its notion of the common good to "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (#164). This goal presumes human cooperation and commitment to justice, especially for persons and societies that are poor and vulnerable.

[37] Importantly, the *Compendium* also draws attention to the fact that the demands of the common good depend on the social conditions of a particular historic period (#166). During

this historic period, preferential protection of the most vulnerable in the human society must be extended to vulnerable species, as well. The *Compendium's* authors recognize this, writing: "The common good of society is not an end in itself; it has value only in reference to attaining the ultimate ends of the person and the universal common good of the whole of creation" (#170).

[38] Although all creatures are given attention, the emphasis of the *Compendium* is almost entirely on people: "God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity" (#171). The conception of the common good in a Christian ecological theology of creaturely kinship requires that goals of local, national, and global interdependence focus not only on our obligation to other persons, but also on our obligation to the most vulnerable of Earth's species, made such by economically driven human choices. Put simply, our creaturely kinship with all Earth's species requires not only our recognition of solidarity across species but also a religious commitment to the common good of the Earth-community.

[39] A commitment to an all encompassing global common good, although desperately needed today, admittedly will be very difficult to attain because it requires an effort by humans to re-conceive of our place on the planet and to seek the ecological good of Earth as though it were our own personal good. It will require us to surrender an anthropocentric view of the world in order to acquire a biocentric one and to enact major steps to counter economic self-interest for the sake of global sustainability. In the words of Albert Einstein, in a critique of anthropocentrism, "Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison [of self-interest] by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty" (cited in Johnson: 62). Surely, this task, which is integral to creaturely kinship and basic to the flourishing of the Earth community, is worth taking up.

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