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Rethinking Root Metaphors in Ecotheology: Oikos and Hodos amid a Changing Climate

Repensar as metáforas originárias em Ecoteologia: Oikos e Hodos num Clima em Mudança

Repenser les métaphores originaires en écothéologie : Oikos et Hodos dans un climat changeant

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Abstract

This contribution juxtaposes two root metaphors that are widely used in Christian ecotheology, namely that of "God's household" (*oikos*) and that of a journey along "the way" (*hodos*). These are tested with reference to other proposed metaphors and for their relative adequacy in Christian responses to climate change. It is suggested that the spatial metaphor of the household can be complemented by the temporal metaphor of a journey, given the challenges of a changing climate. Accordingly, home is best understood in an eschatological way. The Earth is indeed our common house but it does not provide a home for all yet.

Keywords: Climate Change; Ecotheology; Household; Journey; Root metaphors.

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Resumo
Este artigo justapõe duas metáforas originárias, vastamente usadas na ecoteologia cristã, nomeadamente a da «casa de Deus» (*oikos*) e a de uma jornada ao longo do «caminho» (*hodos*). Estas serão testadas por referência a outras metáforas propostas, e pela sua relativa adequação, ao serem usadas nas respostas cristãs às mudanças climáticas. Sugere-se que a metáfora espacial da casa pode ser complementada pela metáfora temporal da jornada, tendo em conta os desafios de um clima em mudança. Consequentemente, o lar compreende-se melhor na dimensão escatológica. A Terra é, de facto, a nossa casa comum, mas ainda não providencia um lar para todos.
Palavras-chave: Mudanças climáticas; Ecoteologia; Casa; Jornada; Metáforas originárias.

Résumé
Cet article juxtapose deux métaphores originales, largement utilisées dans l'écothéologie chrétienne, à savoir celle de la « maison de Dieu » (oikos) et celle du cheminement sur le « chemin » (hodos). Celles-ci seront testées en référence à d'autres métaphores proposées, et à leur adéquation relative, lorsqu'elles sont utilisées dans les réponses chrétiennes au changement climatique. Il est suggéré que la métaphore spatiale de la maison puisse être complétée par la métaphore temporelle du voyage, en tenant compte des enjeux d'un changement climatique. Par conséquent, la maison est mieux comprise dans la dimension eschatologique. La terre est bien notre maison commune, mais elle n'offre pas encore un chez-soi à tout le monde.
Mots-clés : Changement climatique ; Écothéologie ; Maison ; Voyage ; Métaphores originales.

Introduction: On Metaphors and Root Metaphors

Metaphors can be powerful. In a saying attributed to Desmond Tutu we are encouraged to see that beggar as one's own brother, that prostitute as one's own sister and that rapist as one's own uncle. The way one sees each of these persons shapes one's attitudes, one's body language and one's responses to them. There is then a difference between seeing and seeing as. To see something as something else is not to disregard what is seen. The harsh realities need to be faced, investigated and understood for what they are. Nevertheless, to see such harsh realities in a new light changes (almost) everything and enables a liberating, healing response. Although metaphors are typically pictorial, privileging the eye, all the other senses may be involved in such perception – hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. It makes a huge difference to the smell of a baby's nappy if the baby is recognised as one's own child in need.

The role of metaphor, indeed the "rule of metaphor" (Paul Ricoeur[1]) has been widely discussed in language and literature, in science, history, philosophy and the arts, and also in Christian theology. One may capture the core insight (since Kant's distinction between *noumena* and *phenoumena*) in a simple formula: there is no seeing without seeing as. There is no direct access to things as they are. Perceptions may be inadequate and need to be critically tested but there is no knowledge without perception. This core insight has sparked endless debate which cannot and need not be reviewed here. Suffice it to say that the role of metaphor needs to be related to similar concepts such as concepts, constructs, icons, models, motifs, myths, narratives, paradigms, symbols, theories and types.

In this contribution I will draw attention especially to the difference between metaphors and root metaphors.[2] Root metaphors are longstanding metaphors that shape entire traditions and that have proved to be fruitful in helping those embedded in such a tradition to see not just something but many things in that light. Root metaphors cannot be invented, they are given and received and can have staying power for decades, indeed for centuries. In theological discourse examples include atonement, healing, justification, liberation, regeneration, the reign of God, resurrection, Spirit baptism and transfiguration. Each of these are indeed metaphors that originated in a highly particular *Sitz im Leben* and became widely used and extended far beyond that context. They may be connected with each other but then the question is one of priority. Which metaphor is typically used as a lens through which the others are viewed? This accounts for differences in long-standing theological traditions.

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[1] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

[2] It may suffice here to draw on Paul Santmire's use of the term in, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambigous Ecological Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 14.

I will juxtapose two such root metaphors that are widely used in Christian ecotheology, namely that of "God's household" (*oikos*) and that of a journey along "the way" (*hodos*). I will bring these two into play with other proposed metaphors and models in order to test their relative adequacy in Christian responses to climate change.

1. Models and Root Metaphors in Christian Ecotheology

Christian ecotheology emerged especially in the 1970s, partly as Christian critiques of ecological destruction, partly as varied responses to ecological critiques of Christianity. This dual critique prompted reflection on the adequacy of dominant root metaphors. To what extent have such root metaphors contributed to the causes of ecological destruction? Are they adequate to guide Christian responses to such destruction? Numerous questions may be raised here but two will suffice: Can such root metaphors do justice to that which is material, bodily and earthly, to God's work of creation (*creatio*) and to the outcome of what God created (*creatura*)? And: Can such root metaphors avoid the traps of an arrogant anthropocentrism, seeing human beings as "crown of creation"?

It is worth adding that seeing the world around us as God's creation is by itself a metaphor, a way of seeing as – and a deeply counter-intuitive one at that. This is because we do not have access to the world as God presumably created it "in the beginning". We only have access to the world around as it now is, riddled with anxiety, suffering, injustices and oppression, alongside that which may be good, beautiful and joyful. To see *this* world as God's creation is then both counter-intuitive and profound. Anyone overhearing such a re-description and ascription should immediately ask: How on earth could this God of love have created such a messed-up world? To explain that will require telling the rest of the story of God's work.[3]

At first the focus of Christian ecotheology was indeed on revisiting the doctrine of creation and on anthropology, more specifically the relationship between "man and nature", later revised as "the place of humanity within the earth community". However, if these reflections are not related to the crux of the gospel and the Trinitarian heart of the Christian faith, they will not have staying power. Not surprisingly, constructive attempts soon emerged to explore alternative root metaphors. Again, such root metaphors cannot be invented but theologians can discern and reflect upon current trajectories. One may therefore also understand the emergence of ecotheology as the quest for alternative root metaphors, perhaps discerning the need for a paradigm change.

It is not surprising that several leading (Western) scholars offered typologies to track what is emerging in the field. For the purposes of this essay one may say that such typologies identify and focus on different root metaphors. Three such contributions may be mentioned very briefly:

In the *Travail of Nature* (1985) Paul Santmire describes the ambiguous ecological promise of Christian theology by contrasting two intertwined motifs, namely a "spiritual" and an "ecological" motif. He understands the latter as "a vision of the human spirit's rootedness in the world of nature and on the desire of self-consciously embodied selves to celebrate God's presence in, with, and under the whole biological order."[4] He argues that such long-standing theological motifs are rooted in root metaphors and identifies three of these, namely the metaphors of ascent (the experience of the overwhelming cosmic mountain), of fecundity and the experience of a promising journey, giving birth to the metaphor of migration to a good, fecund land[5]. As examples he includes the flood narrative, the exodus, the return from exile, but also the American Pilgrim Fathers. Although such a journey becomes necessary because of alienation from the land, the rootedness in the world of nature is retained.

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[3] Ernst M. Conradie, "What on Earth Did God Create? Overtures to an Ecumenical Theology of Creation," *The Ecumenical Review* 6:4 (2014): 433-53.

[4] Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, 9.

[5] Santmire, *The Travail of Nature,* 16.

In *The Promise of Nature* (1993) John Haught discusses three "approaches" for doing ecotheology.[6] An apologetic approach defends the ecological integrity of Christianity with reference to notions of dominion, stewardship, or priesthood. A sacramental approach draws on creation-centred spiritualities (e.g., Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry) to defend the ecological integrity of the natural world and to resist threats against that. An eschatological approach (favoured by Haught) focuses on the either the promises of God to make all things new (Jürgen Moltmann) or the promise of nature itself, if understood in process or in evolutionary terms (drawing on Alfred North Whitehead and/or Teilhard de Chardin). This allows Haught to speak of nature itself as a restless journey, of human existence as one of hopeful anticipation and of Christian existence as fervent expectation.[7] He discusses the implications of each approach for an environmental ethos and praxis.

In an important concluding essay to the volume *Christianity and Ecology* (2000) Rosemary Ruether juxtaposes two "types" of doing ecotheology.[8] The first is the covenantal tradition associated with the biblical tradition but also with ecumenical efforts towards "covenanting for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. An ecological ethos then follows from covenantal rights and responsibilities. The second is the sacramental type associated with the work of Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry. It emphasises a mystic, typically cosmic Christology and Pneumatology, drawing on the biblical motifs of wisdom and the Logos. Ruether observes that Protestants tend to favour the covenantal type while Catholics and Orthodox Christians end to favour the sacramental type.

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[6] John F. Haught, *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993).

[7] See John F. Haught, *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[8] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Conclusion: Eco-justice at the Center of the Church's Mission," in *Christianity and Ecology. Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 603-14.

She calls for a reclaiming of the dynamic interaction between these types for the sake of a redemptive hope and an encompassing ecojustice.[9]

2. *Oikos* and *Hodos* as Emerging Root Metaphors?

Notwithstanding these typologies, there are arguably especially two dominant metaphors that have emerged in Christian ecotheology that have the potential to become long-standing root metaphors, namely seeing the world as God's household and seeing cosmic, evolutionary, and human history as an ongoing journey.

The metaphor of the whole household of God first emerged in ecumenical discourse through the writings of Philip Potter, the former general-secretary of the World Council of Churches.[10] It was quickly picked up by a wide range of scholars involved in branches of the ecumenical movement, including Kim Yong Bock, Dieter Hessel, Douglas Meeks, Lewis Mudge, Geiko Müller-Farhenholz, Konrad Raiser and Larry Rasmussen. While this may sound like an all-male chorus, it is also used in the Oikotree movement in South Korea, in Latin American liberation theology, in African's women theology (where a distinction between house, home and hearth is suggested[11]) and in South African discourse on poverty and ecology[12] – to mention only a few examples. Finally, this imagery also plays an important role in Pope Francis's influential encyclical *Laudato si'* with the significant subtitle "On Care for our Common Home".[13] On this basis this volume of the journal *Ephata* rightly explores the strengths and limitations of the "common house".

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[9] Cf. Ruether, "Conclusion", 613.

[10] Cf. Philip A. Potter, *At Home with God and in the World* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013).

[11] Cf. Musimbi R. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge, eds., *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996).

[12] Cf. Diakonia Council of Churches, *The Oikos Journey: A Theological Reflection on the Economic Crisis in South Africa* (Durban: Diakonia, 2006).

[13] Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2015). Although the phrase "our common home" is used repeatedly in *Laudato si'* the metaphor is not developed, nor is their reference to ecumenical discourse on the "whole household of God" (oikos). our planet is a homeland and that humanity is one people living in a common home.

The core strength of this metaphor relates to its ability to hold together ecumenical concerns over economic justice, ecological sustainability and ecumenical fellowship on the basis of the etymological root “oikos” in the English words economy (the management of the household), ecology (the underlying logic of that household) and ecumenical relations (the inhabitation of the house). One may readily extend the metaphor to also speak of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, the church as God’s dwelling place, the upbuilding of the household (*oikodome*), the role of stewardship (the *oikonomos*), the place of the church in God’s larger household,[14] and eschatological longing for the house to become a home for all God’s creatures.[15] One core limitation is that the metaphor seems to remain anthropocentric even though other animals also build “houses”. If the house becomes all-inclusive (a metaphor for the whole world), if it excludes no threats, it does not provide the shelter required. At some point of extension any metaphor will begin to break down.

The metaphor of the “promising journey” is picked up by Paul Santmire as one example of what he terms an “ecological motif” in the Christian tradition. He describes this as “migration to a good land”.[16] In his many writings on evolution John Haught recognises the dangers of a sense of cosmic homelessness but suggests that nature itself is in process towards a destiny that has not been reached yet (the cosmic story portrayed by the sciences). If so, and if humans participate in the promise of nature, human existence could be understood as participation in a spiritual journey. Following in the way paved by Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry, Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Swimme also employ the metaphor of a journey to speak of the “Journey of the Universe”, with a clear ecological moral to that story.[17] From a perspective very different from such North American voices, the Diakonia Council of Churches speak of *The Oikos Journey* (2006) in order to address issues of poverty and ecological destruction together. An international group of scholars meeting in San Francisco in 2011 produced a collective set of reflections on "The Journey of Doing Christian Ecotheology."[18] This is currently being taken forward through collaborative work on a volume on method in ecotheology where the metaphor of a road as embedded in the English term methodology (meta+hodos+logos) is taken as a point of departure.[19] Following its Busan Assembly (2013) the World Council of Churches also called on churches to view their journey of faith, as a "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace". These examples may suffice although there are surely many more.

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[14] Cf. Clive W. Ayre and Ernst M. Conradie eds., *The Church in God’s Household: Protestant Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ecology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2016).

[15] Cf. Ernst M. Conradie, *The Earth in God’s Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2015).

[16] Santmire, *Travail*, 24-25.

The core strength of the metaphor of a journey, if compared to the spatial metaphor of a household, is that it does better justice to movement and change over time. Its weakness is then implied, namely that it potentially tends to underplay a sense of place or at least a sense of responsibility for this particular place. If the journey is spiritualised (where "heaven" is regarded as the ultimate destination and Christians as aliens and sojourners on earth[20]) it would also undermine an ecological praxis, ethos and spirituality. By contrast, if the metaphor is taken too literally, the journey to the promised land can easily revert into forms of entitlement that pave the way for lasting conflict. This can easily happen if the journey becomes devoid of theological connotations.

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[17] Cf. Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

[18] Cf. Whitney Bauman, Ernst M. Conradie, and Heather Eaton, eds., "The Journey of Doing Ecotheology," *Theology* 116 (2013): 1-3, 4-44.

[19] The volume, edited by Ernst M. Conradie and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, is still in the making and is to be entitled "How Would We Know What God is up to? An Earthed Faith 2".

[20] Unfortunately, in two of the five instances where the metaphor of a journey is used in *Laudato si'* it is used accordingly: "Even now we are journeying towards the sabbath of eternity, the new Jerusalem, towards our common home in heaven." And: "we come together to take charge of this home which has been entrusted to us, knowing that all the good which exists here will be taken up into the heavenly feast. In union with all creatures, we journey through this land seeking God …" See *Laudato si'* par. 243, 244.

The metaphor of the journey could be specified in various ways, e.g., as a home-coming journey (combining the two metaphors), a "long walk to freedom" (Nelson Mandela), an "incredible, adventurous journey", the "imitation of Christ" (Thomas á Kempis), a "spirituality of the road", a pilgrimage, or "the Way of the cross" and therefore "a people of the Way".

3. Journeying amid a Changing Climate

The two metaphors of the household and the road are clearly not the only guiding metaphors available for doing ecotheology amid a changing climate. There is ample room for creative and constructive exploration. Yet, a reminder may be appropriate, namely that root metaphors are typically received, not invented. Arguably, we are the products, not the producers of such root metaphors. We live within the "world" socially constructed by such metaphors. It would therefore be facile to simply combine the two metaphors, for example in the form of a home-coming journey, at best with reference to the famous quotation from T.S. Elliot's *Little Gidding*: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." More typically, the two metaphors stand in creative tension with each other. While the metaphor of a journey emphasises the temporal axis, the metaphor of the household is more spatial in orientation. One may say that the earth is indeed our one and only house but that it is not our home yet – given economic inequality and the many faces of violence and ecological destruction. There is then much to do along the way, in making the house a home for all God's living creatures. Being at home, even staying at home is then also a journey of a different kind.

One also needs to be conscious of gender stereotypes embedded in these metaphors – of a testosterone-driven emphasis on an adventurous journey, a male gaze in mapping the terrain, the "trail of tears" that long journeys may evoke following forced removals, a domesticated notion of the motherly home or a patriarchal notion of the "house of the father".

In the South African context the combination of the two metaphors of a home and peoples migration conjure up images of Portuguese, Dutch and British imperial conquest, the devastation of the Mfecane, the Great Trek, forced removals for the sake of establishing Bantustans and more recently migration from other African countries leading to repeated outbreaks of xenophobic violence.

Given such caveats, let me explore the potential of the metaphor of a journey for doing ecotheology amid a changing climate. The metaphor of a journey is clearly an attractive one. It carries many biblical overtones given the themes of Abraham as a "wandering Aramean", the exodus from the "house of slavery", an extended wandering through the wilderness towards the promised land,[21] the return from exile through a highway in the desert (Is 40:3), the two contrasting ways for wisdom and piety (Psalm 1), the Torah as a lamp for the road ahead (Psalm 119:105), the "Way" of Jesus Christ, the *via dolorosa*, the road to Damascus, and the depiction of Christians as sojourners (1 Pet. 2:11-12, Heb. 11:13), as people of the Way, and so forth. If so, the methodology (the logos in meta+hodos+logos) employed for doing ecotheology should reflect something of such a broken logic, the logic of the cross.

Both the temporal and the spatial axis of such a journey are important. Amid a changing climate I suggest that it is best not to view this journey as a pilgrimage with a clear destination, well-worn paths, inns along the way and ample tales narrating the experiences of travellers, even marketed as tourist attractions. Instead this journey is one by foot or sail, through unchartered landscapes or seascapes, without paved ways, established footpaths, clear beacons, only some animal tracks with general directions for the way forward. This is not a "macho voyage" of exploration in the last outposts of wilderness either – soon to be followed by colonisation and exploitation. It would lead one astray from the challenges of climate change to consider the search for exoplanets, astrobiology, or extra-terrestrial intelligence. It could best be regarded as a journey to find a new home as a result of forced migration where current conditions at an uncertain destination are subject to conflicting reports. There are fellow travellers, some heading in different directions, each with a story to tell. There are stark dangers all along the way – inclement weather, contaminated water sources, access to food supplies, the outbreak of diseases, enmity between travellers, conflict over scarce resources, armed robber gangs and vigilante groups. But there may also be trusted companions, generous strangers, and kind-hearted fellows.

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[21] Jan Jorrit Hasselaar draws on Jonathan Sacks (and Maimonides) to suggest that it takes time to change a people's identity. A journey to Palestine that could have taken a few days or weeks takes forty years because it is impossible to abandon their identity as slaves overnight. If slavery is to be abolished, former slaves have to overcome a slavish mentality or else will merely enslave others and themselves: Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, *Climate Change, Radical Uncertainty and Hope Theology and Economics in Conversation* (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2021).

The analogies with what we know about climate change should be obvious. I am writing this within the week of the release of the IPCC's sixth Assessment Report.[22] There is no need to repeat the scientific evidence. Instead, what should be emphasised is that despite the many available scenarios the road ahead is necessarily unchartered. We do not know yet whether the political will to address climate change (the Paris Accord) will be matched by mitigation efforts and by a rapid decline in carbon emissions. We know that some funding will be available for adaptation but not to what extent it would be sufficient. We know that average global temperature and subsequently sea levels will rise in the decades ahead but not with how much. We know about various thresholds that could be breached but not whether and when that may be and how feedback loops may interact. We know that the impact may be disastrous (especially in terms of food security) and that some have already become climate refugees, but we do not know if that would mean that we will need to leave our family homes and if so by when that may become necessary. We know that the supply chains of good and services may be interrupted but not how severe or how long-standing that may be. We know that mass migration may spark conflict but not to what extent that will affect our own lives. We know that more zoonotic diseases may come our way but their identity and impact cannot be known in advance. We know that there will be a further loss of biodiversity and that some species will become extinct but not how far that would reach. We know that some are tempted to employ geo-engineering "solutions" but not whether and when they would actually be used and what side-effects that may bring.

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[22] See the IPCC's, *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis – Summary for Policymakers* at https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM.pdf (accessed 20 August 2021).

What does that mean for doing ecotheology amid such a changing climate. Can the root metaphors of *oikos* and *hodos* offer some guidance? What if the ancestral village called home (*ikhaya in isiXhosa*) is burnt down, if the rains stay away,[23] if the vegetable garden becomes arid amidst soaring temperatures, if the house is flooded, if the inhabited island is suffocated by salt water and is disappearing under the waves?

The biblical metaphor of the exodus from the "house of slavery" would not be helpful to describe the ancestral home. The journey of Abram as a "wandering Aramean" could be but that requires speculation on the reasons for his departure from Ur and then from Haran. The "wandering through the desert" to the "promised land" could be illusionary (as such land may not be available), the conquest of Canaan a recipe for disaster, and the return from exile impossible. The symbol of a straight highway in the desert (Is 40:3), as quoted in John 1:23, indicates a return to "the way of the Lord" with Jesus Christ portrayed as "the Way" (John 14:6), while the "road to Damascus" serves as a call for conversion. The lack of understanding shown by the disciples Thomas and Philip in John 14 may be indicative of our difficulty of figuring what all of this could mean amid a changing climate.

There is some irony here: The secular metaphor of "pathways" for the future as adopted by the IPCC illustrates with some mathematical precision what is required. Like the prophets of old scientific reports portray paths to disaster with equally apocalyptic imagery. The kind of "conversion" that is required also becomes secularised. Essentially there is a need to transform the energy basis of the global economy from fossil fuels to sustainable alternatives in order to reach net zero emissions by 2050. Formulated in one crisp sentence, that is a gigantic and immensely challenging task but what it entails is nevertheless clear. It requires political will, economic policy changes, local entrepreneurship, cultural change in terms of consumer behaviour and raising awareness through education and civil society campaigns.

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[23] This is the point of departure in a set of articles edited by Ezra Chitando and Ernst M. Conradie, "Praying for Rain? African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change," *The Ecumenical Review* 69:3 (2017): 311-435. See also the forthcoming volume edited Ezra Chitando, Ernst M. Conradie, and Susan Kilonzo, *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

Where does this leave the task of doing Christian ecotheology and of proclaiming the core message of the gospel? This is all the more embarrassing because of the complicity of Christianity in the root causes of climate change.[24] It would be possible for churches and individual lay Christians to merely repeat what is said in the public domain, to counter climate denialism in its own midst, and to render moral support to the optimal pathway as portrayed by the IPCC. Christianity could muster its moral resources, community leadership, weekly gatherings of large flocks, infrastructure, and networks to align itself with such an ecological transformation. At best it could add value through colourful metaphors that speak to the hearts and minds of ordinary people. It could provide pastoral support in helping people to cope with uncertainties and anxieties in confronting the challenges on the road ahead. It could provide some solidarity in times when "love grows cold".[25]

Would such a functionalist approach suffice for doing Christian ecotheology?[26] Would this not acknowledge that the Christian message has been superseded by secular efforts towards "building a better society"?

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[24] This is the point of departure taken in the volume edited by Ernst M. Conradie and Hilda P. Koster, *T&T Clark Handbook on Christian Theology and Climate Change* (London et al.: T&T Clark, 2019).

[25] See World Council of Churches, *Solidarity with Victims of Climate Change* (Geneva: WCC, 2002).

[26] This is a core question in ecumenical debates on climate change. See for example Grace Ji-Sun Kim, ed., *Making Peace with the Earth: Action and Advocacy for Climate Justice* (Geneva: WCC, 2016); also Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster, eds., *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

Or could such efforts perhaps be portrayed as the long-term fruit of the Christian message? That would be an arrogant claim given Christian complicity in the root causes of the problem. Instead, I suggest that the priestly task of doing ecotheology does not require final answers to such questions. Christians are bold witnesses to the way of Jesus Christ and not tasked to serve as the judge. The truth of the gospel is ultimately not dependent upon Christian witnessing.

4. The Journey of Doing Ecotheology

Let me on this basis offer some further reflections on the way forward for using the available root metaphors for doing ecotheology amidst a changing climate:[27]

First, I suggest that the task of doing theology could be imagined as a discussion around a campfire in the evening, alongside the path, with companions and fellow travellers, reflecting on today's leg of the journey, anticipating tomorrow's. It may also be helpful to gather one's available tools such as a map, a compass, binoculars, stories from other travellers, travel guides, boots, a rucksack, provisions, a torch or candle, and warm clothes for the night. There are by now ample such tools available for doing ecotheology, not least the Torah as lamp.

Second, a crucial aspect of doing ecotheology is story-telling. This would recognise the role of story-telling in all cultures, at best around a campfire in the evening, anticipating what lies ahead for the next day. One may then speak of telling, sharing the story *en route*, with companions and strangers on the way. For Christians the task is one of sensing what God may be up to. It is one of telling the story of who this God is (God's identity), what kind of God this is (God's character), what this God has done in the past, understanding what God is doing at the moment and what the future may hold in this God's presence. This task of

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[27] I am drawing here on work in progress for an essay entitled "Some South African Perspectives along the Road in Doing Christian Ecotheology" for volume 2 of the An Earthed Faith series.

"Telling the Story" is recognised in a series of edited volumes currently underway.[28]

Third, although the route ahead is not clear, there is a clear sense of destination (perhaps a vision of shalom, where justice will prevail, of the coming reign of God). The aim of the journey is not merely to reach the destination; every step of the journey is important and has eschatological significance as stories are gathered along the way. The home-coming dinner, perhaps the feast of the Lamb that was slain, has its lure but it is every step of the journey that matters. That requires both a healing of memories and confronting injustices and suffering resulting from that along the way.

Fourth, a comment about the theological connotations of this journey, how this is related to the knowledge of Godself, i.e., knowing the identity and character of God and knowing what God may be up to. It should be clear that using tools cannot secure reliable knowledge of God. In the same way that one may see a path but cannot see a journey, that one may detect signs of love without seeing that love, God's presence and character can be discerned without being visible. As per the Nicene Creed, what is unseen forms part of God's creation. Knowledge of God enables us liturgically to see the world in the light of the Light of the world.[29] We cannot actually see that Light; we can only see things in that light. Or in the often-cited words of C.S. Lewis, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." One needs tools along the way, including a lantern or a torch, but one should not confuse the lantern with light.

Fifth, the metaphor of a journey does yield some remarkable insights on what may and what may not be expected of God. Given this metaphor, the question what God may be up to sounds awkward. It is not as if one could expect God to pave the way, to provide rescue operations, to carry creatures all the way, or to show the way by offering directions (as an omniscient director who knows every way in advance) that one then has to follow robotically. Even the image of following in the footsteps of Jesus, as if one does not need to think about the route oneself, seems inappropriate. It is also not as if it is God who puts the challenges ahead in place like a pre-planned obstacle course. These challenges (e.g., those associated with climate change) may be self-inflicted or not, but should not be regarded as divine punishment for human folly. It is not as if the Creator controls the forces unleashed in the "Anthropocene" and can choreograph what human agents are to do next. One may say that being the Creator implies self-limitation from God's side, allowing creatures to be and to evolve without pre-planning and pre-determining every step of the way. Human parents who engineer and then micro-manage the lives of their children (selecting their genes and talents, deciding on a school, sport, career, marriage, grandchildren and their eventual deaths in advance) would be diabolic. God needs to make room within Godself for creatures to be, to evolve, to embark on their own life journeys, to make mistakes, to cope with challenges, to mature and hopefully to flourish.

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[28] Ernst M. Conradie and Pan-chiu Lai, *Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin …*. An Earthed Faith 1 (Durbanville: Aosis / Eugene: Cascade, 2021, forthcoming).

[29] Cf. Conradie, *The Earth in God's Economy*, 25-112.

This does not mean that the divine parent is absent from the lives, the journeys of beloved creatures. Whenever God acts it is through creatures, involving a paradox of multiple agencies at different levels.[30] How, then, does God interact with (human) creatures? How would we know what God is up to in this sense? This is not an unfathomable mystery as if it would take an intellectual tour de force to reach the answer. The identity and character of this God has been disclosed to us in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit. I would suggest that God's presence and interaction with creatures take the shape of 1) parental guidance (in broad parameters) like any loving parent who finds joy in their adult children would, providing some light so that one may see for oneself; 2) helping those who have lost their way completely to find the Way again; and

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[30] The notion of a "paradox of double agency" is widely discussed in discourse on divine action in the world. An action may be ascribed to an agent at one level and to another agent at a higher level. For a discussion, see Conradie, *The Earth in God's Economy*, 175-220.

3) a comforting presence (the Wind behind one's sails) throughout the journey, especially when times get rough.

Sixth, there may indeed be a need for something like a "spirituality of the road", to borrow a phrase from the South African missiologist David Bosch.[31] What is needed for the journey of doing ecotheology is not any ABC, a method with a few easy steps. The notion of a journey requires a balancing of the temporal tensions between past, present and future. To live in the moment, with a vision towards the future and on the basis of a memory of the past is demanding. A prerequisite of such a spirituality is to "come into step." To be in step is to appreciate the moment in between footsteps. The moment just before the next foot touches down. It does not help to linger in the past. One has to shift one's body weight with the necessary courage. It also does not help to hasten the movement. This will soon lead to exhaustion. One has to be willing to linger for a moment in the air, in anticipation of touching down and feeling the earth under one's feet anew. Only in this moment of lingering, only through a rediscovery of "slowness" instead of an ever faster pace, will time be experienced and not merely measured. Only then will one be able to experience the merciful presence of the eternal God in the moment.[32]

Conclusion on "Our Common Home"

There is a need to return the root metaphor of the whole household of God as "our common home". Amid a changing climate the attractiveness of this metaphor is that the common home recognises a common if differentiated responsibility for housekeeping. It encourages a sense of solidarity with fellow inhabitants of God's household, including a solidarity of the sixth day, namely with animals other than humans. The metaphor of a journey also invites such a solidarity but the emphasis on such commonality is underplayed. It may therefore be appropriate to recognise the limitations of each metaphor, to juxtapose them in order to invite a creative tension in this regard. The dynamism of the metaphor of a journey implies the need to understand "our common home" in terms of the eschatological tension between the already and the not yet of God's coming reign. For that reason, a clear distinction is needed between a house and a home (or a hearth). The earth is indeed the common house within which all God's creative live, but given anxiety, suffering, injustice and oppression, it does not provide a home for all yet.

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[31] Cf. David J. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1979).

[32] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Ellen T. Charry, *A Passion for God's Reign: Theology, Christian Learning and the Christian Self*, ed. Miroslav Volf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 41.

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