



Overcoming the Anthropocentric Captivity of Theology

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THE CURRENT ECOLOGICAL TURMOIL IS HUMAN MADE.

The world is in a constant process of change.

“The Earth has always undergone changes.” I often hear this sentence while discussing one of the most pressing issues of today: global warming and the loss of biodiversity. There is nothing new

There are many different reasons advanced for the problem of climate change, and many different solutions proposed. Christian theology can be said to be a reason contributing to climate change, and Christian theology can contain a solution. The problem is at root anthropological; human activity has created it, and the call to repentance and conversion can be vital to the solution.

therefore, so the conclusion of that argument, in what the planet is experiencing today. Sometimes a further point is added: since in some of those preceding cases of colossal changes human beings were not even around, why should the current climate change and the loss of biodiversity be ascribed to human action?¹

There is one truth in that line of thought: the overall conditions on planet Earth are not static. They evolve. There are *fluctuations* within a given situation of overall stability of our planetary system, and *transitions* from a situation of stability towards a new and unknown situation. The periods of glaciation, for instance, belong to such large-scale transitions.

The Anthropocene: the new era shaped by humankind.

Currently, we live in a period between glaciations. It has been a very stable period of about 11,000 years and has provided ideal conditions for our species, the homo sapiens, to thrive.

Lately, however, this period of stability has entered a process of sustained and rapid change. The *Holocene*, as the current period is called, is giving way to what is being called the *Anthropocene*, literally, “the human era”. The name conveys that this new evolutionary stage is decisively impacted by the presence and the activity of human beings.

The Earth does not contain our needs anymore.

There is enough evidence regarding the impact of the human species on the changes that our planet is undergoing. Statistical data speak an unambiguous language in this regard: More than 75 percent of available land has been altered by human activity. More than 50 percent of the trees on the planet have been cut; the acidity of oceans has increased by 30 percent. The level of CO₂ in the atmosphere has risen by 47 percent and the level of methane by 156 percent. The population

¹ I was influenced by the work of the “LWF Young Reformers,” a network of young Lutherans under thirty years from around the world who advocated with great determination and compelling arguments for issues around ecological justice in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). One of the very influential young leaders of that time, the French theologian Martin Kopp, recently published a powerful book which I read with great interest: Martin Kopp, *Vers une écologie intégrale: Théologie pour des vies épanouies* (Geneve: Éditions Labor et Fides, 2023). While not providing a summary of this publication, it greatly inspires my article.

of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and fish has slumped by 70 percent. All these developments relate directly to human activity.

While it is true, therefore, that change has always taken place, the *nature* of the current changes is unprecedented. It is decisively driven by the human species.

The so-called “ecological footprint” conveys a particularly blunt message in this regard. It is a tool that assesses the capacity of the planet to *provide* and *renew* the resources that humankind requires, and to *absorb* the waste that humankind produces. The tool reveals that since 1970 humankind has gone beyond the level of what the Earth can sustain, both in view of its renewal and absorption capacities. A trend that has only accelerated: in 2023, humankind used 1.7 planets for its annual needs of consumption and waste disposal. Or, to express this equation in terms of our calendar year: in 2024, we already used up the Earth’s capacities on August 1!² As of August 2, we lived from future resources. They belong to our children, not to us. Or they come from “planet B”—a planet yet to be found.

The problem is not the number of people, but how a number of people live.

As alarming as this picture is: neither are we doomed nor are we too many, as one can often hear as a way of conclusion. This can be seen by segregating the data of the ecological footprint by nations and their socio-economic status: if the entire world population lived along the levels of wealth and consumption of low-income countries, then the ecological footprint of humankind would fall to the equivalent of 0.6 planets per year.

The flipside: if every human being on Earth lived according to the levels of the “developed” world, it would take almost four planets to carry the ecological weight of such a lifestyle.³

The interpretation of these facts is simple and straightforward. It reveals that it is not primarily the *number* of people on Earth which

² Global Footprint Initiative, “Estimating the Date of Earth Overshoot Day 2024,” news release, May, 2024, <https://overshoot.footprintnetwork.org/content/uploads/2024/06/2024-Nowcast-explained.pdf>.

³ Global Footprint Initiative, “Open Data Platform,” Global Footprint Initiative, data. footprintnetwork.org.

engenders the current ecological turmoil but how a *number of people live on Earth*.⁴

Hard as it may be to hear this for many of us: the current ecological turmoil is largely a consequence of the lifestyle and overall mind-set of the “modern,⁵ Western”⁶ world.

The interpretation of these facts is simple and straightforward. It reveals that it is not primarily the number of people on Earth which engenders the current ecological turmoil but how a number of people live on Earth.

“Do you want us then to go back to underdevelopment or even to prehistory?” I often hear this angry question when sharing the painful picture that the ecological footprint reveals and the onus it puts on us, who live in the “developed” world.

Of course, it is not about choosing underdevelopment. No one would earnestly wish to be living in conditions of deprivation. It is not about going back. There is no future in the past, anyway. Rather, the task ahead is about finding a way forward in a way that does not mortgage the future of life on Earth, or even bar life as we know it altogether from that future. Business as usual—that should be clear—is not an option.

Lifestyles do not come out of the blue.

What human beings do, their focus and drive, how they live altogether, is shaped by what they have in their minds and in their hearts.

⁴ This point is consistently made by low-income countries, whose populations suffer the heaviest consequences of climate change, while only marginally contributing to its root causes: “your gains in wealth, your progress, translate into losses and damage on our end.” See “Fund for responding to Loss and Damage,” United Nation Climate Change, <https://unfccc.int/loss-and-damage-fund-joint-interim-secretariat>.

⁵ Modernity defined as the period beginning with the sixteenth century.

⁶ Geographical definitions are rather unhelpful when it comes to define realities that are much more complex and diverse. “Where does the West begin?” is not just a rhetorical question but raises the deeper issue of the “power of definition.” Just as an example: for a Chilean like me the West begins with the Easter Islands....The “North-Atlantic Realm” is, in my view, a more precise definition of the category commonly referred to as the West.

Lifestyles are driven by aspirations, by a search for meaning and fulfillment, by a purpose and a vision identified as an ideal for human life.

All of this is not only developed at an individual level. Every society has a collective vision of the world, of who the human being is, and about the place of humankind in this world. It is a vision that holds societies together, gives them their identity and their purpose. It designs and informs their concrete life project.

This “collective imagination”⁷ is powerful and has a decisive influence on how people understand themselves, what they do and what they aspire for throughout their lives. It informs their “wish list” for a well succeeded and meaningful life.

As humankind walks further into the Anthropocene it will be of critical importance, therefore, to engage the hearts and the minds of the people, the collective imagination that informs their life projects and concrete actions to avoid the otherwise foreseeable ecological collapse due to the excessive footprint of humankind on the ecosystem.

Ahead of his time by several decades, the US-American poet J.C. Williams expressed our current predicament poignantly (although not yet knowing about the necessity of using inclusive language):

Man has survived hitherto because he was too ignorant to know how to realize his wishes; now that he can realize them, he must either change them or perish.⁸

THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND WHAT CHURCHES CAN DO.

Change is required, and churches can do a lot in this respect. And they are doing it already. I am encouraged by so many congregations reducing their consumption of plastic bottles and waste—for instance during church coffee after Sunday service. It matters.

I am inspired by Lutheran Bishop Frederick Shoo of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) who leads an impressive

⁷ See Timothy Williamson, “Collective Imagining” in *Imagination and Experience: Philosophical Explorations*, eds. Ingrid Vendrell Ferran and Christian Werner (London: Routledge, 2024).

⁸ William Carlos Williams, “The Orchestra,” *The Desert Music, and Other Poems* (New York: Random House, 1954).

reforestation process at the slopes of the Kilimanjaro. He asks families baptizing their children, confirmands, couples to be married, the congregations he visits as a Bishop: “Let us plant some trees together, for the sake of life.”⁹ He is making an enormous difference.

I learn a lot from the integrated approach of the Evangelical Church in Germany supporting congregations to become ecologically sustainable. The “Green Rooster” has been implemented by hundreds of congregations and is actively promoted by their regional and the national church.¹⁰ Good so!

Who are we, for what for and with whom? Theology matters.

Yet, churches can do more. Because they can—and should—support the discernment about those mindsets, priorities and the sense of purpose that configure the lifestyle our time, and which are at the root of the ecological devastation that we experience today.

Churches can support the scrutiny of the prevailing “wish list” and its delusive promises about a succeeded and meaningful life by forcefully announcing Jesus’s promise of life in abundance, which questions so many of the basic assumptions and frameworks that configure our human minds and hearts, and which drive us in the wrong direction.

Such a discernment and scrutiny has deep spiritual and theological implications. It touches on questions about life and what matters in life, about purpose and meaning, relationships and values, freedom, and responsibility.

Faith is so much about all of that!¹¹ Churches have treasures of faith entrusted to them. They have insights to offer that make

⁹ See “Twenty-years of tree-planting for a sustainable future,” The Lutheran World Federation, July 16, 2024, <https://lutheranworld.org/news/twenty-years-tree-planting-sustainable-future>.

¹⁰ See “Der Grüne Hahn,” Kirchen+Klima, <https://www.kircheundklima.de/der-gruene-hahn/> (in German).

¹¹ In what follows I will focus on Christian faith and churches, although fully aware of the huge potentials of inter-faith and ecumenical cooperation on issues around ecology. The United Nations has recognized this importance, however seeing in Faith-based-organizations (FBO) only their “activist” potential, less their ability to address and transform the fundamental issues that drive the current ecological turmoil. See “Faith for Earth Coalition,” UN Environment Programme, <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/faith-earth-initiative>.

their active involvement in such a deep dialogue both valuable and necessary.

Without such dialogue, many actions, also those undertaken by churches, will remain on the surface, only *reacting* to the ongoing ecological devastation (which is important enough), mitigating its impact, but without really *addressing* the root causes, without shifting gears towards a less destructive relationship with the environment. For this to happen it is indispensable to also talk about these fundamental questions: who are we, for what for, with whom? A shift in the collective imagination of our time is required.

This is why theology matters. I continue to encourage churches not to be shy about the contribution of their spiritual and theological insights in a time that humankind is in search of answers and approaches to tackle the ecological devastation. They don't have to become experts on all the complex matters for which a variety of scientific disciplines exist, but just offer from what they know best, and which matters so much today.

However, what churches can contribute represents *one* among many other necessary and important perspectives. Churches should not seek to *replace* (or worse: to *silence*!) other voices from other disciplines. Instead, they will *add* their voice to an interdisciplinary discourse to discern a way forward.¹² The task is big enough to benefit from every single perspective!

The liberating power of conversion (metanoia)

In his Ninety-Five Theses, Luther stresses the need for the baptized to seek daily conversion by always “revisiting” one's own baptism. For him, coming to faith is not a one-time event, but a permanent process. The old person (Adam) needs to be “drowned” every day so that the new person, created by God's action at the shape of Christ, can step out of the waters of Baptism.

As he spoke about this, Luther linked his baptismal theology back to Jesus's call to conversion and its deep biblical and theological

¹² For the question about the church in the public space and the theological premises for such engagement, see: The Church in the Public Space: A Study Document of The Lutheran World Federation (Geneva: Department for Theology, Mission and Justice, The Lutheran World Federation, 2021).

meaning as it is captured in the word used in the Greek New Testament: *metanoia*. It literally means a change of mind, a going-beyond a given mindset, a reorientation, a fundamental transformation of outlook, of one's vision of the world and of oneself, and a new way of loving others, the whole of the created world, and God.

Different to the words of the poet that I quoted above, which so clearly name the crossroads in which humankind finds itself today, Jesus's call to *metanoia* offers a beautiful addition: it does not leave us with the scenario of possibly perishing, as the poet does, but with the promise of life in abundance! Reimagining one's own life does not become a task without any help, guidance, and reference point, but is nurtured by God's inbreaking reigning in our world and the promise of life it delivers already today.

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This is the tone of the contributions that churches can make to people today. It is not a doomsday prophecy but a message of hope: God sets us free to change as we align ourselves daily to the new person God is making out of us through Baptism. Change is not just urgently *needed*; change is also *possible* because of what God does. There is no loss in changing, but just gain in doing so.

Do we ask this often enough: what have we done to creation?

Jesus's call to conversion is a powerful motivation. With its invitation to change hearts and minds it fits perfectly in our time and its challenges. It liberates, sets free at an individual level to rethink and reimagine life as God wants it to be. It has the potential to even reset and reshape the collective imagination of humankind that finds itself

on a wrong track because of the oversized footprint it is leaving on God's creation.

For this to happen, however, Jesus's call to conversion needs to be freed from a superficial understanding that frames "conversion" as a turning away from specific actions. It has even to go beyond the (still necessary!) question about what we have done to our *neighbor* to now add the equally relevant, and nowadays urgent question: what have we done to God's *creation*?

I do not often hear this question in church services. The impressive exegetical and theological research with its new insights and discourses on ecological matters does not yet seem to have found its way into liturgy and worship. Ecological literacy and faculty of speech seem to be confined to specialized research or to special liturgical feasts¹³ but have not sufficiently permeated worship life and catechesis. To me, this is a field of action to be urgently taken up at the local, national, and global level.¹⁴

The anthropocentric captivity of our theological mindset

The reason for this slowness in embracing a more holistic approach that also includes our relationship to the whole created world in our worship life and theological discourse is due to what I call the "anthropocentric captivity" of our prevailing theological mindset. Almost everything is about us, human beings! And just about that!

Despite of what we read, for instance in Romans 8:18–22 or notably in Colossians 1:15–16, or 1 Corinthians 8:6, God's creation is left out of the redemptory action of the Triune God. Salvation is an event just involving humankind.

Even more: despite of what we read, for instance in John 1, our theological mindset continues to delink Christ from God's creation.

¹³ September 1, the Day of Francis of Assisi, being one, although not widely observed.

¹⁴ There is an interesting development taking place: after decades of ecumenical celebrations of the annual "Feast of Creation" of September 1, also known as "Creation Day" or "World Day of Prayer for Creation" (<https://seasonofcreation.org/>), church leaders and theological and liturgical scholars from various denominations are exploring a proposal to elevate such an observance to the status of liturgical feast in the calendar of Western churches, as a way of marking the Nicaea centenary (2025). See: "Ecumenical efforts to introduce a Christian Feast of Creation," *Lutheran World Federation*, April 2, 2024, <https://lutheranworld.org/news/ecumenical-efforts-introduce-christian-feast-creation>.

Thus, “creation” as a theological topic only comes in to represent the initial history, the prehistory—if one may say—that sets the stage, the decoration, and the scenery within which the essential history of salvation of humankind unfolds.

Anthropocentric captivity has made the human person become the only subject of interest, everything else is secondary, falls out of scope. Nature is irrelevant. Just human beings matter to God.

Our theological discourse has been part of the problem.

Here we touch upon a frightening insight: this “anthropocentric captivity” that has marked our way to speak about God has in itself had devastating effects on God’s creation! As I connect this insight to what I mentioned above, according to which the collective imagination of a given society is also configured by the ways in which humankind responds to its very fundamental questions, one may even ask: could it be that such a prevailing theological anthropocentric discourse had its direct effects on the current ecological crisis?

This is the thesis that the American historian Lynn White Jr. stated in a seminal article entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, in which he argued how medieval, Western Christianity had a pivotal role in shaping the mindset that triggered the gradual process that has led to the ecological crisis we live in today.¹⁵

In his article, he exposed how, based on a specific interpretation of the accounts of creation in the book of Genesis, Christianity promoted a dualism between humankind and nature placing human beings at the center and above everything. Consequently, God’s creation, of which human beings are seen as masters and possessors, only had value as it was (and still is up to this day) of use for their purposes.

As one can easily fathom, Lynn White Jr.’s article triggered intense discussions. In some cases, theologians became very defensive trying to elude the responsibility that the author placed on Christian faith and on a specific and very pervasive theological discourse in Western Christianity.

But happily, the article also launched impressive scholarly research that has produced numerous exegetical, historic, and

¹⁵ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

systematic publications. The research unearthed biblical narratives and theological approaches that complement and at times even contradict the dualistic, anthropocentric, hierarchic, and exploitative theological discourse that resulted from a certain reading of the accounts of Genesis.

Churches as part of the solution

This vast production of Eco-theological research represents today an incredible asset for churches to meaningfully contribute to discern the way as humankind faces the crossroads at which it finds itself today: moving forward in such ways that life continues to be a blessing on this planet.¹⁶

Next to all the practical actions that can be implemented at all levels of the church, and which I encourage strongly to undertake wherever possible, the church has that unique contribution to make: its theological reflection. This matters in an interdisciplinary endeavor. It matters a lot. Because without addressing the fundamental frameworks that configure our individual and collective imagination, the root causes for the ecological crisis will remain untouched.

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As churches offer their theological reflection and insights, they need to be aware of a legacy they must overcome: the anthropocentric captivity of their mindsets. For this to happen, there is valuable

¹⁶ "Save the planet," or "Save the Earth" one can read at times on demonstrations. The planet and the Earth are not in danger. It is life on Earth that is endangered. The Earth may continue to exist. But life?

biblical and theological research readily available. Now is the time to let it permeate the life in congregations and parishes, notably worship and catechesis. God has much more in God's mind than us, people! God cares about the whole creation. We people included. ☩

Martin Junge is the first Latin American General Secretary of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF). He was elected by the LWF Council in 2009 for a term of seven years and was reelected for a second term in 2016. Junge was born in Chile in 1961 and studied theology at Georg-August University in Göttingen, Germany. He returned to Chile and from 1989 to 2000 he served as pastor of two congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile (IELCH) in Santiago. In 1996 he was elected president of the IELCH.