

Conradie, E.M. (2014). What on Earth did God create? Overtures to an ecumenical theology of creation. *The Ecumenical Review*, 66(4): 433-453
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/erev.12120>



What on Earth did God create? Overtures to an ecumenical theology of creation

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Prepared for the WCC Assembly in Busan (2013)

The need for an adequate theology of creation

The need for an adequate theology of creation is typically taken for granted given the familiarity of the theme in terms of the Christian confession. However, at times there has been a dangerous neglect of creation theology¹ in order to focus, for example, on the existential and contextual relevance of the message of salvation, or on God's transforming mission in the world, or on secular processes of social transformation, or on the institutional needs of the church, or on a vague sense of spirituality. This leads to an inability to relate the realm of grace to the realm of nature.² At the same time, wherever creation theology has become the focus of attention, often in isolation from the soteriological core of the Christian gospel,³ it has all too often been used to provide ideological legitimation for the interests of dominant groups in society. Creation theology, already in biblical times, was often the prerogative of a royal elite. Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa provide notorious recent examples in this regard.

In such a context it may be necessary to remind oneself of the social significance of a doctrine of creation. This is already indicated in widely used phrases such as human dignity, black liberation, economic justice, cultural authenticity, women's emancipation, or environmental sustainability. In each case a soteriological qualifier is added to an aspect of the material world that may be re-described by Christians as part of God's creation. Theological reflection on such phrases therefore assumes some or other form of creation theology. A few further examples would suffice:

- In ecotheology, a concern for that which is material, bodily and earthly has returned to the centre of attention.

¹ Jürgen Moltmann describes this as a "retreat from cosmology into personal faith". See his *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 34.

² This observation is derived from Joseph Sittler. See Peter Bakken and Steven Bouma-Prediger (eds.) *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 38-50.

³ For a discussion of the relationship between God's work of creation and of salvation, see my *Saving the Earth? The Legacy of Reformed views on "Re-creation"* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013), pp. 1-50.

- Divisive ecclesial debates on homosexuality are plagued by an inability to come to terms with medical and psychological evidence on the reversibility of any sexual orientation.
- In Christian reflection on the HI-virus it is sometimes regarded as God's punishment for promiscuity, prompting the secular responses that all those infected are "purely innocent victims" of the pandemic. This response may address the problem of stigmatisation but hardly answers the question what such viruses are doing in God's supposedly "good" creation".
- In contemporary discourse on science and theology, creation theology has once again moved to the centre of attention, sometimes with the result that the soteriological core of Christianity is underplayed, or undermined, if not replaced by attention to the theodicy problem.
- The search for cultural authenticity in various indigenous theologies poses the question: Is the God who created us the same as the God who saves us?⁴ Is culture a preparation for the gospel? Any answer to this question is subject to suspicion – of natural theology, cultural superiority or naivety.
- This begs some classic theological and hermeneutical questions: how is gospel related to culture, text to context, church to society? How is the context to be understood in theological and not only secular terms? As God's creation?
- Moreover, where does the plurality of religious traditions ultimately come from? How is the Christian confession related to other belief systems?

Without addressing any one of these questions, I trust that it is clear enough that in each case the need for an adequate creation theology is evident.

The state of questioning

Ecumenical theology is characterised by a bewildering and conflicting plurality of discourses. The variety of perspectives should surely enrich the household of God in particular contexts, but given disciplinary fragmentation, the self-isolation of discourses and underlying methodological disputes, this situation calls for ecumenical recognition of the authenticity of particular theologies. This situation also applies to creation theology.⁵ In general one may suggest that it is no longer quite clear what the question is that creation theology has to address. The question

⁴ This profound question was articulated by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2000), p. 75.

⁵ Per Lønning reports that the Strasbourg consultation on "Creation – An Ecumenical Challenge?" (1983) gathered some key words concerning the creation theology in different confessional traditions. In rather cryptic and simplified terms: *Eastern Orthodoxy*: Theosis, divinisation, the whole world created for the final transfiguration in Christ. *Roman Catholic*: Nature, creation seen as an organic pattern of global finality, elevated to perfection through sacramental grace in Christ. *Anglican*: The sacramental universe, a unified vision of creation, incarnation and sacrament. *Lutheran*: Creation/New Creation, a dual approach to the theological enterprise as a whole (law/gospel). *Reformed*: Covenant, 'God's history with his people' as a key to authentic creation faith. *Free Church*: 'No to the world' (in many historic varieties) questioning the establishment orientation of much mainline creation talk." See Lønning, "Creation: How it Became an Ecumenical Challenge", *Tro & Tanke* 1995:5, pp. 39-48, citation on p. 46.

is: What is the appropriate question? Consider the following:

The question *whether* the world was indeed created lies at the centre of ongoing philosophical debates on atheism and agnosticism. If all God-talk is socially constructed (which it necessarily is), does it make any sense to speak of a Creator who existed prior to the world (interpreted as creation)?⁶ The question is a pertinent one: Are we created in God's image or are we creating God in our image? Did God exist before God-talk emerged amongst humans? In ecumenical circles it is widely agreed that both creationism and self-explanatory evolutionism are to be avoided but any deist, theist or panentheist notion of God begs the question how God's relationship with the world as such may be understood. This is a question that cannot be avoided since it is assumed wherever God is confessed to be the Creator.

The question *how* the world was created lies at the centre of contemporary discourse on science and theology. How may God's actions in the history of the universe and in the evolutionary history of life on earth be understood? How does that make any difference to what happens in the material world? Can that be detected through scientific observation? Here the plausibility of any Christian claims to discern God's hand in history is subjected to fierce scrutiny. It is widely agreed that both interventionism (where the work of the Son and the Spirit interferes in the work of the Father) and reductionism (where God's action makes no discernible difference to what happens in the world) are theologically problematic, but it is not clear what *via media* is to be followed.⁷ Some may dispute the theological legitimacy of the question or provide theological answers – suggesting that God created through Word and Spirit and is transforming the world through the witness of the church. However, such a theological short-cut comes at the cost of isolating the Christian witness from scientific knowledge of the world.

In order to move away from speculative questions about the origins of the world others suggest that the question as to *who* created should be foregrounded. This is in line with the polemical and doxological nature of the biblical witnesses where creation is said to give praise to its Creator. The Barthian emphasis on Christ as the one through whom all things were made has now given way to a Nicene consensus on the identity of "the triune Creator".⁸ However, the plausibility of this confession is undermined where there is a lack of attention to the logically prior question, namely whether the world was indeed created.⁹ At the same time the polemical significance should not be underestimated: it offers a critique of imperial forces and their divinities.

Yet others focus on the question as to *why* the world was created. This allows for a teleological and indeed an eschatological line of inquiry. The purpose of God's work

⁶ For this line of argument, see Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the Beginning ... Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

⁷ See the debate culminating in the publication by Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy & William R. Stoeger (eds.) *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action: Twenty Years of Challenge and Progress* (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory Publications / Berkeley: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 2008).

⁸ See title of Colin E. Gunton's *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans, 2008).

⁹ For a critique of Barth's understanding of the relationship between God's work of creation and salvation, see chapter 4 of my *Saving the Earth?*, 121-174.

of creation can then be brought in line with God's identity and character. A God of love would create an object to love, hence *creatio ex amore Dei* instead of *creatio ex nihilo*.¹⁰ This approach is also helpful to retain the soteriological thrust in the biblical roots of the Christian tradition. However, it begs the question how such purpose would be known. Some may derive that from a cosmic design but this would prompt critiques of natural theology. Others may call upon revealed knowledge of such purposes but this is often claimed in isolation from what is known about the world from the various sciences and not subjected to further scrutiny.

Yet others reflect on the meaning of the *activity* of creating. What does that entail? What is the difference in using verbs such as manufacturing, shaping, birthing, separating, judging, procreating, becoming, creativity, ordering, reproducing, blessing, developing, flourishing or simply a creative and motherly "letting be"?¹¹ Where does the material come from that God is working with? Is God making creative use of the forces of chaos or is God protecting people against such forces? What is the significance of the creation by God's "word"? And of God's assessment of creation? Does the real significance lie in God's judgement, suggesting a *critical* creation theology that offers protest against any theology of blood and soil?¹²

A more traditional approach is to focus on the question as to *what* was created. This allows for a more graphic depicting of the beauty and magnificence of God's work, enjoyed by children and grown-ups alike. Some would focus on the macroscopic world of galaxies, stars and planets (an activity described by Calvin as the "alphabet of theology"¹³), or on the microscopic complexity of life. The interest in trees, flowers and animals is certainly in line with the doxological thrust of the Psalms and the wisdom literature. Many would concentrate all the attention on the human creature, prompting contemporary critiques of anthropocentrism.¹⁴ Yet others would be intrigued by the confession that God created the visible and the invisible – and focus on the category of heaven,¹⁵ or the world of angels, powers and even demons, or perhaps on the emergence of influential ideas and moral visions.

This emphasis on what God created is important in a number of theological discourses on human dignity, women's bodies, homosexuality and environmental sustainability, and ethnicity. Yet, it has to be admitted that the track record of theological reflection on what God has created has been disastrous, to say the least. Those who have claimed to know what God created have often derived oppressive

¹⁰ See, for example, Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 76.

¹¹ See, for example, Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹² This was proposed by Oepke Noordmans in his acclaimed work *Herscheping* (Utrecht: J. van Boekhoven, 1934). For a discussion, see my *Saving the Earth?*, pp.175-216.

¹³ The reference is to Calvin's commentaries on Psalm 148:3 and Jeremiah 10:1-2.

¹⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg suggests that "creation comes to fulfillment in us and that the whole universe was created with a view to us." See his *Systematic Theology Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans, 1994), p. 136. Robert Jenson, in his *Systematic Theology Volume II: The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) puts it bluntly: "Humanity is the reason for the rest of creation" (p. 115) and adds: "They exist in that God will there to be a stage for the story of the Son" (p. 127). It is rather odd that Jenson, in a chapter on "The other creatures" (pp. 112-132), spends just three pages on the nonhuman earthly creation and eight pages on the angels.

¹⁵ This approach is typical of indigenous theologies, including African theologies. See also Michael Welker's conclusion that "The heavens are a reality that is inaccessible to creaturely formative activity but that nevertheless can be perceived by the senses, a reality that is immune to manipulation but that determines life on this earth." See his *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 40.

consequences from that. It has been used to construct theological legitimation for domination in the name of differences of gender (and patriarchy), racial superiority, class and caste (allusions to the “children of Ham”), sexual orientation and species (claims for human superiority). Neo-Calvinist apartheid theology in South Africa offers one notorious example. Since God presumably created different races “in the beginning”, racial integration goes against God’s creation ordinances. Christians should therefore call upon government to keep ethnic groups apart, if necessary through law and order – hence apartheid.¹⁶ It comes as no surprise that the prophetic critique of apartheid theology (as is the case in Latin American liberation theology¹⁷), tend to be disinterested in the theme of creation since that served as the cornerstone for colonial theologies of superiority and oppression. Intractable and vehement ecclesial debates on homosexuality offer another example, also with devastating consequences. Ecofeminist theologies provide notable exceptions given the interest in that which is gendered, bodily, perishable and vulnerable so that the theme of creation returns to the centre of theological inquiry.¹⁸

A deeply counter-intuitive confession

The value of listing the questions around creation theology in this way does not lie only in methodological clarification. It may also help Christians to rediscover the deeply counter-intuitive tone of the Christian confession that the God the Father is the “Maker of heaven and Earth”, that through Jesus Christ “all things were made” and that the Holy Spirit is the “Giver of life”. To say that the world is God’s creation is by no means self-evident, as if “creation” may be used as a rough synonym for “world” or “nature”. This confession cannot be offered in the form of an independent preamble or in terms of what various religious traditions share in common. It cannot be reduced to a statement on the world’s divine origin or dependence upon God either.¹⁹ This is, in fact, a deeply counter-intuitive claim given the tension that we as humans experience between the grandeur and the misery of our existence.

I suggest that one can identify especially five reasons why the confession cannot be taken for granted and is indeed counter-intuitive. Consider the following:

a) How could we know *that* the world was indeed created if we were not there “in the beginning”? Scientists may agree that the known universe emerged from the Big Bang (the Primordial Flaring Forth or the Big Birth) but cannot and do not know where that came from. There are actually only a few metaphysical options available: Is the world the inevitable result of deterministic laws (Fate), or of random variation

¹⁶ For a discussion, see chapter 8 of my *Saving the Earth?*, pp. 321-358.

¹⁷ In an illuminating essay Vitor Westhelle seeks to explain the apparent absence of creation theology in Latin American liberation theology. He suggests that creation faith presupposes a sense of belonging that is absent from the experiences of displaced and landless peasants faced with fences and walls. See his “Creation Motifs in the Search for a Vital Space: A Latin American Perspective”, in Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Engel Potter (eds.), *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), pp. 146-158.

¹⁸ This is evident in almost every contribution to ecofeminist theology from around the world – so that there are far too many references to list here or to single out any ones in particular.

¹⁹ See Welker, *Creation and Reality*, pp. 1-12.

(Luck), self-organising patterns, intentional agency (intelligent design, a cosmic blueprint or only planning some outside parameters), or a creative interplay between these? The last of these options may be attractive, more or less allowing for the same interplay that planning to start a family would include: a bit of fun, planning the broad parameters but not all the detail on the envisaged child's abilities, leaving quite a bit to chance and then hoping that the foetus will develop according to an established pattern. Even so, for Christians to claim that they have access to some revealed insight as to where everything comes from is audacious, to say the least.

b) How do we know that some or other divine being created the world? How could we know such a mystery if that transcends us by definition? Apophatic theology should remind us that any divine being that is supposedly known by humans cannot be God. God can only be known by Godself. To claim that the world's ultimate origin was revealed to us by such a God is necessarily circuitous. Knowledge of the Creator cannot be derived from innate knowledge or from observing the world around us.

c) How dare Christians claim that they know the true identity of the divine creator? Is the world really the signature of the triune God? This confession has always been highly polemical and still is. How, then, could one make sense that the identity of the Creator of entire universe is revealed in the carpenter from Nazareth? This is the scandal of particularity that is inextricably linked with Christianity. The claim that the triune God is the Creator may well be regarded as arrogant in the context of inter-faith dialogue and multi-faith collaboration.

d) More pertinently, how could *this* world be the creation of a loving God? How could it be the creation of *this* God? Once the identity and character of this triune God is affirmed, it is by no means self-evident that this world may be ascribed to such a God. It is even less self-evident that this God could be the Creator than the claim that this God is a Saviour – which is far more palatable for many. Indeed, the confession that the world is the work of a loving Creator is all but obvious from human experiences. To say that this world – with all its pain, misery, violence, injustices and the many manifestations of evil – is the work of a triune God of love, is an audacious confession of faith.²⁰ One cannot one-sidedly focus on whatever is perceived to be beautiful or creative in order to affirm that this world is God's good creation. The test case is to describe a malformed child, a villain like Adolf Hitler, fierce predators or a devastating tsunami as God's own creature.

e) We really do not know *what* God created. Job 37-39 should remind us that we were not there in the beginning. The world as we know it has been subject to dramatic evolutionary changes throughout the history of the universe. To claim to know God's original intention on the basis of what we see around us is therefore dangerous. The same apply to Aristotelian attempts to determine the *telos* of something. We can only speak about God's original intentions on the basis of contemporary theological constructs (not theological or scientific reconstructions of

²⁰ See Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christelijk Geloof: Een Inleiding tot de Geloofsleer* (Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach 1985), 152.

the inherent design of the world). Moreover, according to Christianity's own confession, the world as we know it has been shaped, always already, by the destructive impact of what Christians call sin, but also by the history of salvation, including the ambiguous influence of Christianity itself. Likewise, our attempts to gain knowledge of the world is influenced by the social construction of reality but also by the distortion brought about by the many faces of sin. In short, it is impossible and indeed dangerous to claim to know what God created. We do tend to distinguish between what God created, what subsequently evolved, what we created and what we messed up, but on what basis this distinction is made is typically not clear.

One may conclude that the Christian confession of faith in the triune Creator is deeply counter-intuitive – as much as the confession that the Creator of the entire universe became incarnate in a carpenter (who died poor, young and without descendants, leaving nothing behind, deserted by even his closest followers) from an obscure Roman province just about 2000 years ago, or the message that this God would give his only Son as a ransom for the worst perpetrators in history, that this Father abandoned his Son to die on a cross and that this instrument of torture provides the key to overcome all evil in history, that the power of death and destruction can, indeed has been overcome through the “bodily” resurrection of this Son, that the church as the body of Christ is actually one, holy, universal and indeed Christian, and that we are still after some 2000 years to expect some dramatically new from this God.

A constructive thesis: Creation as critical re-description of the world

This recognition of the counter-intuitive nature of the Christian confession may help to see its polemic intent and its social significance afresh. It may help to start with an apparent paradox: To say in one breath that we do not know what God created *and* that *this* is the world that God created. To affirm the one side of this paradox without the other would be disastrous.²¹ Those who think they know what God created without realising how counter-intuitive it is, are dangerous and may use that to make deductions from “nature” as to how God's work of re-creation may then be understood. Those who are hesitant to affirm the second part often do so because they eschew that which is material, bodily, vulnerable, perishable and earthly. Others seek to accentuate the tension between God and world, faith and science, gospel and culture, church and society (which is often needed), but this would leave the rest of us wondering how these are then connected. If this remains unresolved, the transforming impact of the gospel in this world would be undermined. If the finite and the infinite are treated as opposites it becomes difficult to re-connect them. This

²¹ In *Saving the Earth?* I explained the polemic significance of this paradox in the context of reformed theology. The problem I have with neo-Calvinists is that they affirm the first part of the confession too quickly without realising that this is a counter-intuitive claim – and then make deductions from “nature” as to how God's work of re-creation may be understood. The problem I have with some followers of Barth and Noordmans is that they are too hesitant in coming to the second part of the confession – so that the critical power of the gospel can no longer be related to the materiality of God's creation (see p. 354).

would also not do justice to the second and third articles of the Christian creed, namely the incarnation of the Logos and the inhabitation of the Spirit.

My thesis is that the Christian confession of faith in the triune Creator is best understood as a critical re-description and ascription of this world as we now experience it. *The Christian faith offers a way of perceiving the world, a way of seeing by seeing as, a cosmological and liturgical vision, an interpretative framework, a way of making sense of reality around us.* In short, it confesses that the world as we know it in all its grandeur and misery, its ironies and ambiguities, its delights and its distress, its panache and its pain, its inadequacies and injustices, the ecstatic dance of creatures amidst death and destruction, belongs to the triune God.

Accordingly, the world is not an autonomous entity that has its origin, existence and destiny in itself.²² It is God's own creation and beloved by God. It is nothing but the household (oikos) of the triune God. This suggests that in God's eyes that which is material, bodily and earthly is precious to the Father, is worth dying for²³ and is being sanctified by the Spirit.

This thesis requires some further unpacking:

a) To re-describe and ascribe the world as God's beloved creation is to offer one interpretation alongside many others. Together with other persons seeking for truth, Christians seek to fathom the ultimate mystery of the universe. They do not *know* that the triune God created the world; they only confess that. The origin, destiny and ultimate meaning of the existence of the universe entail a mystery that is not in our possession. If what Christians confess is true, this truth will look after itself, it cannot be protected by us. Christians are witnesses, not bulldozers.²⁴ This allows and in fact invites inter-disciplinary collaboration and common attempts to make sense of the world around us. Christians may therefore welcome the contributions of the sciences, philosophy and the arts and may find joy in inter-faith dialogue on such ultimate questions. They do have something to contribute to such inter-disciplinary conversations, as will become evident below.

b) To re-describe the world as God's creation implies a particular way of seeing. Multiple levels of seeing is required here, namely seeing and appreciating forms at the surface level, perceiving (seeing an object as something else by filling in some missing details), seeing connections between events (as in seeing a movie, not only a series of frames), developing deeper insight (not what is seen but what is seen in) and having some foresight. One has to see, but not with one's eyes only. This is the difference between observing data, gathering information, gaining knowledge, developing insight and finding wisdom. To see the invisible is widely appreciated, for example in the Hebrew, Patristic and African imagination alike. It is also part of common human experience. After all, one cannot see someone's personality,

²² See the Faith and Order Study Document 153, *Confessing the One Faith* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), p. 35.

²³ See Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 24, 31.

²⁴ See Klaus Nürnberger "Ethical Implications of Religious and Ideological Pluralism – a Missionary Perspective", *Missionalia*, Vol. 13:1, pp. 95-110, reference on p. 99-100.

friendship, love, a university, a church, a city, a country or indeed the world as such. One may watch soccer but one cannot see “soccer”. One may adopt a worldview but one cannot the view the world. Each of these aspects of seeing assumes the role of the human imagination so that faith cannot be reduced to intellect, emotion or commitment (guarding against distortions in each case) but transcends all three in imagining and hopefully imaginative ways.

Since we participate in that which we seek to interpret, such a vision cannot emerge as it were from a distance but only from within. We cannot see the world; there is no view from nowhere. Moreover, the world in which we find ourselves is in flux due to geological, biological and social evolution. When the word “world” is used, it has to be interpreted in historical terms as embedded in the history of the universe, including the evolution of life on earth. This common knowledge is re-described as the history of God’s economy (house holding), including God’s work of creation, salvation and consummation. It may therefore be better to understand this vision as *a dynamic system of sensory coordinates required for orientation and navigation on a journey through an uncharted landscape (or seascape)* where at least some sense of direction is required.

The vision expressed in the Christian confession is not merely of an object but a story, an episode embedded in a narrative, a motion picture not a snapshot. Through mimesis (and thus re-description) a story uses the contradictions and tensions between images by placing them within a narrative sequence and a particular plot. In order to gather the meaning of such images and to detect the direction of the plot we are aided by words, thus implying a dialectic between image and word. These words may be in the form of sub-titles but may also develop a life of their own without the images, for example in a narrated story or in a text. A narrative thus transforms our experiences of time. This suggests a complex theological interplay between image and word, between word and sacrament, between the word and the Word that became flesh. This emphasis on seeing the direction of movements implies another level of seeing as discernment. This is the complex task of discerning the signs of the times, of detecting the “finger of God” in history, of following the movement of the Spirit.

c) Moreover, there is a tension between seeing what something is and sensing what it should be (e.g. knowing God’s will). In English this ambiguity is embedded in the word “vision”: it captures the tension between what is visible (seeing that in a wider perspective) and an attractive moral vision for the future, of seeing what has never been. While almost every institution may talk about its vision and mission statement, an encompassing moral vision is scarce. Those who have been able to articulate such a vision, also helping people to imagine the first necessary steps towards that vision, have become justly famous for that (e.g. Mohandas Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu).

Likewise, there may well be a tension between seeing reality from different perspectives. There is a world of difference between seeing someone as a hardened

gangster and as a child loved by his parents,²⁵ between seeing a piece of land as nothing but a toxic rubbish dump or seeing it nevertheless as God's own garden. One may say that the Christian confession is called forth by such tensions. It enables us to see that the seeing can be blind and the blind may be able to see. I suggest that the core Christian confession may therefore be understood as a way of seeing the world, a cosmological and liturgical vision, if such connotations are kept in mind.

d) This confession cannot be domesticated because it creates an intolerable tension, given our experiences of pain, suffering, injustices and the many manifestations of evil in the world around us. Again, how could this world be ascribed to such a God of love, known for characteristics such as loyalty, compassion, mercy and justice? With respect to human creatures this confession implies that the rapist *and* his victim, the slave owner *and* the enslaved, the murderer and the healer, the ruthless producer *and* the relentless consumer, the industrial developer *and* the destroyed habitat, the predator *and* the prey are part of God's household. In the midst of the many faces of violence, domination and injustices this confession appears to be intolerable and unwelcome.

The deeply polemical nature of the confession of faith in the triune Creator is perhaps best expressed in the *ubuntu* theology of Desmond Tutu. His affirmation of human dignity on the basis of being created in the image of God is never merely an expression of creation theology but has a polemic and indeed a soteriological intent, namely to affirm the dignity of those whose dignity have been violated – and of those who have violated the dignity of others.²⁶ To say that we belong to God's family (as Tutu never tires of reminding us²⁷), that this world is the household of God, that the story of the universe is the story of God's economy (house holding) is therefore to offer an alternative, polemic way of seeing the world, a quite distinct cosmological vision.

Such an affirmation of the creature is therefore not merely to be understood in terms of the contemporary psychological jargon of self-affirmation – whether on the basis of a common notion of human dignity, African notions of *ubuntu*, Abrahamic views on being created in God's image, liberal assumptions about inherent human benevolence or in the categories of black consciousness. It maintains the paradox that the one who is affirmed may well be deformed, violated, victimised and guilty all at once (and then there is no need to claim innocence for the poor and oppressed), but is either way beloved, especially by God, simply because that one remains part of God's household. Or better: God does not love us because we are lovable; we become lovable precisely because God loves us.²⁸

²⁵ Desmond Tutu comments: "People really are wonderful. This does not mean that people cannot be awful and do real evil. They can. Yet as you begin to see with the eyes of God, you start to realize that people's anger and hatred and cruelty come from their own pain and suffering. As we begin to see their words and behaviour as simply the acting out of their suffering, we can have compassion for them." See his *God has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for our Time* (New York: Double Day, 2005), p. 97.

²⁶ See the study by Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

²⁷ Amongst very many other examples, see Tutu, *God has a Dream*, p. 23.

²⁸ See Tutu, *God has a Dream*, pp. 31-41.

The simple affirmation of something as God's beloved creature may therefore be affirmed with respect to all creatures but it has profoundly different implications. To discern such implications requires a sophisticated theological understanding of the doctrine of human sin – one that resists an easy classification of humanity into perpetrators and their innocent victims (on the one hand) and an equally easy universalising assessment that we are all sinners before God (on the other). It also requires clarification of all the various sources of suffering, including natural suffering, being sinned against and structural violence.

e) The polemical nature of the confession immediately prompts the need for further elaboration, precisely because it is so counter-intuitive given our experiences of pain, suffering, injustices and evil. This would not be evident if only an idealised picture of what God created is portrayed, where only what is deemed beautiful and acceptable is ascribed to God. Instead, the Christian confession is that this is the world that God created, with its many manifestations of destruction and death. This confession creates an almost unbearable tension. If the confession of God as Creator is indeed counter-intuitive yet profound and polemic it can never stand on its own. To make sense of the claim that the victim and the perpetrator are God's creatures one simply has to tell the rest of the story of God's work: God created the world, we messed it up, God made a plan in response and the story of God's work is not yet completed. Or, in short, the confession that this world is God's creation is inseparable from the confession that this (human) creature is a forgiven and sanctified sinner. God has not left the world to its misery. In Jesus Christ we discover that from God's point of view the world is worth dying for (John 3:16). Moreover, through the Spirit, the world is being transformed towards God's vision for it. The core content of this cosmological vision as expressed in the Christian confession is indeed threefold.

f) What enables this way of seeing the world in a different light? What is needed here is clearly not merely good eyesight, instruments for seeing better (glasses or microscopes) or the inherent intelligence and wisdom to see deeper. What is needed to see what others cannot see – even though something may be right in front of one's eyes – is, in Christian terms, a form of revelation. Revelation is not so much an aid for seeing or a spotlight on a dark object. It is the luminosity of something that glows from God's presence. As Desmond Tutu adds: "The divine shines through material that was thoroughly unpromising, unlikely, improbable."²⁹

In order to do that, more than good eyesight is required. The illuminating inhabitation of God's Spirit is needed. This does not provide new light like a limelight, but it warms the heart and allows the broken figure to glow with God's presence. Retrospectively, one may say that such luminosity is possible because God created light in the very beginning (Gen. 1:3). Christological transfiguration is therefore inextricably linked with pneumatological transformation. More importantly (as Protestants would insist), what is needed is that the illusions and systematic distortions of reality (in the form of seduction or deceit) be removed in

²⁹ See Tutu (2005), 96.

order to see through God's eyes, to recognise in scoundrels other than oneself nothing but the image of God. Our problem is not merely bad eyesight or limited insight but that we do not really want to see what is so evident. The blindness of our eyes is not the problem; the blindness of our protest against God's grace is. The problem is not that we have been born blind or that we suffer from optic delusion but that we have become blindfolded.

What, then, can enable us to see? The answer may be found in the Christian liturgy which offers an opportunity for reorientation, to learn to see the world through God's eyes, with delight, mercy and compassion, in a new light, in the light of the Light of the world.

The polemical dimension in ecotheology

The polemical dimension of creation theology is highly significant in the context of ecotheology. To see the world as the triune God's beloved creation is very different from seeing it in a number of other ways:

- Nature is sometimes regarded as something that is essentially inferior and to which value must be added, as something in need of being elevated or spiritualised. Accordingly, nature is good, but culture is better. The body is good, but the soul is better. Gay is good, straight better.
- Nature is often viewed in a romanticised way as "oh so beautiful". In this way the shadow side of God's creation is avoided. The pain, suffering and death due to natural causes are not noticed. This position seems to be possible only from the perspective of the relatively leisured middle class that regards wildlife primarily in aesthetic terms and not as a threat or a source of food.
- By contrast, nature may be viewed in a crudely Darwinian way in terms of a bloody struggle where the motto of the survival of the fittest reigns. Accordingly, nature is "red in tooth and claw". In this way the role of cooperation within a species and the peaceful co-existence between species is underplayed. At worst this approach allows for a form of social Darwinism that may legitimise a sense of cultural superiority, elitism, economic imperialism and political control.
- In a capitalist mode nature is regarded in terms of "natural resources" that are available for excavation for the sake of economic development. Accordingly, land is nothing but real estate, while property is the right of the powerful to do with as it may please them, irrespective of economic inequalities and injustices, or ecological destruction.
- In yet other contexts nature is treated as something so sublime that it ought to be treated with reverence, if not worshipped. This may support an environmental ethos on the basis of treating nature as sacred leading to some much needed restraint. However, all too often humans are then not treated as an integral part of nature. If they are, such a way of seeing the world needs to come terms with the way in which evil has become embedded in social structures. Where does such evil

come from? Where would the power to overcome evil then come from? Often it is assumed that nature would heal itself through recycling over a longer or shorter term. Even climate change may disturb a few ice age cycles but eventually life on the planet will continue to flourish – so it is assumed.³⁰

Compared to such alternatives the way of seeing the world in terms of the Christian confession is highly attractive, at least from an ecological perspective. The ecological significance of the Christian confession is best expressed through a number of models and images, each with biblical roots, with some considerable strengths but also some dangers. Consider the following:³¹

- The world may be regarded as a fountain of life flowing forth from God. This may draw on the New Testament image of the Jesus as the fountain of living water running through us (John 4:14). However, this image harbours the danger of an emanationist view of creation. If interpreted in neo-Platonic terms, this could support an eschewing of that which is material, bodily and earthly.
- The world may be regarded as God’s clay pot. If so, even if it may become a botched job, the potter would remould the world with infinite patience to become what it was intended to be. The world, including humanity, is work in progress. The image of fabrication may be resisted in some circles but economic production need not be destructive.
- The world may also be regarded as God’s work of art. The painter does not gaze upon a world that is finite and complete and proceed to produce a representation of it. Instead, the relationship is one of continued giving birth. Every moment the painter opens her eyes to see the world for the first time.
- Perhaps the world is like God’s novel, including a variety of human characters who are allowed a certain independence and develop a life of their own. Alternatively, the world may be regarded as God’s composition so that God may be portrayed as an improviser with unsurpassed ingenuity, engaged in composing, directing and performing an opera.³²
- Perhaps one may also portray the world as God’s gift to humans – as long as the anthropocentric connotations of such a statement can be qualified. Accordingly, God’s mission does not only entail using human agents as instruments to “care for creation”. Nature is also and perhaps more fundamentally God’s instrument in caring for humans. The earthkeeping imperative follows from the indicative of God’s grace. This may be developed further in terms of God’s providential care in terms of fertility, rain and abundant natural resources, in terms of the therapeutic value for humans of spending time in the wilderness, in terms of the ability of

³⁰ See the discussion of various “warped views” of nature as identified and described by Howard Snyder in *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), pp. 42-45.

³¹ See the various models of creation developed by Daniel Migliore in *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 109-113, drawing on the earlier study of George Hendry, *Theology of Nature* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), pp. 147-162.

³² See the imagery proposed by Arthur Peacocke in *Paths from Science towards God: The End of all our Exploring*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001).

ecosystems to recycle human waste products and the gifts of medicine (the leaves of the trees bring healing to the nations according to Rev 22:2). However, it is best associated by the sacramental gifts of water, bread and wine which may be received in gratitude (in the eucharist).

- In ecofeminist contributions the world is often described as God's body, thus suggesting intimacy rather than an alienating distance.³³
- The world may also be portrayed as God's household. This is perhaps the dominant image in ecumenical circles, thus linking inhabitation, political economy and ecology through the common root of "oikos", suggesting rights and responsibilities for all the members of this household. For humans this way of seeing the world implies attachment rather than ownership, a sense of belonging and participation that addresses any form of alienation and exclusion. However, the image of household also encompasses other animals, gardens, buildings and infrastructure.³⁴
- The world may also be viewed as God's child.³⁵ Christians are used to thinking about themselves as God's children. But what if the universe itself is God's child – which requires nourishment, formation, education, respect and wonder from the parent? Consider the agony of a parent over a sick, injured or a lost child and the cry of Genesis 3: "Adam, where are you?"

One may add the images of play, perichoretic dance, composition, directing a symphony orchestra, staging a drama or choreographing an opera to capture the creative interaction between God and the world (*opera trinitatis*). There is no need here to indicate the ecological significance of each of these images. Suffice it to say that seeing the world through God's eyes as God's own beloved creation is very, very different from other ways of seeing it.

The temporal dimensions of God's Economy

The re-description of the world as God's creation must be understood in dynamic rather than static terms. The images of the creation as fountain, clay pot, body, artwork, household or child may therefore be somewhat deceptive. The world itself is of course highly dynamic. It is therefore more appropriate to re-describe the history of the universe as God's creation. The value of the image of God's household is that it can draw on the classic notion of God's economy (or house holding – *oikonomia tou theou*), including God's work of creation, ongoing creation, providence (including governance in history), salvation, the formation of the church and eschatological consummation. While the term creation as an act of God (*creatio*) refers properly

³³ The most influential contribution remains that by Sallie McFague in *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1993).

³⁴ See the extensive literature on "oikothology", discussed in my *Christianity and Earthkeeping: In Search of an Inspiring Vision* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2011), pp. 115-122; also "The Earth in God's Economy: Reflections on the Narrative of God's Work", *Scriptura*, Vol. 97, pp. 13-36.

³⁵ See Charles Fensham, "The Sacrament of the First Child of God: A Renewed Christian Eco-Imaginary", *Scriptura*, Vol. 111, pp. 323-332.

only to God's work of creation "in the beginning" (perhaps including the notion of becoming or ongoing creation), the term creation as *creatura* is not restricted in the same way. What is material, bodily and earthly is deeply intertwined with the whole of God's work. This allows for discerning different temporal dimensions of the product of God's work. Following the pattern adopted by Duchrow and Liedke,³⁶ one may speak of at least three such perspectives to indicate that the origin, history and destiny of the world are in God's hands:

a) To say that the world is God's creation (*creatura*) is a comment on God's steadfast loyalty to that which is material, bodily and earthly. It affirms that God has not dropped us because we belong to God. The focus here is on the present but then typically the unacceptable present. This affirmation comes amidst much suffering and destructive chaos. Precisely in such a context creation theology re-describes the world by insisting that we need to look at the world through God's eyes, in the light of the Light of the world, with mercy and compassion.

This is certainly in line with the historical roots of Genesis 1 written in the context of the Babylonian exile to people who have lost hope since the city Jerusalem was ransacked and destroyed, the temple as a sign of God's presence was in ruins and the stable Davidic dynasty had come to an end. To follow the gods of the Babylonians appeared to be the only way forward. In this context, symbolised by the alluvial waters of chaos, Genesis 1 offers pastoral support to such exiles. In doxological language it affirms that the destructive forces of chaos do not have the last word. God plays with it! It is a prophetic and polemic statement against imperial forces and their divinities. Nevertheless, it puts the finger where it really hurts: the exile is Israel's own fault. However, this (fallen) world is and remains God's beloved world.

The plausibility of the message that the world remains in God's hands, depends on the explanation that God has been holding the "whole world in 'his' hands" from the very beginning. The reason why the triune God can respond to present suffering is because this God is also the Creator. Creation theology therefore has to probe back from the present (we were not there in the beginning) to the ultimate origins of the universe. This remains the intuition behind insisting on *creatio ex nihilo*, albeit that the very beginning, if one does dare to see through God's eyes, has more to do with God's love, loyalty and lure than with a primordial *nihil*.

As indicated above, this is also the intuition followed in the *ubuntu* theology of Desmond Tutu. It offers an affirmation that the human creature is God's child, belonging to God's family. This is best illustrated in the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation where it was hard to imagine how both the victims and especially the perpetrators of gross violations can be God's children. Why would a Father or a Mother allow that to happen to his or her own children? The answer requires a theology of the cross, but it is quite evident that the rest of the story of the triune God's work needs to be told if this affirmation is to be plausible.

In the present context of ecological destruction, and precisely where the

³⁶ See Ulrich Duchrow and Gerard Liedke, *Shalom: Biblical Perspectives on Creation, Justice and Peace* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1989), 96-106.

environment is most polluted and degraded, an affirmation of God's loyalty to creation implies resistance against the destructive forces of evil. God has not abandoned this earth, this moment in history, this mutilated body, this planet with its runaway climate change, despite appearances to the contrary.

b) To say that the world is God's creation involves at the same a dangerous recollection of God's original goal for creation. Amidst present suffering, injustices and overwhelming evil it offers a form of resistance by insisting that the world need not be like this. This constitutes another form of protest against an unacceptable present. It introduces a moral vision by distinguishing between what reality is experienced to be and what it should have been and actually is.

The core of this affirmation is that this is not how God intended things to be. This world belongs and belonged to God from the very beginning. The current predicament is not God's fault since God declared the beginning to be "very good", whatever that may mean. If not Platonic perfection, it seems to be the comment of a parent over a newly born child, a parent who sees much beauty in the promise that is there nine months (or "six days") after "the beginning".

One may add that affirming the goodness of God's creation from within the present may well be to speak about a world that has never been. It is born from a moral vision for the future that is retrojected into the distant past. This applies to the *ubuntu* theology of Desmond Tutu (traditional village life in Africa was never perfectly humane) and the biblical myth of paradise alike. It does not offer an accurate description of the past but articulates a dangerous recollection of God's original goal for creation. It is dangerous because it contradicts present power structures.

Indeed, Genesis 1 is not a scientific description of the origins of the world. It is always already the articulation of a moral vision. However, if it is a moral vision that would make a difference in this world (not just dreaming that "a different world is possible"), it needs to do justice to what this world is like. One may argue that the priestly authors of Genesis 1 made use of the best available "science" of their day to construct a pastoral but also deeply polemic story to affirm that this world belongs to Elohim (not Marduk), who is able as Creator to direct the forces of chaos (as experienced in the time of the Babylonian exile).

The challenge today amidst ecological destruction is more or less similar, namely to make use of the best available science of our day to tell the story of the universe in such a way that we can again live by this story. The plausibility of the claim that the world is God's own creation depends on the use of the best available knowledge (scientific and otherwise) of our day. However, the message cannot be derived from that. It is a message that should, in our context, inspire resistance against capitalist exploitation, consumerist greed, cultural alienation and domination in the name of differences of gender, race, class, species and kind.

c) To affirm that the world is God's creation also entails an inspiring but dangerous promise that God is not finished with us yet. Creation has a future. From a Christian reading of history evil has already been conquered in Jesus Christ. Creation has been

liberated in Christ. Not only the decisive battle in the war against evil but also the victory itself have been achieved (to radicalise the contrast between D-day and V-day famously proposed by Oscar Cullmann). Peace has been established, on earth, as it is in heaven, on Golgotha, if not already in Bethlehem. The problem is that the world seems unaware of that. The good news has not reached the ends of the earth. Thus the war continues unabated, leading to injustice, conflict and destruction – instead of justice, peace and sustainability.

To affirm that the world belongs to God in the face of such destruction (*sub contrario* as Luther would say), is to put one's trust and hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome evil through the route of the cross. It is to insist that this is not how the story will end because (as it is maintained through the eyes of faith) the God of Life has a different future in mind. This hope is based on the reception of the unexpected promises of God, promises that create a different future.

God's vision for the future implies that the rulers of the world stand judged by God. To speak about a good king, a new king, a coming messiah, a new dispensation and even a renewed creation is to offer a critique of this dispensation. For the rulers of the world that should be unmistakable. Nevertheless, the judgement may be quite unexpected because it is rooted in the liberating message of forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration (giving back what can be given back), restitution (addressing the deficit between what can be given back and what cannot be given back)³⁷ and flourishing on the basis of a sense of mutual respect and reciprocity. This promise provides the source of inspiration to resist present manifestations of evil. Such inspiration introduces amidst the chaos of the present a creative element, bringing renewal, reformation, resurrection, rehabilitation, restoration, regeneration, recapitulation and, in short, re-creation.³⁸

³⁷ This distinction between reparation and restitution is worked out in more detailed in Ernst M. Conradie (ed), *Reconciliation as a Guiding Vision for South Africa?* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2013).

³⁸ The category of "re-creation" is explored at some length in my *Saving the Earth?* (2013). See also Günter Thomas, *Neue Schöpfung: Systematisch-theologische Untersuchungen zur Hoffnung auf das "Leben in der zukünftigen Welt"* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009).