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Ecology and Theology in Dialogue : Death and Resurrection From an Ecological and Theological Perspective

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ECOLOGY AND THEOLOGY IN DIALOGUE:
DEATH AND RESURRECTION FROM
AN ECOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The significance of theology is that it is done for a living community consisting of all life forms. If theology does not support the flourishing of all life then it needs to be re-examined. Currently, theological doctrine and categories are formed by out-dated scientific ideals and do not properly address the current issues posed by scientific findings, or properly engage post-Darwinian ecology. This is problematic because theology has ethical implications for the living world that ecology is concerned with. According to James Lovelock, “Like it or not, we are the problem—and as a part of the Earth system, not as something separate from and above it.”¹ Issues of ecology are at the forefront of people’s awareness and are causing realization that there is a dire need for a change in lifestyle of most humans and the relationship between humanity and our environment as a whole. The impact theology has on the environment is from the ethical implications that flow out of theology, as Christian theology informs the worldviews of Christian people and influences cultural norms and politics to an unsettling degree. Christian theology and ecology must therefore be brought into serious dialogue in order to provide a worldview that properly shows reverence for the created order. The outcome of current theological discourse on death and resurrection widens a falsely perceived gap between humanity and the rest of creation. Thus, theology ought to engage current

¹ James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate in Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 75.

ecological paradigms into its doctrine and re-form categories as necessary in order to close the falsely perceived gap between humanity and the rest of creation that is perpetuated by hierarchically structured theologies that separate body and soul. Death and resurrection are theological categories that can deeply engage ecological discourse because the concepts of death and renewal of life are a part of both disciplines.

In *Science and Wisdom*, Jürgen Moltmann asks the questions, “ What are the areas where science and religion can meet? Where can they engage in a fruitful dialogue aiming at co-operation which will further life?”² These questions have continuously plagued theologians and scientists. Ecology and theology both tell the story of existence, life, and being from different points of view using different methods of discourse, the truths of science often contrasting the truths of theology and vice versa. Ecology in particular offers challenges to Christian theology that pose a serious critique of the ethical implications theology sets forth. However, the eschatological truth claim offered by Christianity offers hope to an ecological cosmology, which otherwise ends in the death of everything. Mutual dialogue between ecology and theology on the topics of death and resurrection can help to correct the falsely perceived dualism of Christianity and offer a hope that motivates action for ecological eschatology.

Both ecology and theology speak to death and resurrection of life. Biblically informed theology tells us that resurrection is of a different substance than life— our very “selves” will be wholly resurrected and will be made everlasting— an entirely new structure of created order and thus, a new ecology will ensue upon resurrection. In ecology, resurrection takes the form of carbon cycles, matter is transformed and

² Jürgen Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 24.

resurrected in and of this world rather than the next, which involves a constant renewal of the earth we currently inhabit. Contrary to cultural beliefs and fears, ecology helps people to see death as a necessary and good process of ecological renewal on two levels because in ecology, death is the only means to both renewal and perpetuation of life. For theology, death was an evil that has been overcome through the promise of a new ecology that triumphs over death as the last word. Ecology and theology therefore offer two different worldviews concerning death and resurrection and when they contradict one another, an individual is faced with a paradoxical worldview. Through mutual dialogue, the paradoxical worldview can be overcome as the truth claims of ecology and theology come together to give meaning and purpose to life here and now for the sake of the future. When brought together in fruitful dialogue on the topics of death and resurrection, theology and ecology offer a strong argument for the sanctity of *all* life and the death that gives life.

Given that theology and ecology currently offer perspectives that seemingly contrast one another on death and resurrection, the task of fruitful dialogue is a trying one. However, a theology with positive ethical implications for *all* life must be ecologically sound. Theologians such as Jurgen Moltmann, Ivone Gebara and Joseph Sittler, among many others, have attempted in the past to incorporate ecology and theology into one worldview. Gebara argues that, “It is no longer possible to separate the religious sphere from that of scientific discovery, as if they were two entirely different discourses. Neither is it possible to think of women and men as religious beings independent of the religion that is embodied in the earth and the cosmos.”³ Despite

³ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 6.

differences, science and theology must engage in rigorous dialogue in order to bring theology back down to earth and ecology into the eschatological future. Bringing ecology into conversation with theology can help to unhinge the patriarchal hierarchy that theological categories have been constructed within, which in turn informs the Christian's world-view and ethical code. The current ecological paradigm shift reveals the way of being as cyclical, interdependent, and always adapting, as opposed to a stagnant, mechanistic, and predictable existence, the paradigm that has shaped theological categories in the past.

Fritjof Capra lays out the scientific reasoning behind the current paradigm shift leading to a more cyclic and connected worldview. Recent scientific discoveries suggest that rather than the world functioning in a mechanistic way, the earth and the life that has come from it function in systems, and systems within systems. The new understanding of life has implications for issues in society and humanity in relation to our environment. According to Capra, "Ultimately these problems must be seen as just different facets of one single crisis, which is largely a crisis of perception."⁴ Discoveries that characterize both life and communities as systems will enable humanity to better perceive relationships between one another, life, and the material environment. The implications of the paradigm shift have led to a deep connection between humanity and ecology, called "deep ecology," which will change the human perception of our role in the world. According to James Lovelock, all life on earth plays the role of regulating Gaia which Lovelock defines, "The entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of

⁴ Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*, 1st Anchor Books ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 4.

manipulating the Earth's atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts."⁵ The role of life on earth, including human life, is to regulate the atmosphere to ensure the continuance of life, life that could be compromised by over-population and pollution unless the Euro-American hierarchical mind-set that places humans above the earth and other life forms is debunked. From this perspective, the ethical concern is not human after-life, but the sustaining of all life. Death is an opportunity to prolong the cycle of life and not an evil. Death is the process that allows new life.

The primary concern of mainstream Christianity has been the defeat of death through Jesus Christ. This perspective lends to a hierarchy of mind and spirit over matter, which widens the breach between humanity and creation while also sustaining a negative perspective of death. Breaking down that hierarchy with a theology that views humans as active participants in the moving cycle and continuation of all life will make a difference in people's lives because it changes the way one might live in relationship to the earth and one's perspective on death and new life. The relationship between ecology and theology will also make a difference for other forms of life on earth as Christian theology begins to consider the sanctity of all life and matter rather than focusing on human life. Former ecological theories derived from Newtonian physics and Darwinian evolution have functioned within a mechanistic and hierarchical worldview, which allowed theology to function within a similar hierarchical, linear, and mechanistic structure without critique. As a paradigm-shift has begun within ecology that lends to a new perception of life, the new perspective must challenge theology so that the world-view

⁵ James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.

and ethical implications of theology do not lead to a further breach between science and theology. Theology is, after all, “the study of religious faith, practice, and experience; especially: the study of God and of God’s relation to the world.”⁶ To do theology, one must know of the world God is relating to through science so that theology is relevant in light of scientific findings and beliefs.

If the earth is an open system, which means that it relies on outside sources such as the sun, it will have an end. Material is, scientifically speaking, finite. Thus, belief in bodily resurrection that reflects the Biblical resurrection of Jesus in the flesh and bone is contradictory to scientific understandings of matter. However, without the eschatological promise of resurrection, the ecological narrative is without hope. According to scripture, Jesus was resurrected in flesh and bone “Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”⁷ Jesus tomb was found empty and the post-resurrection Jesus that was encountered was not a spiritual body but a physical one. Thus, the dualism of body and soul, which allows for resurrection of the soul in popular Christianity, counters both the Biblical and ecological narrative. How can ecology and theology be in dialogue in a way that honors God’s created order now and into the eschatological promise? Can dialogue with ecology help to form a theology that has positive ethical implications for all life?

Given that mainstream theology and the science of ecology present contrasting perspectives on death and resurrection as separate disciplines, a fruitful dialogue is a challenging task. However, in order to properly show reverence for the created order, a

⁶ “Theology,” in *Meriam-Webster*.

⁷ Luke 24:39, NRSV.

dialogue between ecology and theology must take place with the outcome being a theology of death and resurrection that does not broaden the gap between humanity and creation, but deepens the Christian understanding as being of God's and from the earth. Fruitful dialogue between ecology and theology will also offer the ecological narrative and eschatological hope that is lacking apart from the Christian narrative. Bringing ecology into the theological conversation concerning death and resurrection is a vital task because the current relationship between humans and the earth does not honor the sanctity of all forms of life and support offered to life by the natural ecological order.

There are key aspects of Christianity that oppose scientific laws and theories, as such; I am not attempting to disprove Christian beliefs using a scientific argument. The driving question for this thesis is: how can ecology and theology, through mutual dialogue, offer a worldview that offers hope for the future and positive ethical implications for all life here and now? This paper will not argue that there is no possibility of eternal life or resurrection. Instead, this paper will argue that Christian theology and doctrine ought not to be concerned with a dualistic resurrection, but in light of current ecological theories, theology and doctrine ought to be concerned with the way in which theology can help people to better understand their place amongst the cosmos through the gospel story.

In chapter one I will provide background ecological information on the natural processes of death and new life as well as the relevant theories and perspectives on death and resurrection in theology. In chapter two I will bring into the discussion the work of Moltmann, Sittler, and Gebara on the conversation between theology and ecology. Chapter three will involve a synthesis of the two disciplines on the function of death and

resurrection, the ethical implications that flow out of an ecologically sound theology of death and resurrection, as well as scriptural corroboration for a communal relationship between humanity and the earth. Chapter four will contain an analysis about what the dialogue between ecology and theology on the topics of death and resurrections means for the reader as well as an overall summary of the paper.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON ECOLOGY AND THEOLOGY

In the following chapter background information will be provided on the topics of death and resurrection from first an ecological perspective, and second a theological perspective. In order to bring the two disciplines into dialogue it is necessary to have an understanding of certain key concepts that contribute to the dialogue on death and resurrection from the unique perspectives that both ecology and theology have to offer on the topic.

Ecology

For the purposes of this paper, the scientific discipline of ecology is viewed as one discipline from two perspectives. The first perspective of ecology is based strictly off of empirical data and contains basic ecological principles. The second perspective of ecology has philosophical undertones that will help make the connection between ecology and theology in chapters three through four and includes the consideration of ethical implications of ecology.

Basic Principles of Ecology

As a discipline distinct from environmental science, “ecology is defined as the scientific study of interactions between organisms and their environment. This definition is meant to include the interactions of organisms with one another, because [...],

organisms are an important part of one another's environment."⁸ Ecology is a life science, whereas environmental science encompasses the study of everything in the environment— including the study of non-living material. Due to the inherent relational existence of life, ecology as a discipline is a study of relationships between living organisms and their environment. The actions of one organism affect and are affected by an organism's surroundings since, "Natural systems are driven by the ways in which organisms interact with one another and with their physical environment."⁹ The impact one organism has on another is often undetected and unexpected. The belief that the created order is mechanistic and linear is no longer true; organisms are not mechanistic according to Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, "All are sentient, possessing the internal teleology of the autopoietic imperative. Each is capable, to varying degrees, of acting on its own."¹⁰ As sentient beings, living organisms are impacted by their environment; organisms respond to changing environments in purposeful ways. Thus, while not all organisms have the ability to emotionally suffer as humans do, all living organisms experience the impact of and respond to human action.

According to Margulis and Sagan there has been a recent paradigm shift in ecology from a Darwinian perspective, as "Darwin portrayed evolution just as Newton had portrayed gravity: the result of abstract principles and mechanical interactions."¹¹ The paradigm shift has been from a perspective that views life and environmental

⁸ Michael L. Cain, William D. Bowman, and Sally D. Hacker, *Ecology*, 1st ed. (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 2008), 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, *What Is Life?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 224.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

processes as mechanistic and linear to a perspective of life that is cyclical and has web-like systems of organization. Life exists as systems, and systems within systems as previously mentioned. Within each system, there are cycles that allow for the continuation of the system. The nutrient cycle is a vital cycle within each system because “The cyclic movement of nutrients such as nitrogen or phosphorus between organisms and the physical environment is referred to as nutrient cycle. Life would cease if nutrients were not recycled because the molecules organisms need for their growth and reproduction would not be available to them.”¹² The nutrient cycle is dependent on death for the movement of nutrients. According to Cain, Bowman, and Hacker,

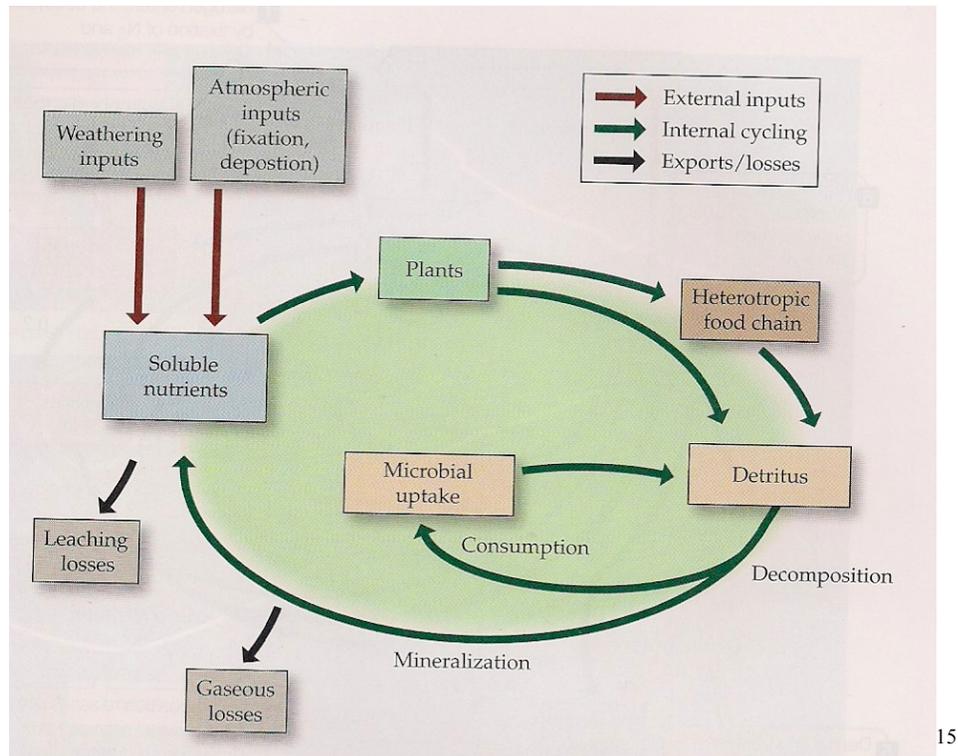
All organisms in an ecosystem are either consumed by other organisms at higher trophic levels or enter the pool of dead organic matter, or detritus. In most terrestrial ecosystems, only a relatively small proportion of the biomass is consumed, and most of the energy flow passes through detritus. Because most of this energy flow occurs in the soil, we are not always aware of its magnitude and importance.¹³

Therefore, death is a vital aspect of the nutrient cycle, and thus, a vital aspect of the resurrection of new life on earth. Organisms live together in communities. Within the community, nutrient cycles occur and allow for the passing of material nutrients and support of new life for the continuation of the community. The necessity of nutrient cycles demonstrate that living communities are dependent on the death and decay involved in such cycles to create and sustain ecosystems, and “As detritus (dead plants, animals, and microorganisms and egested waste products) builds up in an ecosystem, it becomes an increasingly important source of nutrients, particularly nitrogen and

¹² Cain, Bowman, and Hacker, *Ecology*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 434.

phosphorus.”¹⁴ The nutrient cycle is the process through which death is used to sustain life. The following table illustrates the role that death plays in sustaining life and bringing about new life:



Even life forms at higher trophic levels are re-cycled through the nutrient cycle through death. On a smaller scale, death occurs to allow for the transformation of new life in individual beings as well.

Apoptosis is the programmed death of a cell.¹⁶ As a being transforms from a baby until the day that being dies, cells constantly die and are transformed. Cells die and are replaced at such a high rate that “It is estimated that a mass of cells equal to body weight

¹⁴ Ibid., 460.

¹⁵ Ibid., 463.

¹⁶ Paul Schlesinger, “Apoptosis,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*.

is removed by apoptosis each year.”¹⁷ What this means is that we keep on living because our cells die. The cells in our bodies can be replaced and transformed only if new cells that need sustenance, which comes in the form of dead matter in the food we eat, replenish them. Apoptosis rids bodies of unnecessary cells and damaged or diseased cells. Thus, our bodies are kept alive through the death of cells and our bodies depend on the death of other life forms to be continuously renewed. Without apoptosis there would be no human growth and diseases would easily and quickly kill the body without having to put up a fight. The death of cells allows for the transformation and adaptation of the body from conception until the death of the body as a whole. Death is the process that keeps an organism living whether death gives way to life through consumption of dead matter for food, the creation of space for new life to flourish, or the process of cells dying and transforming in order to keep the body as a whole alive and healthy.

Ecologically speaking, the overcoming of death that allowed for life to flourish occurred long before humans existed. Without death, detritus would not be available to microbial organisms in the soil and nutrients would not be recycled. The purposefulness of life in ecology is not towards one known goal but towards adaptation and transformation much like the eschatological goals laid out by mainstream Christian theology, namely the transformation of the body. Death is not the ends to life; death is the means to life. According to the Gaia theory, which will be discussed in the following section, individual organisms play the role of a cell in the larger body of Gaia. All organisms are programmed towards transformation and death so that life as a whole can continue to flourish.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Philosophical Ecology

For the purposes of this paper, there are two key concepts within ecology that call for detailed explanation. One key concept is the cyclical and systemic based nature of life; the second key concept is the character of finitude for life and the earth as a whole. Systems thinking is a newer emergence in the field of ecology, and “According to the systems view, the essential properties of an organism, or living system, are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have.”¹⁸ While systems thinking is a newer category of science and ecology, the belief concerning the interdependency and interconnection of life is ancient.¹⁹ One qualification of a system is that it is open because it relies on a flow of outside sources to maintain proper states for life, which are far from equilibrium.²⁰ Because of the dependence on outside sources, such as a tree’s dependence on water with the response of growing deeper roots, a living entity must be able to respond to its environment suggesting that all living things are sentient even if they lack a brain.

A sentient being is one that has a sense of perception and responds to its environment, also known as consciousness, and “Not just animals are conscious, but every organic being, every autopoietic cell is conscious. In the simplest sense consciousness is an awareness of the outside world.”²¹ Sentient beings are living systems that reside within a larger system, an ecosphere, which consist of other sentient beings. The three key criteria of a living system are, “pattern of organization,” “structure,” and

¹⁸Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*, 29.

¹⁹ Ibid., 34.

²⁰ Ibid., 48.

²¹ Margulis and Sagan, *What Is Life?*, 150.

“life process.”²² A living being of any sort is not a robotic piece of matter, but a process that is dependent on and depended on by other forms of life. This view of life, webs within webs, changes the perspective from an individualistic, mechanistic approach to one that recognizes the cyclical interdependence of life and matter.

All life forms are dependent on other life forms to survive and maintain stability within the eco-system that must be kept suitable for life. According to Lovelock, “The natural death and decay of organisms would have released key materials to the community at large, but some species may have found it more convenient to gather their essential components by feeding on the living.”²³ Eating and dying are necessary aspects of all life and two key processes that keep Gaia alive. What makes Gaia recognizable is the unlikely but present arrangement of life forms that work together to keep Gaia’s atmosphere at a level fit for life rather than at equilibrium.²⁴

Lovelock provides the scientific reasoning that supports the Gaia-theory, including the relational aspects that suggest it is a cybernetic system, which supports the theory because cybernetic systems are evidence of life. Lovelock compares the contemporary atmosphere in opposition to what the atmosphere should be without regulation by the presence of life on earth, which further supports his claim that the earth and the life it holds is a self-regulating creature arguing, “We shall see if the Gaia hypothesis accounts for the strange composition of our atmosphere, with its proposition that the biosphere actively maintains and controls the composition of the air around us, so

²² Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*, 161.

²³ Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

as to provide an optimum environment for terrestrial life.”²⁵ Life as a whole system is self-regulating and responsive.

One implication of systems thinking in ecology is that ecologists began to look at life in a perichoretic relationship, and “In recent years our knowledge of those food webs has been expanded and refined considerably by the Gaia theory, which shows the complex interweaving of living and nonliving systems throughout the biosphere—plants and rocks, animals and atmospheric gases, microorganisms and oceans.”²⁶ The new perspective eliminates any grand ecological distinctions, other than language, between humans and other living matter as all living matter is able to respond to its environment and all life is a part of a continuous cycle. In the Gaia system, “Individual components of the food web continually die, to be decomposed and replaced by the network’s own processes of transformation.”²⁷ Through death, living beings give back to their ecosystem by providing nutrients and food for the beings that once provided the same for them. The smaller system of the individual organism is under the influence of the greater systems of which it is a part.

Ecology involves studying the way that an organism or aspect of matter interacts with its larger surroundings which helps us as human beings discern our role as living creatures on amidst creation. According to Lovelock’s theory, each organism plays a role within the larger life of Gaia. There is an element of purposefulness to life and to matter

²⁵ Ibid., 62-64.

²⁶ Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*, 179.

²⁷ Ibid., 213.

in its support of life. While an organism may not itself will to survive, the organism plays a part in Gaia's will to survive as,

no life process can be understood in terms of the information with which it has been programmed, for it is under the control of the larger systems of which it is part, that provide it with the environment with which it is constantly interacting, and form which it derives much of the information required for its development.²⁸

Apoptosis, or programmed death, is an aspect of the teleology of life and matter as the cycle of life that is only possible because of death, renewal and transformation are the aim that ecology points toward as, "Ecology has to be teleological, for purposiveness is possibly the most essential feature of the behavior of living things."²⁹ As participants in the larger web of life humans also have a purpose, ecologically speaking, in both death and life. Humans are subjects of an ecological teleology that has yet to be fully discovered.

While the unique role of humans within Gaia is still debated, it is clear that human society is not currently fitting the bill: modern society's

overriding goal is economic development or progress, the supreme heterotelic enterprise, which can only be achieved by methodically disrupting the critical order of the ecosphere so as to replace it with a totally different organization—the technosphere that derives its resources from the ecosphere and consigns to its ever more voluminous and more toxic wastes.³⁰

Rather than the support and care of all life, which would include human life, humanity is built around what is perceived and progress through technological development rather than living in a way that is in harmony with the systemic and cyclical structures of Gaia.

²⁸ Edward Goldsmith, *The Way: An Ecological World-View*, Rev. and enl. ed. (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 402.

Euro-American society is built based on an assumed hierarchy of life and being on earth with humans on the top of the ladder. The assumed hierarchy of life has been found wanting in comparison to the web-like cyclic reality of ecological being. It goes against “The Way to be followed by all human beings was the same as that which must be followed by society as a whole, by the natural world, by the cosmos and therefore by the gods themselves.”³¹ The problem is that the laws and the structures that were previously believed to govern the natural world, the cosmos, and the gods have been found faulty, yet human society, Christian theology included, has continued to function within the old structures and systems.

Resurrection experienced through natural cycles is not congruent to the traditional resurrection hoped for in Christian faith, however, in both disciplines death and resurrection play a significant role in shaping the worldview of people. In both disciplines, death is the means to new life. In ecology, new life takes on different forms, while in theology, new life indicates a renewed body for eternity upon resurrection. One holding a primarily ecological worldview sees death as a means to life; death is the sustainer and giver of life in general. One with a predominantly Christian worldview views death as the ends to life, a reality that has been overcome through resurrection of everlasting life. Therefore, we must now look at death and resurrection from a theological perspective.

³¹ Ibid., 397.

Theology

Current beliefs concerning death and resurrection lead to fear of death and disdain for material existence, which removes people from the cycle of interdependence that sustains all life. Popular Christian beliefs have strayed from Biblical accounts of death and resurrection. Theology also lacks an argument for a positive view of death, which would help to breach the gap between humanity and the rest of nature because, ecologically, death is a major link between forms of life and the earth. At an early point in the Bible death is characterized as evil and a result of sin and the New Testament is often read as God's conquering of evil through victory over death. The following sections on death and resurrection will examine Biblical material on each topic as well as engage mainstream theology in the conversation in order to illustrate the way death and resurrection are currently regarded from a mainstream theological perspective.

Death

The promise of Christian faith that most people are drawn to is that God has overcome death and, through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, all people have been absolved from death. Whether it is believed to be a spiritual, physical, or a combination of the two, "Death is at the very core of the Christian religion. Not only is the cross to be found in cemeteries and places of worship alike, but the premise of the religion is that, by their own action,³² humans have fortified immortality."³³ While some assume that death is a result of the fall of Adam, the characterization of death as evil does

³² I do not agree that according to Christian faith each individual is able to fortify immortality through action; however, inasmuch as Jesus was fully human and did this for all people the statement is true. However, since Christians believe that Jesus is fully divine as well, it is also through the action of God that immortality is received.

³³ Schlesinger, "Apoptosis."

not come from the creation stories. Upon discovery by God after eating of the fruit from the tree of good and evil, Adam and Eve were not put to death, but they were given trials in their lives and were destined to return to the ground from which they came and were sustained by. Death was an aspect of human nature as a finite being; the result of sin was the following: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return.”³⁴ Adam and Eve were banned from eating the fruits of the tree of life as a consequence of being banned from the garden. Yet, death is an aspect of human nature and ecological being. The creation story portrays humans as ecological beings that, as a result of their nature are destined to die; because of their human nature, Adam and Eve were meant to return to the ground from the beginning.

Subsequently, death is interpreted as a form of punishment and considered to be the result of evil and an entity to be overcome; “And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.”³⁵ The people looked to a savior to rescue them from the natural order they were created within. Death was perceived as a curse over all people that needed to be lifted rather than a necessary part of life. “Death itself is the worst enemy; and in the end death itself will be destroyed (and man set free from its bondage).”³⁶ Death is feared by those who live, and portrayed as something that even God is against, “because God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of

³⁴ Genesis 3:19, NRSV.

³⁵ Isaiah 25:7, NRSV.

³⁶ David Daube, “Death as a Release in the Bible,” *Novum Testamentum* 5, no. 2-3 (1962): 82.

the living. For he created all things so that they might exist...”³⁷ God is the creator and sustainer of life and all that is against God leads to death. Most of the Old Testament portrays death as an aspect of evil and the result of sin. Old Testament notions of death continue to shape human characterization of death in the New Testament.

While the gospels speak of death as an unfavorable part of life, biological death is not explicitly deemed a result of evil. The miracles that Jesus performs involve stopping impending deaths and even bringing people who are presumed to be dead back to life. Death was used as a political punishment but the act of killing for punishment was reserved for the Romans, which is eventually how Jesus faced his own death. In the gospel of John, Jesus does speak of himself as an escape from death in sin, stating, “I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am He.”³⁸ The change of human’s experience of death after the resurrection of Jesus is not that biological death is eradicated, but that if one believes that Jesus is the savior one will no longer die *in sin*, but rather, one will have new life in Christ despite biological death.

However, New Testament literature following the gospels is clear in identifying death as an evil aspect of human life resulting from sin. It seems like a distinction is assumed between death itself and a different kind of death that one experiences if one has faith in Christ. According to Alan Padgett and Mark Throntveit,

When we look more closely at what Paul is saying about death, it soon becomes clear that what biologists call death is only loosely related to what Paul calls “death” in Romans. Both death and sin are personified by Paul into spiritual powers, under which humanity is now enthralled. Death is not merely biological

³⁷ Wisdom 1:13-14a, NRSV.

³⁸ John 8:24, NRSV.

in Romans, and more than the life that is given us in Jesus is merely biological... we should understand death as both spiritual and biological, a powerful force under which humanity is enslaved, body and soul.³⁹

Whether we see death as a spiritual, biological, or some combination of the two, “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁴⁰ Following the gospel, the New Testament makes a clear statement that human death is categorized as evil and it the result of human action. Only through the action of an incarnate God is death in all of its forms overcome. People are still left to face a biological death while we await the second coming of Jesus and the dead are resurrected into a new ecology of being, “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”⁴¹ Biological death is unavoidable but the Gospel promise is that biological death does not have the last word for life or, “In other words, death is the last and worst effect of sin... The point is that life in this age can no more escape death than it can escape flesh, can no more escape death than it can escape sin.”⁴² What is believed to be received through Christian faith is not a complete escape from biological death. Every person and living organism will experience death. What is promised is that after death resurrection will occur and new life will be given. However,

³⁹ Mark A. Throntveit, and Alan G. Padgett, “Reading the Bible after Darwin,” *Word & World* 29, no. 1 (2009): 46.

⁴⁰ Romans 6:23, NRSV.

⁴¹ Revelation 21:4, NRSV.

⁴² James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 125-26.

death is categorized as an evil in the Bible, and Biblical notions of death consequently shape Christian theology, culture, and attitudes surrounding death.

Resurrection

Jesus' resurrection was not of the soul or a separation of mind and body, but a resurrection and renewal of the full person, "But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.'"⁴³ If the resurrection that Christians hope for is one that mirrors the resurrection of Jesus, then it is one of the whole person, not an immediate resurrection of the soul. There is no suggestion in the gospel accounts of resurrection of distinction between body and soul, thus upon resurrection a new ecology ensues. After resurrection, Jesus seems to still have basic needs, such as eating which, implies that he still relied on the trophic cycle,

He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. . . . They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.⁴⁴

Jesus continued participation in the trophic cycle post resurrection life does not remove ecology from his being, rather, it offers a new ecology. This suggests, "the new creation will be both continuous and discontinuous with the present world, and, as with the resurrection of Jesus, the laments of continuity include something of the physical/material

⁴³ Matthew 28:5-6, NRSV.

⁴⁴ Luke 24:38-40, 42-43, NRSV.

character of this world.”⁴⁵ While the life of Jesus is renewed after death, as presented, the physical and material aspect of his new life remains in many ways similar to before his death.

Resurrection does not remove humans from the natural systems and settings of God’s creation, but rather, places humans more deeply within creation. Not only are we made of and receive our physical being from the earth, but we are to be redeemed into a new ecology and a new cosmology. “God himself changes his relationship to the world. God’s *faithfulness* to his once created world cannot therefore limit his *freedom* to complete and perfect his temporal creation, making it a creation that is eternal—and thus changing creation’s fundamental conditions.”⁴⁶ When Jesus said that he is “the way, the truth, and the life,” he said it in the incarnate, earthly body of God⁴⁷. God’s promise is not a life in a new realm, post-resurrection Jesus was experienced in a body and God’s promise is not to humanity alone, but all of creation. The promise is experienced and present in “*This* earth, with its world of the living, is the real and sensorily experienceable promise of *the new* earth, as truly as this earthly, mortal life here is an experienceable promise of the life that is eternal, immortal.” Thus, as one participates in ecojustice one participates in the coming redemption; full participation in natural processes is experiencing the promise of God.

Mainstream Christian beliefs stray from the Biblical portrayal of resurrection and focus on an individual resurrection that occurs immediately after death. However, it

⁴⁵ Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell, and Michael Welker, *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2002), 9.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God : Christian Eschatology*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 272.

⁴⁷ John 14:6, NRSV

seems as though the early churches established by Paul held beliefs in line with the teachings of the gospels which suggest a communal resurrection of the flesh upon the second coming of Jesus, stating

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.⁴⁸

The dead and the living will be raised up in *body*.

James Dunn emphasizes the difference between Paul's use of "sarx" which is translated as "flesh" and "soma" which is translated as "body." Dunn states that, "In broader terms we could say that Paul's distinction between *soma* and *sarx* made possible a positive affirmation of human createdness and creation of the interdependence of humanity within its created environment. Sadly, however, this potential in Paul's theology was soon lost as the distinction itself was lost to sight."⁴⁹ Distinguishing between the two is vital for a proper understanding of Paul's theology of death and resurrection. Paul did not argue that humans would not experience biological death, which is unavoidable. Paul argued, however, that a life of flesh ends in death. Life in Christ, however, which is still lived in a body, experiences death but does not end in death. Life in Christ begins with the resurrection of the body, the uplifting of God's creation, into a new way of being in God's redeemed creation. Death and resurrection, in Paul's

⁴⁸ 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17, NRSV.

⁴⁹ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 72-73.

theology, should lead to a lifting up and reverence for all things created rather than a separation of the body and soul.

Creeds which serve as the unifying doctrine and basic beliefs for Christian denominations proclaim a Christ who was born and resurrected but never lived; the Apostle's Creed reads: "I believe... in Jesus Christ His only Son, Our Lord who was conceived of the Holy Spirit born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. On the third day, he rose again and ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty."⁵⁰ Belief in a bodily resurrection, as a creedal confession, is a necessary aspect of Christian faith and "for creedal Christians, Jesus' story does not end with his death. It continues into the present and into the future, more powerfully than before."⁵¹ While Luke Johnson asserts that, apart from the resurrection, Christianity is reduced to an ethical code, he recognizes that Old Testament scriptures do not necessarily prophecy a resurrected savior, and the creed does not mention resurrection of believers, only Christ. However, Johnson rightly asserts that the New Testament is full of promise to believers that death has been overcome for all. The Nicene Creed reflects similar notions regarding belief concerned with Jesus' death and resurrection. The Nicene Creed states "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father."⁵² In order to be a creedal Christian, one must confess belief in a bodily

⁵⁰ Apostle's Creed

⁵¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed : What Christians Believe and Why It Matters*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 176.

⁵² Nicene Creed

resurrection. However, belief in resurrection poses the most contrasting perspective of life when compared with ecology when it is believed to be a physical, bodily resurrection.

Belief in physical, bodily resurrection is not the only school of belief surrounding resurrection. Robert Russell, in his chapter titled “Bodily Resurrection, Eschatology, and Scientific Cosmology” in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, categorizes belief concerning the resurrection in two categories: the objective and the subjective. Belief in bodily resurrection is objective; something *actually* happened to the body of Jesus historically, despite the event being counter to scientific laws. The subjective form of belief in resurrection confesses the resurrection as the truth as Jesus’ first disciples experienced it:

According to the subjective interpretation, the resurrection of Jesus is only a way of speaking about the experiences of the first disciples. Although they described the resurrection as having happened to Jesus after his death and burial, it is in fact not about purported events in the new life given to Jesus by God but merely about the experience of renewed faith given to the disciples.⁵³

Thus, there is another way of believing in the resurrection besides believing in bodily resurrection that is in agreement with the sciences. Thus, this form of belief in the resurrection greatly alters the shape of modern Christianity, which has been built upon belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus and hope for bodily resurrection of all believers.

While traditional Christian theology would have to take on some major changes, the changes may be necessary in order to keep Christian theology relevant,

Time and time again, famous and would-be famous New Testament scholars made a splash in the media by assuring the interested public that the resurrection texts of the New Testament speak of a reanimation of the dead Jesus but that today human beings are not going to be persuaded that dead persons can be reanimated. Therefore the experience and reality of the bodily resurrection must

⁵³ Peters, Russell, and Welker, *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, 8.

be called into question. A theology concerned about its academic reputation avoided this topic or at best gave it a niche under the cloak of existentialist and supernaturalist figures of thought.⁵⁴

Christian theology and belief surrounding death and resurrection ought to be genuinely re-examined, not only because of growing disbelief, but also in light of the current environmental crisis and new ecological findings; beliefs concerning death and resurrection have the power to alter the worldview of Christians in a way that can have a positive impact for *all* life. As it has been done in the past, Christian theology must respond to the ecological paradigm shift in all categories of theology because ecological frameworks can act as an example for the way in which God works in the world. If theology is the study of God, a God that can only be manifested to us in this universe and can only be articulated through human experience, then familiarity with the processes and structures of the universe is an absolute must for theologians. One might argue that one's Christian faith ought to be the lens through which one perceives the cosmos, but in order for theology to be done for all life, it is also the case that one must see the gospel story through the lens of the cosmos.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 34-35.

CHAPTER 3

DIALOGUE BETWEEN ECOLOGY AND THEOLOGY

The ethical implications of theology not engaging ecology are dire for all life, including humanity, as it leaves Christians isolated from the ground from which people were created and to which they will return.⁵⁵ The hope for bodily resurrection creates a breach between humanity and the environment by pulling human destiny out of the nutrient cycle through hope in the earth's renewal and bodily resurrection because in most contemporary cultural death rituals, nutrients are either burned or isolated and contaminated in burial. Rather than seeing the beautiful cycle of life that has been set before us, the rising of new life through trophic and nutrient cycles that sustain life on earth, Christians place their hope in the breaking of that cycle when one ought to be thankful for the opportunity to give back to the ground that has given and sustained one's life. Further, according to ecological sciences, the earth as a whole is an open system and as such, the earth will end.

Pre-Existing Dialogue

Traditionally, the Christian God has been projected by mainstream theology as a person ruling above creation in direct relationship with humanity. However, as science reveals the lack of hierarchy amongst creation and the deep interrelatedness of all being,

⁵⁵ Genesis 2:7, 3:19, NRSV.

the traditional projection of God becomes more difficult to relate to. Humans are beginning to understand who they are amongst the cosmos, and the discovery is not what was expected. Humans are not on top, but more so at the mercy of the cosmos and, “Human beings no longer stand *over* against nature, as the determining subjects of knowledge and endeavor they are also part of a history with nature.”⁵⁶ A God-on-top illustration crumbles as we discover that a perceived hierarchy is actually an interconnected web. The mystery and the miracle are not beyond this life, but in it.

Moltmann traces the origins of theology that have caused the chasm between body and soul, humanity and creation. The problem that Moltmann identifies is that

Through the monotheism of the absolute subject, God was increasingly stripped of his connection with the world, and the world was increasingly secularized. As a result, the human being—since he was God’s image on earth—had to see himself as the subject of cognition and will, and was bound to confront his world as its ruler. For it was only through this rule over the earth that he could correspond to his God, the Lord of the world. God is the creator, Lord and owner of the world; in the same way human being had to endeavor to become the lord and owner of the earth. This was the idea behind centralistic theologies, and the foundation of the hierarchical doctrines of sovereignty.⁵⁷

The theological separation of God from creation has helped to create a chasm between humanity and the rest of nature as humans remove themselves from a part of the created order and perceive their selves to be lords over the created order. If humans are removed from the created order and look down on natural processes such as death from the top of a hierarchy, there is no need to perceptibly place themselves within the cycle of life

⁵⁶ Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 15.

⁵⁷ Jèurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1.

“below.” However, this hierarchical categorization and separation of the infinite and material is far from Biblical.

Old Testament notions of body and soul simply do not exist, nor does the hope for eternal life in the majority of the Hebrew Biblical Tradition. Moltmann states, “The fundamental anthropological differentiation between soul and body is foreign to the Old Testament tradition, because the ontological distinction between immortal Being and the mortal individual existence is foreign to them as well.”⁵⁸ Humanity and creation were perceived as a part of the same divine history and not distinct histories of the infinite and finite. It was not until the new testament that humans perceived themselves to take part in an infinite divine history, but even in the New Testament the body and soul are not portrayed as separable entities, but rather, two aspects of one being, where the ends of life is the embodiment of Christ. According to Moltmann “Finally, embodiment is also the end of the redemption of the world, the redemption which will make it the kingdom of glory and peace. ‘The new earth’ completes redemption (Rev. 21), and the new ‘transfigured’ embodiment is the fulfillment of the yearning of the Spirit (Rom. 8).”⁵⁹ Biblically speaking, life is the ends of death, just as it is in ecology, yet many contemporary theologians continue to make the distinction between body and soul that perpetuates the Euro-American perceived hierarchy of the created order and disdain for the material world; for example, according to Moltmann, “Barth preserves the Platonic primacy of the soul and takes over the Cartesian view that the relationship of the soul to

⁵⁸ Ibid., 256.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 246.

the body is a relationship of ownership.”⁶⁰ In order to counter the chasm that has been created between humanity and the rest of nature as well as the chasm between the infinite and material, as both chasms remove humans from the cycles of the created order, theology must make the move towards and into a theology of nature.

Joseph Sittler, too, calls for a revolutionary alteration of theological categories in light of the environmental crisis and the lack of community between humans and the material that sustains life. The ecological theology Sittler advocates for essentially demands an overhaul of Christian theological thought,

The largest, most insistent, and most delicate task awaiting Christian theology is to articulate such a theology for nature as shall do justice to the vitalities of earth and hence correct a current theological naturalism which succeeds in speaking meaningfully of earth only at the cost of repudiating specifically Christian categories. Christian theology cannot advance this work along the line of orthodoxy—neo or old—which celebrates the love of heaven in complete separation from man’s loves in earth, which abstracts commitment to Christ from relevancy to those loyalties of earth that are elemental to being.⁶¹

While Moltmann saw the need for Christian theology to take on new form, a form that integrates material integrity, Sittler argues for a complete overhaul, as orthodox Christian categories do not leave room for a theology of ecology, only for a theology for ecology. Sittler places significant emphasis on the incarnation, God’s entering into nature in order to manifest grace. For Sittler, “By grace is meant all the God does to crack nature open to God, to restore it to his love and to its intended destiny.”⁶² This statement implies that nature, along with humanity is in a fallen or isolated state and God acted and continues to

⁶⁰ Ibid., 252.

⁶¹ Joseph Sittler, Steven Bouma-Prediger, and Peter W. Bakken, *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 30.

⁶² Ibid., 35.

act in order to restore nature by entering into it; “The *fact* of this coming, and that it came into the theater of *nature*, means that it is the will of God that there should be a fusion of nature and grace.”⁶³ God’s grace does not come from an isolated realm reserved for the divine; God’s grace is fully present and manifested in nature.

The redeeming grace of God came through an aspect of nature, through material reality in time and space as humans experience reality. Grace is not an aspect of Christian hope; it is an aspect of ecological being. The hunger, thirst, exhaustion, community, interdependence, and temporality that humans experience in life is experienced by God, “We have not affirmed as inherent in Christ—God’s proper man for man’s proper selfhood in society—the world political, the world economical, the world aesthetic, and all other commanded orderings of actuality which flow from the ancient summons to tend this garden of the Lord.”⁶⁴ This garden, which includes all aspect of material and relational reality, is of the Lord. As a discipline concerned with the relations of material and living reality, ecology offers the language to theology that will help Christian theology to incorporate the “orderings of actuality” that have been overlooked by orthodox theology.

The development of a theology of ecology has real perceptible implications for all life. Since theology effects the Christian’s worldview, a theology of ecology affects the relationship that Christian people, and those whose cultures are influenced by Christianity, will have towards their material and living environment. Previously, the natural world was not given the characteristic of integrity apart from the value it had in

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 46.

human progression. When Christian theology honors the integrity and sanctity of the living and material world by creating the language for and the call to right relationship between humans and the environment, Sittler claims that “This [will have] a cleansing and orderly meaning for everything in the world of nature, from the sewage we dump into our streams to the cosmic sewage we dump into the fallout.”⁶⁵ Theology has the potential to give meaning and to honor the sanctity in the perceivably mundane and tragic material reality in a way that can positively shape the future of the earth.

Sittler clearly makes the connection between the speculative theories of theology and the practical implications, placing importance on both aspects. What people believe in within or outside of perceivable reality shapes the way people live in relation to one another and in relation to the earth, and “if grace is understood ecologically as built into the whole constitution of the world of nature, society, and the life of man with fellowman, if grace is explicated from the standpoint of the doctrine of the creation as bringing forth life-giving *variety*, then a quite new way of beholding the world and our fellowmen comes into possibility.”⁶⁶ Sittler’s hope is for theology to promote a new perspective of life and relationship for all beings, which also has implications for the human perspective of death. In his later life, Sittler applied his ecological understanding of grace to the process of aging and dying.

Sittler recognized the incongruence of the term “eternal life.” Life is, by nature, not eternal, but finite. Sittler also recognized the egocentrism necessary for hope in eternal life,

⁶⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 86.

It is hard to understand the naked egocentricity of the Christian's picture of eternal life. The shattering of the egocentric life is what the Christian is to be about. Not "What will I be after I die." The Whole imagery of eternal life ought to be an acknowledgement that there is a potentiality for the human spirit, which transcends the solidification of your precious identity.⁶⁷

There is irony in the Christian hope for eternal life because Christian life is supposed to be about servitude for the other and not concern of the self. However, the ethical evaluation of Christian hope for eternal life is not the only issue that Sittler identifies on the topics of death and resurrection. He posits in a lecture on dying, ethics, and theology that,

Eternal life—the words don't belong together. Life is, by definition, not eternal. It has to be understood in a trans-logical way. We have to be honest with our people. Eternal life cannot be a reenactment of certain choice parts of our life. If we live, we are the Lord's; if we die, we are the Lord's. Don't preach a phony kind of heaven. I [Sittler] refuse to make any blue prints of the details of eternal life.⁶⁸

Without an end, life becomes something else; it becomes something transcendent and infinite. Sittler made great contributions to the conversation of ecology and theology as well as on the topics of death and resurrection; however, the two did not completely come together for him, at least not in his public life. Sittler made it clear that the environmental crisis taking place must become a revolutionizing responsibility for theology and he located theology in the ecological sphere. Theologian Ivone Gebara takes it a step further and begins to encompass ecology in her theology.

In *Longing for Running Water*, Gebara takes an ecofeminist approach to traditional Christian theology, offering a God in all things and a God that encompasses all

⁶⁷ Joseph Sittler, *Conference on Aging/Reflections on Aging and Death* (1974).

⁶⁸ Joseph Sittler, *Dying, Ethics, and Theology* (Chicago, IL: 1984).

things. Gebara's concept of God is one that stems from the perspective of the global south. She identifies issues with traditional Christian theology as being from the standpoint of a white, rationalistic, western male.

Patriarchal religions have always been marked by an incredible and paradoxical duality of perspective. They preach domination over the earth while at the same time exhorting us to loathe matter and struggle against the body... To at least admit the existence of this ambiguity is the first step toward refashioning our beliefs within a perspective that allows us to treat all living things with respect.⁶⁹

Gebara does not deny that she, too, comes from a biased perspective, but she offers a fresh look from a different perspective as one who sees herself and all things as parts of one cosmic body whose "interwoven fibers do not exist separately, but only in perfect reciprocity with one another—in space, in time; in origin and into the future."⁷⁰ She redefines humanity so as to leave behind traditional anthropocentrism, and focus on humans as being related to and dependent on the entire cosmos. She recognizes that while the cosmos is not dependent on humanity, humanity is in a unique position of being able to identify the relatedness of the sacred, cosmic body, to name it, and to contemplate one's role within it.

As a result of her perspective, Gebara redefines God and humanity as two separate yet convoluted entities that are a part of a cosmic dance, which includes all other things in existence. She does not leave behind the poor people within humanity, nor does she leave her focus solely on environmentalism; but, as all things are related, she seeks a justice that is for a God in all things, "Ecojustice is the kind of justice we seek and live

⁶⁹ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

out when we affirm our bodies as part of the Sacred Body of the universe."⁷¹ A God in all calls for justice to be sought for all.

Gebara's notion of God as that which is in all and that which all is in, but is not the total sum of material existence, shapes her theology into one that simply cannot be separated from ecology. Ecology is a part of God and God is a part of ecology. As such, in relationship to the environment and God, humans play a role in ecojustice, as human are a part of what people have named ecology. Ecojustice is not a responsibility we have to a material environment separate from ourselves and created for us, it is a responsibility of humanity as a responsibility to the self and all things that are part of one "sacred body." Gebara emphasizes the relatedness and interdependence of all things to involve all creation, and beyond, in the human conception of what God is and how God is in the world. While being criticized for nearing pantheism, a critique not despised by Gebara herself, she proclaims a panentheistic God, a God not limited to but certainly within all material existence, "Rather than being pantheistic, the ecofeminist perspective opens us to see the sacred dimensions of our cosmic body and prompts us to assume a humility that dismisses all our totalitarian pretensions."⁷² A panentheistic approach levels out the hierarchy of being and humbles humans to the reality that all are a part of the same sacred cosmic web.

From a panentheistic perspective, in which God is both in and transcends creation, both of Gebara's identifications of evil involve God in the evil because she continues to categorize death as evil even though death is a necessary aspect of creation's

⁷¹ Ibid., 87.

⁷² Ibid., 123.

perpetuation. At the same time, what Gebara proposes to counter evil is transcendence of the self, which suggests that evil is a human quality, as "This transcendence invites us to reach beyond the limits of our selfishness and respond to our call to a new collective ethical behavior centered on saving all of life. This transcendence is a canticle, a symphony unceasingly played by the infinite creativity of life."⁷³ What Gebara fails to address is the necessity of death for all life. From an ecological perspective there is no sense of natural evil; evil is a human responsibility. One might look with new eyes at that which is identified as evil outside of humanity and perceive evil not as that which is against humanity, but instead that which is against the flourishing of all life.

Through an ecologically based lens, what was perceived to be evil, such as death, becomes a source of life flourishing. Amongst all creation on earth, the death of anything provides room and nourishment for the life of something new, yet "It is we who say that a fox is bad because it ate a chicken."⁷⁴ Theology plays a role in defining and naming evil, a role that must be taken seriously because of the ethical implications such a name has for society and life as a whole. In death, humans have the opportunity to give back and enter into the created order once more by fulfilling a Biblical mandate to return to dust⁷⁵ and becoming nutrients and material for new life while at the same time creating space for new life to flourish. However, if death continues to be categorized as an evil, people are unable to joyfully take part in the gift that death is to the ecosphere. Traditional theology

⁷³ Ibid., 167.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁷⁵ NRSV, Genesis 3:19 "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Eccl 3:19-20, "For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again."

has created a separation of body and soul that causes a hatred of the finite body in preference for the eternal soul that pushes humans away from participating in the carbon cycle, as well as contributing to an unhealthy fear of death and eschatological possibilities.

The concern here is not with belief in resurrection as a whole, but rather, with religious eschatological beliefs, including bodily resurrection, because science cannot challenge the resurrection experienced by Jesus' disciples after his death, nor can science accurately predict eschatological happenings of the metaphysical world. However, science, specifically ecology, does have something to say about eschatology and beliefs concerning death and resurrection of the physical.

Scientific cosmology need not be seen as challenging those eschatologies that are restricted to spiritual, moral, interpersonal, societal, or historical categories, but when eschatology expands to embrace the environment and the history of life on earth... and when earth is seen as a tiny part of the immense universe, then Christian eschatology runs up directly against the challenge of physical cosmology.⁷⁶

Both ecology and theology tell different stories about life processes. Theology explains life and death processes through the lens of the Bible and experience of the Christian, and has salvation and spirituality in view in its metaphorical use of "life" and "death." Ecology, through the lens of physical cosmology as experienced by people, uses these terms in more biological and material ways. Thus, fruitful dialogue between ecology and theology is trying but also necessary.

Without mutual dialogue, the ecological narrative removes meaning and purpose of life because the only promise it offers is the promise of death to all life and the earth.

⁷⁶ Peters, Russell, and Welker, *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, 8.

However, when brought into dialogue with the Christian narrative, “We could say that the ‘freeze or fry’ predictions for the cosmological future might have been applicable had God not acted at Easter and if God were not to continue to act to bring forth the ongoing eschatological transformation of the universe.”⁷⁷ If one believes in God’s incarnation and Easter action, ecology can work within those truth claims of theology to offer a meaningful existence within this ecosystem and the new ecosystem to come. In the following chapter theology and ecology are engaged in order to move towards a theology concerning death and resurrection that honors ecological systems and structures with positive ethical implications and an ecological narrative of hope.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 19.

CHAPTER FOUR

CLOSING THE GAPS: THE ETHICAL EVALUATION

With the tools from the previous chapters, which include background information on ecology and theology relevant to the topic of death and resurrection in chapter two, as well as dialogue between ecology and theology that already exists in chapter three, chapter four will now engage this information in a dialogue on death and resurrection. From this dialogue an ethical evaluation will be derived concerning the questions: Does the breaking of the natural cycle (through burial practices informed by Christian theology) and the hope for something beyond the created order that sustains life cause a breach between humans and the matter that yields human life? How can ecology and theology work together to offer a worldview and belief system that reveres the material world and offers hope for the future? First, a methodology of dialogue and ethics will be laid out. Subsequently, a theological reconstruction will be made with ecological concepts considered. Last, an evaluation will be briefly made of the ethical implications that could flow out of an ecologically sound theology of death and resurrection.

Methodology

Ecology and theology both serve as different perspectives through which one perceives the world. Each gives us insight to the world around us, offering people a purpose and a role amongst creation. Often ecology and theology are in congruence, or at

least not conflicting. However, on occasion, the perspective offered by one discipline contradicts the perspective offered by the other. On the topics of death and resurrection, ecology and theology offer different perspectives that, as a result, have different implications for life. From the perspective of ecology, death is a positive event; it is the process that allows for the sustainment and renewal of life because death is necessary for the recycling of nutrients and material, and death is necessary for an organism to obtain food. Death allows for the flourishing, renewal, and continuation of all life. According to ecology, the earth is an open system itself, like all other ecosystems, and will also come to a complete end, so although death serves a good purpose it also has the last word. In Christian theology, death is categorized as an evil; death is the result of sin, but has been overcome by God through Jesus' resurrection so that Christians, while they will still die an earthly death, will also experience resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus portrayed by the gospel was a resurrection of flesh and blood. Jesus' tomb was found empty and he still needed to eat⁷⁸ as he did, in flesh and blood prior to his death. Further, along with resurrection of human bodies creation, as a whole, will be renewed with the second coming of Christ and will not come to an ultimate end but rather, a new ecology. These discrepancies between ecology and theology are key areas for discourse between the two disciplines because of their commonalities and conflicts.

Ecology cannot always negate or affirm beliefs that are taken to be true theologically and vice versa because as different disciplines they ask different questions and use different methods of responding to those questions. As disciplines with different sources and methods for answering questions, one cannot assert the falsity of one

⁷⁸ Luke 24:38-40, 42-43, NRSV.

discipline with the reasoning and support of the other discipline. However, ecology can offer insight about the world and the natural relationships that have been ordained by the creator. Further, Christian theology can offer a layer of symbolic meaning and hope to ecology for Christian people. Scripture is a collection of ancient wisdom, stories of the way human bodies of the past have experienced both the sacred and the secular. The debatable historical validity of the stories does not negate the truth expressed in them. However, ancient people's truth concerning the natural world as a system is different and often must be reevaluated by scientific truths currently held about the ecosphere. Yet, the enduring truths of Scripture are not natural-scientific. These different kinds of truth need to be considered in dialogue as we work toward a holistic vision. For the Christian community, the role of humans amidst the ecosphere must be interpreted through the gospel story, which includes death and resurrection. However, in order for the Christian interpretation of the role of humans within the ecosphere to be ethically sound, ecology must also be considered.

Using Christianity as a lens through which one perceives the world, Christian beliefs concerning death and resurrection are significant as Christians imagine the role of humanity on this earth and in this life. If one believes that it is *this* earth that will be renewed, in accordance with scriptures, and thus the earth has theological significance, the hope for renewal enhances the drive to work towards ecojustice now because it is an aspect of participating in God's promise. Given that Christians believe in the incarnation, the in-breaking of God to material existence, Christian theology ought to honor God by incorporating ecological models of relationship since, as created models, ecological relationships and processes are ordained by God.

My ethics function out of a revised Kantian framework, placing precedence on the duty to support the flourishing of all life. Not only are we never to treat another person as a means to an ends, life in general ought not be treated as a means to an ends but an ends in itself. Death, also, is not to be treated as a means to an end, but an end in itself having intrinsic value. The problem here is that in order to live, one depends on the dying of other beings. We ought to revere life and death in a way that honors the intrinsic value of the sacrificed life. It is not ethical to hope for anything more in biological death than to give whatever one can back to the earth and the web of life because death is the sustainer of all life. However, the Christian eschatological promise is that death will not be the last word for any aspect of creation.

Theological Reconstruction

The purpose of this paper is not to argue for or against the Christian belief in bodily resurrection, but to examine the ways in which that belief should affect peoples' relationship to the earth and life as a whole. Death, which leads to new life from both a Christian and ecological perspective, has in the past been categorized by theology as evil, death is something to be overcome. We certainly experience death as a tragic event, yet, looking at death from an ecological perspective, one is able to see that death is a necessary means to new life. Death is a gift that each life is able to offer back to the web of life as a whole. Theology and ecology should be in conversation with each other because each discipline provides a unique perspective of human experience with the world and offers a possible explanation of the role that humans play on earth in life and in death. Together, theology and ecology can offer to Christians a worldview that has a positive outlook on death, as it supports the flourishing of *all* life.

In order to make positive contributions to environmental issues and to honor the life and the matter that God is experienced through, theological doctrine concerning death and resurrection ought to take seriously natural cycles and structures. The ethical implications of a theology that is partially informed by scientific discovery are positive for all life as one sacred ecosystem. Moving from a dualistic perspective of the world, which allows for a special or temporal distinction to be made between this life and the next, towards a perspective of embodiment, which unites the spiritual and material while still maintaining a level of God's transcendence, can progress hierarchical societal systems towards systems that revere all bodies equally despite the organization, age, size, color, shape, or sex of the bodies. As one begins to see life as one whole, single system, and experiences God in the dependence and transcendence of life and death, one will accumulate reverence for all life and for the end of life as the possible beginning of something new. A result of this is that humans are not gazing upwards towards an alternate way of being in a world of different substance. Currently, according to Moltmann,

God's eternity now took the place of God's future, heaven replaced the coming kingdom, the spirit that redeems the soul from the body supplanted the spirit as 'the well of life,' the immortality of the soul displaced the resurrection of the body, and the yearning for another world became a substitute for changing this one. As redemption was spiritualized, the 'realm of flesh' was correspondingly reduced to the body and its earthly drive and needs.⁷⁹

A dualistic worldview perpetuates the gap between humans and the rest of creation by allowing for a new realm of being beyond the ecosphere rather than emphasizing the

⁷⁹ Jèurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life : A Universal Affirmation*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 89.

embodiment of redemption in this creation through the groaning of the Spirit.⁸⁰ A theology in dialogue with ecology offers a perspective in which material beings are fully in tune with the natural processes of the ecosystem that is Gaia, and the transcendent nature of the divine that is embedded in the sacred body of Gaia—connecting and transcending all forms of life. From the perspective of theology, death must be considered a means to the resurrection of life with the sacred body of Gaia rather than the means to a new life for each individual. For an individual, the life-giving process of death ought to be perceived as the ends of life, a sacrifice made in gratitude for the sacrifices one depended on to sustain one's own life.

An ecologically sound theology does not contradict the kerygma of the Biblical narrative; rather, it refocuses our interpretation of the kerygma to see God and to see Christ in the bodies of other people, other life forms, and in the natural processes that give bodies life. Interpreting the Biblical message in-line with ecology helps us to perceive the divine as both transcendent and within our ecosphere. Theology ought to affirm natural cycles and structures including all life, but, according to Sittler, “we do not have, at least not in such effective force as to have engaged the thought of the common life, a daring, penetrating, life-affirming Christology of nature.”⁸¹ This is because a life-affirming theology of any sort must also affirm death as the process through which God works to renew and transform life, and fulfill the promise of the Gospel. The Biblical kerygma, of death giving way to new life, is not a unique story but is, rather, the fabric of

⁸⁰ Romans 8:22-23, NRSV “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

⁸¹ Sittler, Bouma-Prediger, and Bakken, *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*, 46.

creation that binds together all life. Creation has survived by the sacrifice of death for new life long before any human ever arrived through nutrient and carbon cycles. Without death all forms of life would have ended long ago, if not from lack of material to form new bodies then certainly from lack of resources (which consist of water and dead organic matter) to sustain life.

In the ecological narrative death has the last word. A strictly ecological worldview is a grim one because even though one is able to contribute to the perpetuation of life through death, life as a whole will come to an end eventually. The Christian promise of everlasting life despite biological death offers hope and meaning to the ecological narrative. The Christian eschatological narrative is not counter to the ecological narrative, but rather, contributes to it, “The hypostatic unity differentiates too—differentiates between person and nature; and the ecological unity differentiates also between the world of human beings and the organism of the earth. There is no redemption if this differentiated unity is resolved in favour of one side or the other.”⁸² Everlasting life takes place within a new ecology, which means that the ecology that we are a part of now matters for God’s promise. The Christian narrative offers hope to the ecological narrative that ends in death.

Theology as an academic discipline is the study of God and ought to be done with and for the creation that God has been experienced within. Christian theology gives particular authority to the Old and New Testament, which tells us the stories of ancient peoples’ experiences of God from the perspective of their own bodies. An ecologically sound theology recognizes that human experiences of God happen in time and are located

⁸² Moltmann, *The Coming of God : Christian Eschatology*, 277.

within a grand ecosystem that was created by God. It is through one's material body that one is able to experience God; bodies that are not one's own, "the atoms in *our* bodies were formed in the "bodies" of the early stars."⁸³ Paying particular attention to bodies and natural processes in theological discourse allows us to be attentive to the reality of God. Honoring the natural processes of death and life honor the creation of God beyond our own bodies and environment.

A living being of any sort is not a simple piece of matter, but a process that is dependent on and depended on by other things, living and non-living. Life in any form is not a mechanistic lump of organic matter; rather, "Life as God and music and carbon and energy is a whirling nexus of growing, fusing, and dying beings. It is a matter gone wild, capable of choosing its own direction in order to indefinitely forestall the inevitable moment of thermodynamic equilibrium—death."⁸⁴ This view of life, which radically unsimplifies life, changes the perspective from an individualistic, mechanistic approach to one that recognizes the cyclical interdependence of life and matter. Even Moltmann makes the mistake of perpetuating the distinction between nature and humanity despite his argument that humans ought see themselves as a part of natural systems, "But if nature and humanity are to survive on this earth, they must find a way to a new community with each other. Human beings must understand themselves once more as integral with the earth's cosmic setting. Human beings cannot integrate themselves into 'world machinery' without surrendering their humanity."⁸⁵ Moltmann recognizes the

⁸³ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 18.

⁸⁴ Margulis and Sagan, *What Is Life?*, 55.

⁸⁵ Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 168-69.

need for the inclusion of humanity in nature; however, he tries to make the argument that in order to be wholly and completely integrated into natural systems humans must surrender their humanity. On the contrary, in order to survive, humans must find their humanity embedded in our ecological system. If humans realize that humanity is already an integrated aspect of an ecological system, true humanity would be discovered rather than surrendered. However, as long as the separation of the physical and spiritual continues in theological discourse, humans will remain separated from natural life giving processes and perceive the world as a hierarchically ordered structure.

Moltmann is correct in asserting that a change in the structure of the worldview set forth by orthodox Christianity is necessary. If theologically we divorce God from creation, then it is easy to posit a separation between humans and creation as, Biblically, humanity is created *imago dei*— in the image of God. While the Christian scholar who takes Scripture seriously must avoid pantheism, an emphasis on God’s existence amongst materiality is important, too. God’s in-breaking into the material world is the basis of the incarnation. Stressing the significance of human relationship to God through materiality is a Biblical notion; “But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?”⁸⁶ Dialogue between ecology and theology is broadly Biblical, so in order to revise orthodox categories, and avoid a strong dualism and hierarchical structures, theology should look to ecology. The positive ethical implications that could flow out of a theology, that is in dialogue with ecology, regarding

⁸⁶ Job 12:7-9, NRSV

death and resurrection are numerous. Two positive implications are towards eating practices and burial practices.

Theology ought to re-categorize personal death as tragic rather than evil and emphasize that humans, as created beings, ought to play a part in the created order of things through the nutrient cycle. Death is certainly a tragedy from the perspective of the living and the dying; losing a loved one is never easy and knowing that one's life as it is known will come to an end is terrifying. However, death is also a necessary process through which one has the opportunity to evoke grace upon other forms of life because in death one has the opportunity to "give back to the earth some very small measure of the vast resources they drew from it in life and, in the process, perpetuate the cycles of nature, of growth and decay, of death and rebirth, that sustain all of us."⁸⁷ Death is an inevitable evocation of grace for the entire cosmos and the life that has emerged within it,

Fundamentally, we learn (via many converging lines of evidence) that death is natural and generative at all levels of reality. Consider: without the death of ancient stars (which are cauldrons of chemical creation), the universe would support nothing more complex than the simplest gases: hydrogen and helium. Without the death of generation upon generation of simple forms of life, no descendants could have evolved eyes to see, colors to attract, emotions to feel. Without the death of fetal cells during the early stages of development, we would all be spheres. And of course, this: In a finite world, without the death of elders there would be no room for children.⁸⁸

Ecologically, death is one of the greatest goods. Death is the physical source and sustainer of material for life, allowing the space and resources for the resurrection of material and nutrients for new life.

⁸⁷ Mark Harris, *Grave Matters : A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 2.

⁸⁸ Michael Dowd, "Is Scientific Evidence Modern-Day Scripture?," *The Huffington Post*, March 2, 2012 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-michael-dowd/science-as-modern-scripture_b_1300193.html.

Gebara's "sacred body" can be viewed in light of the Gaia theory in order to help humans better understand their role as members of a larger living body and see death as an opportunity for transformation and resurrection within the sacred body that one was given life by. If evil is reclaimed as that which acts against life as a whole, then the unhealthy fear of death can fade into a deeper reverence for life, and death can be rightly perceived as an opportunity to give back by being transformed into nutrients, matter, and space for new life. Removing death from the category of evil does not invalidate the tragedy experienced, both emotionally and physically, through one's own life or the life of a loved one. While bodily resurrection is still a possibility of belief, it does not have to be the central message of Christian theology. Christian theology can, rather, focus on the life-supporting messages of Jesus teaching. To do so, death would have to be re-categorized as a tragic but non-evil aspect of human existence. Resurrection can be taught through the process of nutrient cycles; while this teaching does not include resurrection of the same physical body, which is the account of resurrection told in the gospel, it tells of the recycling and transformation of life and material within the sacred body, or Gaia.

One critique of this perspective is that it lacks the central message of the Christian faith; there is no promise that offers hope in an ecologically based theology. One could also wonder where God might fit in to a theology that relies so heavily on the sciences. However, the message of the gospel, which represents the transformation of death into life, actually functions as the fabric of life and the process that gives life and eschatological hope to the sacred body. In the words of Sallie McFague, "The model of the universe as God's body does not allow us to say everything. It focuses on embodiment, inviting us to do something that Christians have seldom done: think about

God and bodies. What would it mean, for instance, to understand sin as the refusal to share the basic necessities of survival with other bodies?”⁸⁹ It would mean that withholding one’s own body from the sacred body would have to be considered sin. A theology of ecology would look radically different than orthodox theology; categories such as death and resurrection would take new shape and be manifest in the natural processes of life. The ethical implications that would flow out of an ecologically sound theology would be positive for all forms of life because the relationship and intrinsic value of all beings would be taken into consideration for theological formulation. The ecological implications of a theologically informed ecological narrative offer hope for the future and a call to ecojustice as a participant in God’s promise.

Ethical Implications

It is important to consider the ethical implications of theology because it is through these implications that theology can greatly affect life on earth for the better or for the worse. Theology concerning death and resurrection impacts the culture surrounding burial of the dead. The funeral industry currently makes major negative impacts within the ecosphere in attempts to preserve the human body. With an ecologically sound theology of death, it should be clear that the negative impact of human burial is unethical. Further, the cycle of death and life have implications in every person’s day-to-day life through eating habits. It is at the death of other forms of life that humans eat and are sustained in their own life. A proper theology honors the sacrifice of life that is made for one’s sustainment in daily life. Theology ought to honor the natural

⁸⁹ McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, viii.

order of the ecosphere with a theology concerning death and resurrection from which ethical implications flow out.

Theology can honor the natural order of the ecosphere by encouraging burial in a fashion that does not involve concrete vaults or embalming fluids, a great disservice both economically and ecologically. The average funeral in America costs \$10,000. Only about half of that is for the funeral service and visitations, which together cost about \$4,000. The other half is for the embalming, casket, and vault.⁹⁰ The death of people has created an industry of it's own. The cost of funerals is atrocious and it is often because people want to honor the lives of their loved ones and know that their loved one's bodies are resting softly safe from the elements that might reach them underground. The natural life cycle perpetuates off of recycling energy and nutrients, which are held back from nature during the process of mainstream burial practices in the U.S. The embalming process includes the use of formaldehyde, which has been proven to pose health issues in funeral homes, including increased chances of myeloid leukemia.⁹¹ Formaldehyde is also considered a class one carcinogen and if it gets into the soil, which it eventually does, can pollute the soil and water sources, affecting all life depending on those resources. The manufacturing and transportation of vaults and caskets is also a source of harmful pollution and wasteful of resources, and "While the concrete and metal in vaults may be considered 'natural' to some, the manufacturing and transporting of vaults uses a tremendous amount of energy and causes enormous carbon emission. In this US, vault

⁹⁰ Harris, *Grave Matters : A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*, 10.

⁹¹ Green Burial Council, "Frequently Asked Questions and Fictions," <http://www.greenburialcouncil.org/faqs-fiction/> (accessed 12-17-2011).

manufacturing requires the production of 1.6 tons of reinforced concrete.”⁹² The cremation process, while a less harmless option than embalming and burial in a non-decomposable casket or vault, also uses unnecessary amount of energy and has the potential of releasing mercury and other harmful chemicals into the atmosphere.⁹³ Further, traditional burials require space that could be used for nature preservation. Cutting down trees and groundwork in traditional cemeteries require chemicals and energy to be used in upkeep of the land. A natural burial, which consists of the body being placed chemical-free in a decomposable coffin or shroud, allows for the material body to given back to the earth that sustained the body’s life, “The idea is to allow the body to rejoin the elements, to use what remains of a life to regenerate new life, to return dust to dust.”⁹⁴ By advocating for green burials with a theology of death and resurrection that includes allowing the grace in death to be prevalent, theology can make a positive ethical contribution to ecological issues while honoring God’s created order.

Humans have been living and eating and dying as though we owe no gratitude to the earth and other manifestations of life that have given us life and sustained us. People, as part of the trophic cycle, are a part of a dance on the Gaian table, which is sustained by the kerygma of Christ, death transforming and giving way to new life, as life is continually sacrificed for the renewal and sustainment of life. We are not on the outside of the cosmic table waiting for dinner to be served to us. In a very literal sense, we are dinner to the predators who seek our flesh, and we ought to be dinner to the ground that

⁹² *Ibid*

⁹³ Green Burial Council, “Frequently Asked Questions and Fictions.”

⁹⁴ Harris, *Grave Matters : A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*, 1.

gives life to allow for the Christ symbol to live and continue upon our death. In order to honor God's created order we must eat in a way that honors the death that sustains our lives.

For most human beings, especially those in modern urban and suburban communities, the most direct form of contact with nonhuman animals is at mealtime: we eat them. This simple fact is the key to our attitudes toward other animals, and also the key to what each one of us can do about changing these attitudes. The use and abuse of animals raised for food far exceeds, in sheer numbers of animals affected, any other kind of mistreatment.⁹⁵

An ecologically sound theology of death and resurrection honors the death that is given every time food is consumed for the perpetuation of life.

The Christ event, remembered through Holy Communion, is a reminder of the deep connection between life and death, "what is often forgotten is that every Eucharist is a thanksgiving memorial for God at work in creation as well as redemption."⁹⁶ We are given life and sustained by the death of life. Everything we eat, or everything we should eat, was very recently a living being created and given life by the same God that creates and gives life to human beings. "While representative of creation's culmination, bread and wine are, nonetheless, means of sustaining human life. The creator's will is to give life, and man and woman in the bodies of their flesh are most certainly able to receive it."⁹⁷ Through eating, a bodily necessity that is already given theological meaning through the Eucharist, one life is fueled by the death of another form of life. It is through

⁹⁵ Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Ecco Press, 2000), 57.

⁹⁶ Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), 101.

⁹⁷ Joel Kurz, "The Gifts of Creation and the Consummation of Humanity: Irenaeus of Lyons' Recapitulatory Theology of the Eucharist," *Worship* 83, no. 2 (2009): 116.

the tropic cycle that humanity is invited to take part in the dance of the sacred body not as an overseer but as a participator in the divine dance of creation.

Burial and eating practices are only two positive ethical implications that flow out of ecologically sound theology on death and resurrection among many, such as an overall new outlook on life and death within the ecosphere. It is clear that there is much improvement to be made theologically in order for theology to support the flourishing of all life rather than the flourishing of the spiritual human individual. As an ecological apocalypse brought on by human action becomes more of a reality it is more urgent for theology to respond and be reformed by current ecological paradigms rather than paradigms of the past.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In an age where environmental issues threaten the ecosphere, theology has a responsibility to respond. If the significance of theology is that it is done for a living community consisting of all life forms but theology does not support the flourishing of all life, then it needs to be radically re-evaluated. Theological doctrine and categories that are formed by out-dated scientific ideals and do not properly address the current issues posed by scientific findings, or properly engage post-Darwin and post-Newtonian ecology are not sufficient to deal with current crises facing life today. This is problematic because theology has practical and ethical implications for the living world that ecology is concerned with. Thus, theology ought to engage current ecological paradigms into its doctrine and re-form categories as necessary in order to close the falsely perceived gap between humanity and the rest of creation that is perpetuated by hierarchically structured theologies that separate body and soul. Death and resurrection are theological categories that can deeply engage ecological discourse because the concepts of death and resurrection are a part of both disciplines. In ecology, however, resurrection takes the form of death being transformed into new life through the transformation and recycling of matter rather than an eschatological resurrection of living bodies.

Engaging ecology in theological conversation strengthens theology by integrating more knowledge about the living community that theology is responsible to into

theological doctrine. On the topics of death and resurrection there are key ecological concepts that will help to bridge the perceived gap between humanity and the ecosphere. An understanding of the nutrient cycle helps us to understand the need for dead organic matter, including dead bodies, to be naturally recycled into the soil. This does not imply that humans should stop burying their dead altogether, but rather, it should be done in a way that natural cycles can take place which means that concrete vaults and embalming fluids must be left out of the equation. The current ecological paradigm negates past paradigms in which the world was seen as mechanistic and linear and theorizes that life is a system of interconnected and interdependent webs. The ecosystem as a whole forms one large living creature that Lovelock names Gaia. Within Gaia humans can contribute to Gaia's system by living in a way that supports the perpetuation of life as a whole by honoring the systematic structure and natural cycles in the way that we eat, live, and take care of the dead. Death is a vital aspect of the cycle of life, it is part of a process that allows life to flourish and support the resurrection of new life within Gaia.

Despite the necessity of death for ecological sustainability, death has been categorized as evil both Biblically and theologically. Biblically, death is portrayed as though it is the result of human sin rather than a natural part of life from the time of creation. Death is characterized as an evil that God controls in response to human action; death is something that people most look to God in order for it to be overcome as if it was not a part of the natural created order that sustained life on earth long before people were ever present. In the New Testament the culture surrounding death becomes more confusing because there is a biological death and a spiritual death, yet, Paul does not argue for a complete separation of the spirit and the material. Death is convoluted in the

New Testament but the two concepts are still loosely related in life and directly related after biological death, as resurrection is the full unity of the body and spirit. The convulsion of death in the New Testament has led to a great confusion and fear of death in the present. New Testament notions of death are not the problem because Paul was not advocating for a world of two kingdoms, but rather, one incumbent, changing, and progressing kingdom that is fueled by hope in God's promise rather than fear of death. The problem is the theological mis-interpretation of death that becomes clear in common creeds, such as the Nicene Creed and the Apostle's Creed which both state in similar fashion that Jesus *suffered* death for people, went to hell, and conquered death by being raised again and ascending to heaven. Jesus did not suffer death; he suffered execution and thereby experienced death. There is, in the creeds, no separation of biological and spiritual death. However, there is a false separation of the material world and the spiritual world one enters after death—the world of heaven and hell where Jesus' real conquest was achieved.

Engaging theology with the ecological narrative offers hope for life rather than inevitable death for all of life. The eschatological promise of the Christian narrative claims that this ecology, in which death has the last word, is not the only way. Creation as a whole will be redeemed in the future and thus, humanity's relationship with the rest of creation matters now because as people of faith Christians are to live into the new ecology that is forthcoming. Christians can live into the ecological narrative as participants in God's eschatological promise. Ecojustice becomes more than an ethical responsibility by becoming a present and active way of participating in God's promise of a new ecology.

There is pre-existing dialogue on ecology and theology which Moltmann, Sittler, and Gebara have each taken part from different perspectives. Moltmann's argument for a need for dialogue and detailed discussion of the issues helps to set the stage and direction for dialogue. Sittler's engagement with theology and environmental issues correctly communicates the responsibility that theology has towards the ecosphere and incumbent environmental issues. Sittler highlights the in breaking of God into the material world through the incarnation, causing a fusion of nature and grace that has not yet been theologically digested. Gebara locates God within, but also transcendent of, the universe in a way that helps to break down hierarchical theological categories and doctrines so that a horizontal dialogue between ecology and theology is possible. However, both Gebara and Moltmann continue to categorize death as evil. Sittler recognizes the egocentricity of the Christian hope for eternal and heavenly life but does not engage ecology on the topic. Moltmann argues that theology has distorted Biblical notions of death and resurrection but he continues to convolute the spiritual and material in the same way that Paul does.

If death is perceived as a natural evocation of grace, it becomes a good that allows for the flourishing of life rather than an evil that must be feared and overcome. The location of God's sacred body as Gaia emphasizes the necessity of ecological resurrection of one's material body. Acknowledgement of ecological resurrection gives death the purpose of sustaining and supporting life on earth, making way for generations of life to come. The eschatological promise of the Christian narrative offers hope to the grim ecological promise of death for all. Fruitful dialogue between ecology and theology on death and resurrection offers theological meaning to ecological processes and structure

while positing ethical implications for all life forms that support the flourishing of life within the ecosphere.

While traditional theological doctrine does not directly address the way that burial should take place it can, and should, encourage burial to take place in a way that allows for natural cycles to occur. The language of resurrection should be used for the transformation of death that happens naturally within the ecosphere in order to honor the natural created order. Doing so would not negate the bodily resurrection of Jesus but, rather, affirm it because it honors the rhythm of death to life set forth from the beginning of creation and the interdependence of all life. The rhythm of death to life supports life on a day-to-day basis through the consumption of food, which is dead organic matter. Without nutrients living bodies would die, thus, life relies on death daily. Theology concerning the Eucharist can support the flourishing of all life by emphasizing the sacrifice remembered specifically of Jesus, a sacrifice embodied in natural ecological cycles through the dependence of all life on death. The presence of creation in the practice of Holy Communion strengthens the connection between the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice made by Gaia for new life and contributes to a theology of death and resurrection that honors the sacrificed life needed for life to be sustained ecologically and eschatologically.

Christian theology is relevant in a scientific age, and can offer a perspective on life that supports the flourishing of the ecosystem. Currently, theological discourse is falling short of its potential on the topics of death and resurrection.

Few things are more important than transforming how we think about our inner and outer nature, and our mortality. Thus far, the Evidential Reformation has been centered in science. We desperately need our faith traditions to celebrate this

momentous time. We need all the experience that the traditions can muster to guide us today.⁹⁸

Framework has been set for theological discourse that engages ecology in fruitful dialogue and vice versa. Theology concerning death and resurrection can impact the situation of the ecosphere in a positive way through proper engagement of ecological discourse that honors the sanctity of death and provides an element of hope for the ecological narrative as a result of the Christian call to ecological justice and redemption from the dooming death promised by ecology.

⁹⁸ Dowd, "Is Scientific Evidence Modern-Day Scripture?."

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