

Religion & Society

Volume 68 | Number 2 | June 2023



Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society
Bengaluru

Religion & Society

A Quarterly Journal of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore.

Indexed in the Guide to Indian Periodical Literature, Religion Index One: Periodicals, and in ATLA Religion Database Published by the American Theological Library Association 300S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606
Email: atla@atla.com; website: <http://www.atla.com>

Subscription:

India: Rs. 400 (for individual subscription); Rs. 600 (for Library subscription)
Asia, Africa and Latin America, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand & Japan: US\$ 70 (for individual subscription); US\$ 100 (for Library subscription)
UK: £ 50 (for individual subscription); £ 70 (for Library subscription)
Continental Europe: € 50 (for individual subscription); € 70 (for Library subscription)

For a single issue Rs. 100 (US \$7): For a double issue Rs. 200 (US\$ 15);
Postage extra Rs. 20 (US\$ 3)

Library subscribers receive religion and Society as well as CISRS books.
Subscriptions are for the calendar year. All issues of the year will be supplied.

We accept Cheque/ Demand Draft/ Postal Money Order and Online payments.
Please send subscriptions in favour of the CISRS publication Trust:
Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, #73, Millers Road,
Benson Town, Bangalore 560046, India.

Editorial Board:

Dr. Y.T. Vinayaraj (Chief Editor), Dr. Packiam T. Samuel, Dr. Margret Kalaiselvi,
Dr. Samuel W. Meshack, Dr. Sonajharia Minz, Dr. Rodinmawia Ralte,
Dr. Gabriele Dietrich, Dr. George Mathew, Dr. Shalini Mulackal,
Dr. P. Wilson, Dr. Chilkuri Vasantha Rao, Dr. Sumit Abhaya Kerkatta,
Dr. Lilian Jasper, Dr. Mary E. John, Dr. Sanal Mohan,
Prof. Faizan Mustafa, and Dr. Wati Longchar.

Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society

#73, Millers Road, Benson Town, Bangalore 560046, India

Phone: +9540050213 (M); Dir/Fax: 23330335/23332981

Email: cisrsblr@gmail.com • website: www.cisrs.in

RELIGION & SOCIETY

Volume 68 Number 2 June 2023

Religion, Ecology, and Politics

Contents

Editorial	iii
Articles	
Religion, Theology, and Ecology in the Capitalocene <i>Jeorg Rieger</i>	1
<i>Poromboke Ecotheology: Towards a Decolonial and Intersectional Ecotheology</i> <i>George Zachariah</i>	13
Land, Development, and the Neoliberal Agenda <i>Vasundhara Jairath</i>	44
Religion, Ecology, and the Commons: An Indigenous Perspective <i>M. Zubenthung Humtsoe</i>	53
Religion, Ecology, and Politics: Movement Matters <i>Y.T. Vinayaraj</i>	76
Book Reviews	
Whitney A. Bauman, <i>Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic</i> <i>Paul T. Corrigan</i>	91
Catherine Keller, <i>Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public</i> <i>Subir Rana</i>	94

Editorial

The ecological challenges we face today have strong political, economic, and religious underpinnings. Whether it is the neoliberal policies of the state or the monolithic development projects of multinational corporations, Mother Earth and the people who depend on natural resources for their survival suffer as a result. In her new book *Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity, and the Commons in Delhi* (Sage 2020), Amita Baviskar exposes how authoritarian governments interweave political totalitarianism, cultural fascism, and a neo-capitalist agenda to displace and even evacuate common people in urban city spaces in India, especially in Delhi, to polluted spaces or bodies in the name of “green city-clean city” projects.

Discussing the disastrous effects of mining and aluminium industries in the eastern Indian state of Odisha on the indigenous communities and highlighting their politics of resistance and survival, Felix Padel asks, “What is the real cost of these development projects on local inhabitants and ecosystems?” (*Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel*, 2020). The struggles of Dalits and indigenous people against land acquisition and displacement expose not only our inadequacy to define economic growth, development, democracy, and earth ethics but also alternative ways of living, being, and becoming earthlings, which, of course, have political, economic, and religious-cultural cadences.

The South Asian Study and Research Centre (SASRC), a research initiative of CISRS and Delhi Forum, a platform for radical social engagement, jointly organised an event for young theologians and activists at CISRS’ House, New Delhi, from March 23–25, 2023. Its purpose was to listen to and engage with organic intellectuals who champion crucial ecological/political issues and concerns, driven by their moral sense of “deep solidarity” (Joerg Rieger) with the displaced and the dispossessed. This volume of *Religion & Society* is a collection of the papers presented

at the conference, which in turn become creative and dynamic responses to the testimonies of organic intellectuals who fight for justice at the grassroots level.

CISRS has always been at the forefront of signifying religion as a people's movement to ensure justice and peace in society and thereby urge churches to discharge their faith in solidarity with the dispossessed and disenfranchised. CISRS is Now, renewing its efforts to address the politics offered by grassroots ecological movements and translate those political agonies into theological language and practice. The politics of the current eco-social movements cannot be contained within slogans such as "care for the earth" or "green mission"; rather, it is a *kairos* moment for faith communities in India to embark on a radical political theology of the earth that unsettles the settled notions of religion, ecology, and politics.

Religion, in the context of neo-capitalism, has to attend to the politics of material production and reproduction and how it maintains eco-sensitive relations in society. Today, ecology is not just a discourse on environmentalism, but is a political ecology of things that attends to the productive and reproductive relations that happen even beyond human life. Jane Bennett sees nature as the political realm of human and non-human actants and agentic assemblages and call on us to attend to the agential position of the earth and the vibrant material trans-actions happening within the ecology of relations (Bennett 2020). In response to these material trans-actions of ecology, religion is provoked to retain its enmattered and embodied genealogy. As Tamsin Jones explains, "religious experience is never purely interior and private, for it is written in our actions, our orientations, and our turnings, marked on our bodies and our expulsions, generative of energies and social movements that track one way or another" (Jones 2016:18). Religion, here, becomes ontological and material in content and practice. The philosophers of "new materialism," such as Bruno Latour, Rosi Braidotti, and Gilles Deleuze, challenge ecotheologies to shift their focus from environmentalism to political ecology, by which the social agency of the earth and the common people—people who live in close affinity with the earth—is affirmed and doctrinally confessed.

Relocating (Eco-)theology in the era of neo-capitalism (*Capitalocene*), Joerg Rieger calls for a "deep solidarity" based on the labor and collective

agency of the working class that entails a critical analysis of the stark power differentials inherent in neoliberal capitalism, which enables a few to maximize profit at the expense of many and the earth's ecosystems. Theology in *Capitalocene* is envisaged in his essay in this volume as an extraordinary project for deep solidarity beyond the reductionist approach that deals with economy, ecology, politics, and religion as separate and isolated. Drawing from a true diversity of voices from disenfranchised communities, this essay tries to connect the study of economics, religion, and ecology, effectively unmasking and breaking universalized ideological hegemonies. By doing so, this essay opens novel pathways for confronting both capitalist catastrophes and capitalist narratives of catastrophes in the twenty-first century.

Following the critical traditions of ecotheology, George Zachariah, in his article, offers an interrogative analysis of mainstream environmentalism and mainstream ecotheology in perpetuating the distress of the earth and objectifying the subaltern people who live in symbiotic relationships with the environment. Zachariah argues that, in order to retrieve the transformative face of ecotheology, we need to resist the colonisation of the commons—and the commonwealth of the natural resources and the commoners—the indigenous or subaltern people. According to him, this decolonial practice recognises and investigates the correlation between environmental injustice and the wider social and economic injustices. By employing the hermeneutical key of intersectionality, this approach affirms the epistemological privilege of the subaltern social movements. Zachariah suggests that a deeper engagement with Dalit and indigenous environmentalism and struggles is essential for developing a decolonial and intersectional ecotheology in India. This would involve addressing even eco-casteism.

Vasundhara Jairath, in her essay, analyses the latest changes proposed to the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2006, known as the Draft EIA 2020, and how they affect civil society and grassroots communities adversely. She argues that this shift in policy is nothing but another step to institutionalize processes of capital accumulation already under way in the neoliberal state. As Jairath contends, this commentary focuses on the processes, mechanisms, and legitimating discourses used to roll out changes in legal structures and state policy relating to land

acquisition, “development” projects, and the setting up of business ventures. According to her, this mainstream discourse of development in favor of the agenda of capital accumulation can only be challenged by articulating a counter-hegemonic conception of development, which demands that people’s needs be met through a system of production that places their needs at the center rather than those of capital.

Offering an alternative indigenous ecotheology from the lived experiences of the north-east Indian tribal people, Zubenthung Humtsoe, in his essay, urges us to ensure a counterculture and ethics that protect the natural environment and people’s cultures and traditions. He advocates a postcolonial indigenous earth ethics that emphasizes coexistence and correlation with the whole of nature, which is embodied, enmeshed, and preserved in indigenous traditions and cultures. According to Zubenthung, preserving the indigenous social and cultural norms links the indigenous generations and provides them with a shared identity—the narratives of oneness and belongingness. “Such eco-spirituality has been the belief system of the indigenous ancestors, which ultimately led to the conservation of the ecosystem without being abused or misused.”

Following the contemporary post-continental materialistic philosophical traditions that affirm the social agency of the earth and the people who depend on its resources for their survival, Y.T. Vinayaraj, in his essay, emphasizes a paradigm shift from environmentalism to political ecology. Political ecology, he argues, gives proper attention to the vital materiality of trans-actions happening within the ecology of relations rather than “care for the environment.” Alluding to contemporary materialist philosophies, Vinayaraj envisages religion as an embodied political practice of being and becoming planetary beings. Envisioning indigenous ecological movements as eco-religious movements enmeshed with the agonies and vulnerabilities of the materialities of life and embodied with the radical politics of restructuring our settled notions of religion, ecology, and politics, Vinayaraj offers a constructive proposal for a radical indigenous political theology of the earth in India.

We present this volume for the critical consideration of our readers and well-wishers, as we continue our journey together to envisage a common planet and a way of life that affirms our existence as planetary beings.

Y.T. Vinayaraj
Editor

Religion, Theology, and Ecology in the Capitalocene

Joerg Rieger

Vanderbilt University, Tennessee, USA

Abstract

This article offers a critical analysis of the stark power differentials inherent in neoliberal capitalism that enable a few to maximize profit at terrible expense to the many and to earth's ecosystems. In response to this Capitalocene era, this essay calls for a 'deep solidarity' based on the labor and collective agency of working-class people. On the other hand, theology in the Capitalocene is envisaged as an extraordinary project for deep solidarities beyond the reductionistic approach that deals economy, ecology, politics, and religion separate and isolated. Drawing from a true diversity of voices from disenfranchised communities, this article tries to connect the study of economics, religion, and ecology, effectively unmasking and breaking universalized ideological hegemonies. By doing so this essay opens novel paths for confronting both capitalist catastrophes and capitalist narratives of catastrophes in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Anthropocene, capitalocene, climate change, emerging alternatives, deep solidarity

INTRODUCTION

It is now commonly argued that we are living in the geological age of the Anthropocene. This is the age when humanity is considered to be the dominant force that shapes the planet, just as other forces shaped the

planet in earlier times, like glacial ice shaping the Pleistocene (between 2.5 million and 11,000 years ago) and warmer climate conditions shaping the Holocene, the past 10,000 years of planetary history during which permanent human settlements and agriculture begin.

What the concept of the Anthropocene neglects, however, is that not all human activities have equal impact on the planet. As much as 71 percent of all carbon emissions, for instance, which are the major factor in the current situation of human-made global warming, are linked to the economic interests of only 100 corporations.¹ According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, between 1988 and 2016, the fossil fuel industry has emitted as much greenhouse gas as in the previous 237 years since the beginning of the industrial revolution. By comparison, according to some studies, if all Americans eliminated meat from their diet, this would reduce US greenhouse gas emissions by 2.6 percent.² While this is not an insignificant number, many concerned groups that include faith communities appear to be more aware of the problems of consuming meat than of the role of capitalism in climate change. Thus, instead of talking about the Anthropocene, it has been suggested by sociologist Jason Moore and others that we should talk about the Capitalocene, which is the geological age when the interests of big money are shaping the planet in unprecedented ways.³

But why should scholars of theology and religion care about these developments? The Capitalocene, as I am arguing in my book *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity*,⁴ is not just a matter of economics and politics; rather, it shapes and affects everything. While the Capitalocene is the major factor in climate change,⁵ it also shapes humanity, the way we relate to each other, the way we think, and even our most deeply held religious beliefs. This is where the work of scholars of theology and religion becomes especially relevant and where they can make much-needed contributions.

To be sure, some of this shaping of theology and religion happens by default. The logic of big money sneaks into images of God, although this is often overlooked, for instance when God is envisioned as a heavenly CEO or an autocrat in the sky. Such images are widespread and are often held unconsciously rather than consciously. What makes them problematic and even dangerous is that they prevent alternatives from

taking root in the religious imagination, for instance images of God as a collaborator with humanity, which are actually quite common in many religious traditions. In addition to the logic of big money shaping religious imagination, this logic also infuses personal communal relationships at the core of religion, for instance when others are evaluated according to their supposed “market value,” which includes individual friendships, intimate relationships, and even whole faith communities.⁶

While some of this shaping happens by default and unintentionally—material reality shapes human life and faith whether we like it or not—some of it happens intentionally and is worth investigating further here. In the following pages we will have a closer look at ecology, which has become a major battle ground, as climate change is one of the major challenges of our time, threatening the future of many life forms on planet Earth, including humanity as we know it. Responses to climate change, even when they acknowledge its significance of and seek to redress it, are not innocent but are often shaped by the dominant interests. For example, when the general publics in the United States and in Europe acknowledge climate change (in the United States, there are also large numbers of climate change deniers), responses often focus on the carbon footprint of individuals. This does not happen by default. Emphasis on individual responsibility for climate change is supported by so-called “carbon footprint calculators,” which estimate personal CO₂ emissions and are broadly promoted and widely available on the internet. While this approach may seem innocent, consider the fact that the terminology of carbon footprint and the respective calculators can be traced back to the fossil fuel industry,⁷ which started to promote them in the early 2000s in order to direct attention away from corporate interests.

Another example of how dominant interests in the Capitalocene shape responses to climate change and other ecological interests is the blaming of consumers. This is a common approach in many faith communities, reflected in the work of many ecological theologians, even when they engage the economic underpinnings of climate change.⁸ Of course, the increased consumption of often short-lived disposable goods and material things adds its own challenges to the ecological crisis by contributing to rising CO₂ emission levels, pollution, and growing garbage heaps. But blaming consumers hides and obscures the fact that the global capitalist

economy depends on economic growth and increased production, which is supported by publicity and advertising campaigns, due to the fact that human desire is not infinite, as is often mistakenly assumed. People only desire so many chocolate bars, shoes, or rugs, and at some point consumption tapers off. What matters most in campaigns to increase consumption, therefore, is not primarily the material object but non-material feelings of love, acceptance, safety, and so on that reach farther. In other words, blaming consumers for what is sometimes called “materialism” (wanting more and more stuff) neglects the dominant powers at work in the Capitalocene that produce desires. And it covers up the fact that attention to material realities—some of it now happening in what has been called “New Materialism”⁹—is actually helpful and at the heart of many religious traditions, including the Jesus movement, which sought to bring “good news to the poor” (Matt 11 and Luke 4).

In the world of Christianity, the Capitalocene also factors in the often-observed shift to the right. Since the 1930s and 1940s, big money has systematically invested in conservative Christianity in the United States,¹⁰ with repercussions around the world. The evangelistic enterprises of Billy Graham, situated in the heart of US Evangelical Christianity but highly effective globally, are only the tip of the iceberg.¹¹ In the process, conservative Christianity itself has become more conservative. The values that people perceive to be “traditional” are frequently not preserving the past but the interests of big money, for instance by shifting attention from corporate interests (and climate change) to so-called family values that often tend to be more restrictive than even the family values of the 1950s. Examples for this money-infused traditionalism include the subordination of women in the nuclear family, the restrictions on abortion, stereotyping men and women according to their shifting roles in capitalism, and the multiple hierarchies of the capitalist workplace, all of which are considered God-given to such a degree that they are assumed to be natural.

ENGAGING THE CAPITALOCENE AS SCHOLARS OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

In the face of these massive challenges, engaging ecology and religion from the perspective of the Capitalocene is crucial if we want to make a difference. This brings us to a fundamental problem that is virtually taboo

and, like taboos in general, directs us back to questions at the heart of religion.

Let us take another look at CO₂ emissions, which are the main cause of climate change, as 97 percent of scientists now agree.¹² Even when the fundamental relation of climate change and CO₂ emissions is recognized, dominant conversations about emissions tend to neglect the fact that emissions are the result of the extraction of fossil fuel and coal, which is related to capitalism's foundation in relationships of exploitation of people and the planet. In the COP-21 Paris Agreement, for instance, there is frequent reference to emissions but no reference to extraction.¹³

This particular neglect of the extraction of fossil fuel and coal, which is at the heart of how the Capitalocene perpetuates itself, also tends to neglect the fact that the methods and conditions of extraction are determined by the interests of capital rather than by the human communities that are most affected by these activities. One example is the practice of "fracking," also known as hydraulic fracturing by which fluids are injected into the ground with high pressure to force open existing fissures in subterranean rocks to extract oil or gas. This method of extraction, increasingly used by the fossil fuel industry in order to access deposits that were previously inaccessible, uses up natural resources like water, which are often scarce, leads to the leak of massive amounts of methane gas that further accelerates global warming, produces cancer-causing pollution due to the heavy use of chemicals, and destabilizes tectonic plates leading to increased earthquake activity.¹⁴ It is not hard to see who the winners and the losers are in this relationship, as the interests of capital typically triumph over the interests of people. Even the well-being of workers, who tend to earn better-than-average wages in the fracking industry, is impacted negatively.

The forces that extract fossil fuel and coal from the planet are inextricably linked to the forces that exploit human labor, another matter that is typically neglected when CO₂ emissions are the sole focus of debate. More precisely, the forces that extract at the expense of planetary well-being are the same forces that exploit at the expense of human well-being. Exploitative labor relations are still at the core of the capitalist enterprise, often covered up by increased attention to the exploits of financial capitalism that are discussed even in theological circles.¹⁵ Note

that this kind of exploitation is not a matter of “greed” or other moral failures of corporations and their leadership—exploitation is based on the economic principle of corporations being expected and often required by law to work for the benefit of their shareholders at the expense of their workers and the environment. This is one of the reasons why at the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt we try to keep matters of ecology and the economy—exploitation and extraction—together.¹⁶

In these dynamics, religion is not just a sideshow. Christianity for instance, it has been argued consistently for over 50 years, has contributed to the deterioration of the climate in its own ways. Examples include an exclusive focus on humanity and troubled understandings of its “dominion” (Genesis 1:26) of the earth, as well as an otherworldly focus that does not seem to care about material reality. While this is not true, of course, for all of Christianity, there is a real problem with many of the dominant forms of Western Christianity, traces of which can also be found in the anthropocentrism of Western science and the humanities. This was one of the central points of historian Lynn White’s influential essay from the 1960s, which is still routinely quoted, especially by those who understand the current age in terms of the Anthropocene.¹⁷

But more is at stake than anthropocentrism, as Christianity (by supporting the logic of the Capitalocene) also supports extractive and exploitative relationships not only of the earth but also of the majority of its people. Anthropocentrism, even in its Christian forms, never puts the interests of all of humanity at the center—it promotes almost exclusively the concerns of the privileged few. At the most basic level, Christianity contributes to extraction and exploitation when conversations about extraction and exploitation that are at the heart of the Capitalocene are rendered taboo. Even in theological education today, conversations about labor relationships, class, and the inner workings of capitalism are still quite rare and, when they happen, are met with considerable pushback. This is perhaps best seen in what I have called the “long silence” of discourses on social class and labor relations in the field of theology.¹⁸ But there are also other examples where Christianity actively supports the logic of the Capitalocene, for instance in the so-called “Gospel of Prosperity,” where capitalist principles of prosperity are promoted in a kind of “winner-takes-

all” mindset that is quite contrary to the communal prosperity promoted by the Abrahamic traditions of the Exodus from Egypt, the Hebrew prophets of the eight century BCE, as well as the Jesus movement that marks Christianity. Note that the problem with this Gospel of Prosperity is not its concern for prosperity and material things—Jesus was concerned about that as well—but the kind of prosperity that is promoted here that benefits the few rather than the many.

Any quest for alternatives needs to consider this history so as not to end up promoting solutions that further perpetuate the problems we are facing. Common Christian ideas like “creation care,” for instance, ignore relations of extraction and exploitation and would need to be deepened by questions such as why creation is not being cared for, who benefits from this lack of care, and how the most significant damage to creation is done. The same is true for widespread Christian calls for the “protection of creation,” the “restoration of creation,” or “environmental stewardship,” all of which tend to be complicit in ignoring fundamental relationships of extraction and exploitation.

If there is indeed a connection between climate change, religion, and the Capitalocene, solutions can only be developed if the three are addressed together. For people of faith, this means not only deepening concerns about climate change but also addressing its causes at deeper levels. Christianity has a special responsibility in this regard, as it developed in close relation to capitalism, but other religions are not off the hook, as many of their contemporary forms are often closely linked to capitalism as well, like forms of Buddhism employed by multinational corporations for their own purposes, or the many prominent forms of religious nationalism around the world that include examples from Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. At the same time, however, where religion is supporting the dominant status quo, alternatives tend to exist as well, which are often overlooked. In Christianity, for instance, these alternatives tend to manifest themselves in resistance movements and lived alternatives that can be found even in the United States, which is still the epicenter of neoliberal capitalism.

The first step in the formation of alternatives is an engagement with the logic of capital that drives extraction and exploitation. While

economists can provide some insights, scholars of religion and theology have a particular role to play here due to how deeply our disciplines and our communities have been shaped by the dominant reality. Yet, since ideas are always linked to material realities, this engagement needs to be developed in terms of actual realities on the ground. Scholars of theology and religion will do little good if they assume they can do their work without material engagement in emerging alternatives, pulling their ideas out of a metaphysical hat as it were or from the lofty heights of their imaginations.

This is why, in the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt University, we developed the so-called solidarity circles.¹⁹ The basic principle of these solidarity circles is that religious communities can only be formed and transformed in relationship with the solidarity and cooperative economy, and that religious communities that operate in solidarity and cooperatively can help reshape the fundamental economic relationships that rule in the Capitalocene. What we are finding is that connecting communities with developments in the solidarity economy, especially with worker cooperatives, fundamentally changes life in the Capitalocene.²⁰ Worker cooperatives might be considered a substantial first line of defense against the logic of extraction and exploitation, as they reverse the fundamental relationships of exploitation on which capitalism rests.²¹ Whereas capitalist enterprises are based on siphoning off the surplus produced by working people, sending it to investors at the top, worker cooperatives reclaim the surplus produced for working people and their communities, developing democratic relationships at work where they are usually absent even in countries that are proud of their political democracies. The surplus produced by working people, as well as the profit that goes along with it, can now be reclaimed by the community. This fundamentally reshapes the production of surplus and profit itself and makes it less extractive and exploitative, as democratic structures at work benefit not only the common good but also the environment in which surplus and profit are being produced. When the flourishing of all is at the heart of economic relations, the logic of extraction can be transformed into a mutual relationship of give-and-take, where both the agency of the working majority and the agency of nature itself can be acknowledged, appreciated, and honored. Human labor and

other-than-human labor can now work hand-in-hand (or hand-in-paw, or hand-in-branch).²²

These dynamics also capture what in the past I have called the “theological surplus,” an understanding of the work of theology that reshapes the work of scholars of theology and religion in the Capitalocene.²³ My basic point is that this theological surplus does not fall from the sky or arrive on the clouds of theological ideas but emerges as communities work out their liberation and salvation (which may be turn out to be the same thing) “with fear and trembling,” as Paul famously put it in Phil. 2:12. Here, images of God can be expected to change from a hierarchical manager to a collaborator, for this God is, as Paul continues in the next verse (Phil. 2:13) “at work in you”—i.e. in those who engage in the processes of liberation. Note that such images of God as worker rather than as autocratic dictator pick up the wealth of images in the Hebrew Bible that depict God in images of working people doing menial labor, including the work of women such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, sowing, planting, pottery, and so on.²⁴

CONCLUSIONS

The work of theology and religion that has been described here begins at the bottom, forging deeper connections with those who are most affected by relationships of extraction and exploitation, both human and other-than-human. This is where the production of any surplus is anchored in the Capitalocene, for good or for ill, and this is where the power to change things needs to be reclaimed. There is some real power here that can be organized, as the complex histories of various labor movements show that are of course not without their own glitches. Recall that no employer could ever say that only a dead worker is a good worker.

For people of faith, this means aligning ourselves with the power of working people, who constitute the majority of humanity as well as the majority of people of faith. Even in the wealthy countries of the North, 99 percent of the population have to work for a living, and wealth is produced on the back of the working majority which, particularly in the United States, often has difficulty making ends meet.²⁵ It also means aligning ourselves with the power of the earth that continues to produce resources

sustainably, even though this topic could not be developed in greater detail here. And, finally, for people of faith this means aligning ourselves with the power of the divine that all three Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—often envision in terms of the creativity of working people (God shaping Adam from clay and planting a garden, Genesis 2:7-8, with parallels in the Qur'an) and the planet (the productive capacities of water and the earth are noted in Genesis 1:20, 24), as well as unapologetically taking the side of the slaves in the Exodus from Egypt. Pulling together these various forces is not optional if the challenges are so big, but this is how the world has been changed before.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Riley, Tess. 2017. "Just 100 Companies responsible for 71 Percent of Global CO2 Emissions, Study Says." *The Guardian*, July 10. <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jul/10/100-fossil-fuel-companies-investors-responsible-71-global-emissions-cdp-study-climate-change>.
- 2 Griffin, Paul. 2017. "The Carbon Majors Database: CDP Majors Report" (July), <https://cdn.cdp.net/cdp-production/cms/reports/documents/000/002/327/original/Carbon-Majors-Report-2017.pdf?1501833772>, reporting on the percentage of CO2 emissions today and since 1988. See also the related fact check: <https://fullfact.org/news/are-100-companies-causing-71-carbon-emissions/>. Brett Clark and Richard York, 2005, "Carbon Metabolism: Global Capitalism, Climate Change, and the Biospheric Rift," *Theory and Society* 34:4 (August 2005), 391–428, also report that, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the amount of CO2 in the atmosphere has risen by 31 percent since the onset of industrialization, and half of that increase happened between 1965 and 1995. Regarding meat consumption, see Frank M. Mitloehner, "Yes, Eating Meat Affects the Environment, but Cows are not Killing the Climate." *The Conversation*, October 25, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/yes-eating-meat-affects-the-environment-but-cows-are-not-killing-the-climate-94968>.
- 3 Moore, Jason W., 2016. "Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore. Oakland, CA: PM: 1–12.
- 4 Rieger, Joerg. 2022. *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity*, Dispatches. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- 5 Plested, James. 2020. "Capitalist Roots of the Environment Crisis," *Climate and Capitalism*, February 17. <https://climateandcapitalism.com/2020/02/18/capitalist-roots-environment-crisis/>.
- 6 See Rogers-Vaughn, Bruce. 2017. *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, New Approaches to Religion and Power. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- 7 Yoder, Kate. 2020. "Why Do Oil Companies Care So Much about Your Carbon Footprint," *Mother Jones*, August 31. <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2020/08/why-do-oil-companies-care-so-much-about-your-carbon-footprint/#:~:text=BP%20is%20near%20the%20top%20of%20the%20list,is%20now%20reckoning%20with—or%20at%20least%20acknowledging—that%20legacy>.
- 8 When theologians have engaged economic underpinnings of ecological destruction, consumption has often been the primary target. Sallie McFague, one of the earliest ecotheologians, has focused on consumerism, correcting her prior assumption that the problem of ecological destruction is not a lack of love of nature but the temptation of overconsumption. McFague, Sallie. 2001. *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis: Fortress: 33. The works of ethicists Cynthia Moe-Lobeda and William T. Cavanaugh emphasize consumption in different ways as well.
- 9 See, for instance, Vinayaraj Y.T., ed., 2022. "New Materialism, Religion, and Theology: Movements Matter," in: *Religion and Society*. Bangalore, India: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS): 161-179.
- 10 See Kruse, Kevin M., 2015. *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. New York: Basic Books.
- 11 For some background on Graham and another leading figure in these developments, Abraham Vereide, see Kruse, *One Nation Under God*, 35-64.
- 12 Cook, John, et al., 2016. "Consensus on Consensus: A Synthesis of Consensus Estimates on Human-Caused Global Warming," *Environmental Research Letters* 11:4 (April 13), <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/11/4/048002>.
- 13 <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>. See also Schwerin Rowe, Terra. 2023. *Of Modern Extraction: Experiments in Critical Petro-Theology*. London: T&T Clark.
- 14 Melissa Denchak, Melissa. 2019. "Fracking 101," April 19. *Natural Resources Defense Council*, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/fracking-101>.
- 15 See, for instance, Tanner, Kathryn. 2019. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; and Harvey Cox, Harvey. 2016. *The Market as God*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. There is little attention to labor in these projects.
- 16 See, for instance, <https://www.religionandjustice.org/interventions-forum-climate-change-and-capitalism>.
- 17 White, Lynn. 1967. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155:3767. March 10.
- 18 See Rieger, Joerg., ed. 2013. *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagements after Long Silence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 19 For more information, see <https://www.religionandjustice.org/solidarity-circles>.
- 20 See the faith and coops toolkit of the Southeast Center for Cooperative Development: <https://www.co-opsnow.org/tool-kit>.

- 21 See, for instance, Henkel-Rieger, Rosemarie. 2023. "Environmental Justice from a Cooperative Perspective," March 23. <https://www.religionandjustice.org/interventions-forum-ecology-alternatives>.
- 22 Powell, Tori B., 2022. "From Pest to Protector: How Beavers Are Helping to Fight Climate Change," CBS News, August 31. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/california-utah-scientists-beavers-fight-climate-change/>.
- 23 See Rieger, Jeorg. 2007. *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- 24 See Banks, Robert. 2008. *God the Worker: Journeys into the Mind, Heart, and Imagination of God*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- 25 Even the middle class is increasingly facing economic hardship and a loss of whatever power it once seemed to have. This is particularly true in the United States but also in most of the other so-called "developed countries." See chapter 3 of Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene*.

About Author

Rev. Dr. Joerg Rieger is the Distinguished Professor of Theology and the Cal Turner Chancellor's Chair of Wesleyan Studies. He is also the founding director of the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice. Previously he was the Wendland-Cook Endowed Professor of Constructive Theology at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. Dr. Rieger is the author and editor of 22 books and over 140 academic articles. His books include *Jesus vs. Caesar: For People Tired of Serving the Wrong God* (2018), *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (with Kwok Pui-lan, 2012), *Globalization and Theology* (2010), *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (2009), *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (2007), *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (2001), and *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity* (2023).

***Poromboke* Ecotheology: Towards a Decolonial and Intersectional Ecotheology**

George Zachariah

Trinity Methodist Theological College, New Zealand

Abstract

Contextual ecojustice theological engagement entails a critical interrogation of mainstream environmentalism and the mainstream ecotheology enterprise. It exposes how religious environmentalism legitimizes and perpetuates the distress of the earth and subaltern and indigenous communities. Colonization of the commons and the commoners is an alternative methodological standpoint to decolonize ecotheology. Using the hermeneutical key of intersectionality, the decolonial journey recognizes and investigates the correlation between environmental injustice and wider social and economic injustices. A decolonial and intersectional ecotheology affirms the epistemological privilege of subaltern social movements—grassroots expressions of planetary solidarity practicing the politics and spirituality of commoning. In the Indian context of eco-casteism, a deeper engagement with Dalit and indigenous environmentalism and struggles is essential for developing a decolonial and intersectional ecotheology. This essay is an attempt to envision a poromboke ecotheology to engage in decolonial and intersectional ecotheological reflections and praxis in India.

Keywords: Religious environmentalism, mainstream environmentalism, mainstream ecotheology enterprise, ecojustice theologies, ecotheology movement in India, commons, commoners, commoning, social movements, decolonization, intersectionality, intersectional environmentalism, planetary solidarity, *poromboke*.

INTRODUCTION

Claiming religion as an essential constituent of public life is a growing trend in our times. It is an affirmation of the role and presence of religions and their theologies and practices in “public.” Asserting religion as a public phenomenon questions the “secularization thesis” and challenges the binary thinking of secular vs sacred. Here religion is re-imagined as a public-oriented religion, supported by public theologies and ministries of public witness that demonstrate the public character of theological discourses and religious presence in society. The attempt to become a public-oriented religion is consciously and creatively articulated through theological reflections on and religious engagements with the most pertinent issues of our times, engaging a wider public, and transcending religious boundaries. This essay is an attempt to critically evaluate religious responses—particularly Christian theological responses—to the environmental crisis and to explore alternative ways of theologizing in the context of the distress of the earth, informed by subaltern social movements.

RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENTALISM: A CRITICAL INTERROGATION

Religious environmentalism and ecotheologies are attempts to revision and reformulate religious beliefs and practices, articulating the theological and scriptural foundations for engaging in creation-care and initiating programs for the restoration of creation. We see the emergence of religious environmentalism in all religious traditions across the world, demonstrating an openness and commitment to incarnate in the public sphere by addressing one of the most pertinent issues of our times.¹

Roger Gottlieb's description of religious environmentalism summarizes the rationale for religious engagement with the ecological crisis:

Religious environmentalism is a worldwide movement of political, social, ecological, and cultural action. As expressions of a particular religion, in ecumenical alliances with other traditions, through loose networks of spiritually committed activists, and in coalitions with secular environmental organizations, hundreds of groups have resisted global warming, destructive economic 'development,' dangerous toxic waste dumps, reckless resource extraction, mindless consumerism and simple waste. In a wonderful pattern of interfaith cooperation, believers have shown that they are capable of actively working with people whose theologies are quite different from their own. Contrary to the widespread secular liberal belief that religion is inherently antidemocratic, religious environmentalists have shown both a broad openness and a deep civic concern.²

However, it is important to engage in self-reflection and interrogate the theology and politics of mainstream ecotheologies and religious environmentalism. For a critical engagement with religious environmentalism, it is important to utilize the three methodological approaches identified by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim for the study of religion and ecology: Retrieval, Re-evaluation, and Reconstruction. Retrieval involves the scholarly investigation of religious sources to clarify religious perspectives on human responsibility towards the community of creation. It further identifies and engages with ecologically sound and rich ethical codes and ritual practices from tradition. Re-evaluation includes an ecological audit of traditional teachings, doctrines, and practices. Reconstruction initiates a creative synthesis or modifications of traditional ideas and practices to suit the challenges of the context.³ Even a cursory study of mainstream ecotheologies and religious environmentalism reveals that their focus is limited to retrieval alone, and as a result, the dominant strands of religious environmentalism follow the politics of mainstream environmentalism in their ecotheological reflections and engagement.

A brief explanation of mainstream environmentalism is important here. Mainstream environmentalism is based on the logic that universal

categories and metanarratives can inspire diverse communities to engage in global initiatives to save the earth. This logic is inherently problematic at least due to three reasons. First, mainstream eco-discourses and actions consider human beings as a homogenous entity—one human family, living in the *Oikos*—our common home—and suggest that we are all affected equally by the ecological crisis. Second, they tend to blame anthropocentrism and anthropogenic (human-induced) emissions for the present crisis, so much so that the present geological age is named as Anthropocene. Such a diagnosis against human beings *per se* can lead to misanthropy and absolve the ecological sins of corporations and industrialized nations. Third, when universal categories and homogenized and standardized perceptions of human beings are employed in the diagnosis of the problem, the solutions are also informed and constructed by the same logic and worldview.

Contemporary mainstream environmentalism is problematic because of two major reasons—the neoliberalization of alternatives, and the monoculture (single-issue) approach. The neoliberalization of alternatives is the process of neoliberal co-optation of radical ecological discourses and practices. The single-issue approach results from the inability or rather a reluctance to recognize how multiple forms of oppression intersect and disproportionately affect communities on the margins.

The post-World War era saw the emergence of new forms of imperial plunder packaged in a new wineskin termed development and prescribed as the panacea for the accumulated ills of the “underdeveloped” nations. The governments in the Global South used “development” and “economic growth” to legitimize the occupation and plunder of their land, forest, and waterbodies and subsistence communities, resulting in the commodification of the earth and the displacement of the subaltern and indigenous communities from their abodes and livelihoods.

Alternative ecological discourses, initiated in the 1970s and 1980s by grassroots social movements, critiqued capitalism for creating poverty and inequality and threatening ecological sustainability. Sustainability thus emerged as the catchword for the survival of life. However, because of the neoliberal takeover of global bodies such as the UN, capitalism’s flourishing—rather than its rejection—became the focus of the project

of sustainability. Through the concept of sustainable development, the neoliberal agenda of co-opting sustainability discourses was achieved by integrating economic growth, eradication of poverty, and ecological integrity as interdependent. The rest, as they say, is history. Environmental activism has thus become meeting targets, changing attitudes, and being responsible consumers—a shift from systemic changes to lifestyle changes.

Religious environmentalism, in general, has been successful in inspiring the faithful to engage in ministries of care of creation. However, they have failed to do an ecojustice audit of their doctrines, scriptures, traditions, and ministries to identify the ecological sins and ecological bankruptcy of their sources and practices. Instead, they valorize the potential of their religions to respond to the environmental crisis and engage in ministries of creation-care in the public sphere. Since they follow the politics of mainstream environmentalism, they are not able to identify the connection between ecological injustice and wider social and economic injustice. A methodological commitment to affirm the agency and the epistemological privilege of the victims of environmental injustice is therefore missing in these mainstream ecotheologies.

Mainstream religious environmentalism is deeply affected by fanatic and fundamentalist groups. We see traces of eco-fascism and green nationalism in the manifesto of the perpetrator of the shooting at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15, 2019. While standing on the foundation of fascism, this manifesto deploys the language of Christian religious environmentalism to greenwash white supremacy and propagate hatred towards people of color. As the manifesto categorically suggests, the annihilation of immigrants and people of color is a prerequisite to ensure the well-being of the planet.⁴ Eco-fascism is a contagious disease in the Western world today. It is based on white privilege, Islamophobia, and xenophobia. Eco-fascists, many of whom are staunch Christians, argue that we cannot love nature and love immigration. According to them, overpopulation, and immigration are the root cause of the current environmental crisis, and hence they propagate xenophobia and oppose just immigration policies. Naomi Klein rightly articulates the theology of eco-fascism thus: “[Eco-fascism] argues [climate change] is God’s will, that there are too many people anyway, so there’s going to be a great

purge and perhaps that's all for the best. It's environmentalism through genocide."⁵

We see the same fascist and supremacist tendencies in Zionist and Hindutva environmentalisms. Zionist environmentalism's greenwashing of occupation is a major hurdle for Palestinian struggles for self-determination and independence. The environmental campaign of Zionist organizations to transform the desolate desert of Palestine has resulted in the "planting of forests directly on sites where Palestinian Arab villages and mosques once stood, thus erasing the evidence of the Arab and Muslim presence in the name of environmental sustainability and Israeli Jewish sovereignty."⁶ As Nur Masalha observes, "In a sense, Zionism's long-lasting battle against the native Palestinians was a battle for more land and fewer Arabs."⁷ This is how Israeli occupation of Palestine is justified by Zionist environmentalism.

Emma Tomalin's book *Biodivinity and Biodiversity: The Limits to Religious Environmentalism*⁸ critically evaluates the dominant trends in Indian religious environmentalism. The environmental initiatives of the Hindu Right in India make it difficult to distinguish genuine concern for the environment from the cultural nationalist politics of the Hindutva Parivar. This critique is further elaborated in Mukul Sharma's *Green and Saffron: Hindu Nationalism and Indian Environmental Politics*.⁹

In his analysis of "eco-casteism," Sharma observes that the history of caste has shaped the history of the environment in India.¹⁰ Sharma elaborates on two distinctive traits of eco-casteism. Firstly, by glorifying the caste tradition in ancient Indian culture, eco-casteism valorizes and legitimizes casteist traditions as organic and natural. Secondly, the casteist logic of eco-casteism perceives impurity and pollution as the major ecological problem of India. As a result, most mainstream environmental movements in India work around issues of impurity and pollution, with the objective to take back India to the ancient days of purity. Here eco-casteism pathologizes the other—Dalits, indigenous communities, immigrants, and minorities—as impure, who are responsible for the ecological degradation of the nation.

Further, eco-casteism perpetuates casteism by attributing ecological motifs and legitimizations to the ideology and structures of casteism. According to O.P. Dwivedi, “the Hindu caste system can be seen as as progenitor of the concept of sustainable development.”¹¹ Brahmanical environmentalism thus offers justification for the caste system through nature and perpetuates the caste system as an ecological model. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s environmental vision is instructive here: “Environment could not be disentangled from the ugliness of caste injustice, the development of rural landscape could not be disconnected from social relations and structures of power in which it was embedded, and ecology had to confront the transitions to democracy.”¹²

While recognizing the significance of religious environmentalism to transform our religious traditions into public-oriented religions by engaging with the distress of Mother Earth, this section has tried to shed light on how religious environmentalism, emerging from locations of power and privilege, legitimizes and perpetuates economic and social injustice in the name of environmentalism through the fetishization of neo-liberal development and globalization, as well as the continuation of environmental racism, eco-casteism, and environmental Zionism.

This critical review of mainstream religious environmentalism is not meant to discourage or reject faith-based eco-justice public ministries. Rather, it is an invitation to be suspicious of the politics of our theologies and faith-based public engagement in order to develop alternative ecotheologies and faith-based eco-justice ministries that are committed to creating a world less contaminated with ideologies and practices of exploitation and exclusion.

CHRISTIAN ECOTHEOLOGY MOVEMENTS: APPROACHES AND TRAJECTORIES

The term “mainstream ecotheology enterprise” is used in this section to signify the dominant strands of ecotheology as a professional guild discipline that theologically legitimizes the social suffering of the earth and earth communities. The mainstream ecotheology enterprise perpetuates the prevailing order that eternalizes the plunder and destruction of the

earth and the social suffering of the indigenous and subaltern communities.

Despite the ecological richness of the Christian faith and its scripture, there are ecotheological standpoints within the mainstream ecotheology enterprise that perpetuate an earth-denying faith and spirituality, inadvertently offering theological and scriptural legitimization to the commodification of the earth. For example, the first creation story has been used to legitimize human superiority over the rest of creation by declaring nature as devoid of intrinsic worth and moral significance. Nature, therefore, is not considered to be included in God's salvific plan and purpose. Rather, it is a bounty given for human use and enjoyment. Devoid of inherent purpose, the vocation of nature is to become "instruments" for human welfare and progress. This is the theological foundation for the commodification and thingification of God's creation. Colonization of the earth and the earthlings is, hence, a theological project.

Such theological legitimizations of the plunder and colonization of God's creation not only deny the environmental crisis but also invalidates all ecological ministries and activism. Affirming the notion of omni-God, the ecotheology of denial and rejection articulates a sovereign God who is in control. The climate crisis is explained as part of God's plan (and as God's wrath), and since God knows how to deal with it, we need to wait patiently for God's time. The eschatological vision of such dominant theology portrays human beings as "sojourners" and "pilgrims" on earth. The restoration of the earth is, therefore, not a Christian responsibility. Our responsibility is to wait patiently for the arrival of the Ark.

It is also important here to interrogate creation theologies. The doctrine of creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) propagates the idea of the creation of the universe by a sovereign God "out of nothing." The European colonial theology of conquest is founded on this Genesis narrative of the primordial earth as "void," "dark," and "deep." The colonial doctrine of *terra nullius*, too, stems from the same doctrine. The land God gave to humans was originally "empty," and therefore available to be claimed, conquered, tamed, and commodified for the civilizing mission of Europe. *Ex nihilo*, thus, became the foundation and justification for missionizing, and colonizing the indigenous communities, and for cultivating their "wild" and "unoccupied" lands for the benefit of

the Christian empire. The doctrine of discovery, which gave European colonizers the right to claim lands they “discovered” and to subjugate the colonized people and the earth, originated from the Papal Bulls that were deeply influenced by this creation theology.

Mainstream creation theology’s suspicion and rejection of the indigenous and subaltern communities’ earth-honoring worldviews and practices of creation-care also played a major role in destroying the human-nature-divine rhizomatic relationship of mutual flourishing. As Zakaria Ngelow rightly observes, “Unfortunately, missionaries did not supply new, Christian values of how to respect nature, but merely desacralized nature in order to reject native religions. Consequently, people lost their respect for nature; forests were damaged, land suffered erosion and rivers have been polluted.”¹³ When Christian missionaries began to build chapels for them, many of the indigenous communities asked them: “The sacred dimension, for us, does not have a wall around it. How are you going to build a place for God if God is in everything?”

The second half of the last century witnessed the emergence of a variety of feel-good ecotheologies. Feel-good ecotheologies reduced the ecological crisis into a matter of personal choice and initiated campaigns such as conservationism, and lifestyle changes. Like mainstream environmentalism, they too use universal categories to explain the ecological crisis, and their diagnosis identifies anthropocentrism and anthropogenic emission as the root cause of the current problem. “We are the culprits, and we are all in the same boat facing the consequences of our sinfulness.” This is the standard diagnosis of feel-good ecotheologies. Feel-good ecotheologies conceal the systemic roots of the ecological crisis by not naming climate change as climate injustice. Their reluctance to use intersectional hermeneutical keys to discern the signs of the times blinds them from seeing how vulnerable communities are disproportionately affected by the ecological crisis, and how disasters aggravate the marginalization and vulnerability of these communities. Differently said, feel-good ecotheologies cover up the correlation between climate injustice, and gender, social and economic injustices, and legitimize and perpetuate the prevailing order.

Mainstream ecotheology enterprise evades or cancels this critique

by celebrating “diversity” through “inclusion.” These celebrations of diversity represent the colonial logic and practice of “add and stir” and co-opt “differences” into the metanarratives of mainstream ecotheology enterprise.

Feel-good ecotheologies, emerging from locations of power and privilege, advocate lifestyle changes through campaigns such as reduce-reuse-recycle. Focusing on our consumption practices, they invite us to become responsible and ethical consumers without disrupting the prevailing neoliberal capitalist order. This moralistic notion of voluntary simplicity reduces a systemic problem into a matter of personal choice, without critically engaging with the privilege and power that the prevailing order provides us to make such personal choices. As Joerg Rieger reminds us, “the myths of individualism and of individual solutions amount to cover-ups of existing relationships, and even protests of individualism often make things worse if they assume that individualism is a real option.”¹⁴ Many of us, in our ecological campaigns, exhort our communities to use carbon-footprint calculators. But we need to remember that the carbon-footprint calculators are invented and promoted by British Petroleum. In short, “saving the planet,” for feel-good ecotheologies, is an apolitical campaign to convert individuals to practice lifestyle changes, without destabilizing the prevailing unjust order.

The past three decades have witnessed the emergence of ecojustice theological movements that challenged the mainstream ecotheology enterprise and offered alternative theological perspectives and praxeological mediations to bring about ecological justice. They are inspired and informed by the Environmental Justice Movement in the US, indigenous and subaltern social movements in the Global South, and liberation, postcolonial, and decolonial theories, and theologies. They recognize the correlation between the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. They examine the connections between women and nature both as sources of life and as exploited by patriarchy, racism, casteism, and capitalism. They contest the claims of neoliberal capitalism and offer alternative ecological and economic visions for healing the earth. They recognize the epistemological agency of subaltern social movements and non-violent activism in developing alternative ecotheologies and

earth ethics. Using the methodological standpoints of political theology, they reimagine ecotheology as a critique of modernity and empire that spearheads a broad planetary movement for social and ecological justice. Going beyond conventional methods of ethics, through prophetic pragmatism and intersectional and interdisciplinary studies, they engage with concrete problems, and offer ethical responses and a planetary ethic for a just and sustainable future.¹⁵

ECOTHEOLOGY MOVEMENT IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

The environmental history of India begins with the indigenous communities and their cosmogonies, theologies, and community practices of creation-care. Land, for them, was sacred. Their panentheistic spirituality and the custom of totem and taboo inspired them to practice a relationship of mutual flourishing with the rest of creation. Colonialism and missionary theology, which imposed an anthropocentric worldview and salvation project on the colonized, condemned the indigenous practices of creation-care as animistic, paganistic, and pantheistic, and cancelled the ecotheological visions and practices of the indigenous and subaltern communities. Colonial extractivism led to the widespread destruction of the commons in the subcontinent. Neoliberal capitalism continued the colonial spirit of conquest through the colonization of *jal*, *jungle*, and *zameen* (water, forest, and land). Life-giving commons became commodities with a price tag, available in the market for corporations to plunder. After Independence, accumulation through displacement was the mantra of this neoliberal trajectory of development and progress. Consequently, subsistence communities that have been living in communion with nature from time immemorial were displaced from their abodes and livelihoods.

The environmental history of India is the history of different environmental justice movements. The colonial, capitalist, and casteist conquest of *jal*, *jungle*, and *zameen* was contested by local communities. The Bishnoi Movement (the 1700s), the Mahar Satyagraha (1927), the Chipko Movement (1973), the Silent Valley Movement (1978), the Jungle Bachao Andolan (1982), the Appiko Movement (1983), the Narmada

Bachao Andolan (1985), the National Fishworkers Forum (1985), the Anti-Tehri Dam Movement (1995), the Plachimada Struggle against Coca-Cola (2002), the Farmers' Strike (2022), and a host of other movements continue to inspire communities to contest the colonization and commodification of the commons and the displacement of subsistence communities. Such movements are also engaged in the process of envisioning, creating, and practicing alternative ecological relationships of planetary justice and solidarity.

The history of the Christian ecotheology movement in India can be traced back to the ecological visions and practices of the indigenous and subaltern communities that embraced Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They resisted Western missionary theologies that desacralized nature and privatized salvation to a single species which claimed to be created in the image of God. One can identify the determination and creativity of these communities to practice a syncretized faith of creation-care. The Christian Ashram movement in the twentieth century practiced ecological living and creation-care. Gandhian environmentalism inspired many Indian Christians to embrace ecological living. J.C. Kumarappa, an Indian Christian economist and a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, has done substantial work to articulate Gandhian environmentalism as an economy of permanence.¹⁶

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Indian ecotheological movement is its consistent attempts to approach the ecological crisis as a justice issue. Addressing the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972, the first major UN conference on international environmental issues, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi said, "We have to prove to the disinherited majority of the world that ecology and conservation will not work against their interest but will bring an improvement in their lives... Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters?"¹⁷ In the wake of the Stockholm Conference, M.M. Thomas observed that, "the churches have also the concern to see that the debate on environment does not become a provincial concern of the affluent rich societies.... It is certainly irresponsible to talk about environment in isolation from the massive world problem of poverty, war, and oppression.... We need to affirm the centrality of man [sic]

with his [sic] sufferings and hope in the environment debate.”¹⁸ This intentional commitment to combine ecological justice and economic and social justice continues to be the distinctive characteristics of the Indian ecotheology movement.

Unlike the mainstream global ecotheology movement, the ecotheology movement in India, in general, has always engaged theologically with the many manifestations of environmental injustice in India. A pristine nature devoid of subsistence communities has never been the subject matter of the ecotheology movement in India. The Indian ecotheology movement carries the legacy of the ecological visions, practices, and struggles of the indigenous and subaltern communities that resisted Western missionary theologies which desacralized nature and the neoliberal capitalist development paradigm that plundered *jal*, *jungle*, and *zameen*, and destroyed their abodes and livelihoods.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of a constructive ecotheology movement in India. Drawing from the wells of Orthodox theology, Paulose Mar Gregorioso offered a robust criticism of Western models of environmentalism and offered new perspectives to theologically engage with the ecological crisis.¹⁹ Sebastian Kappen challenged the ecotheology movement in India to experience the Divine in the terrestrial, and search for eco-Sophia in the scriptures and oral traditions of our neighbors of other faiths.²⁰ K.C. Abraham is one of the first theologians to use the term eco-justice in the global ecotheology movement. He proposed an ecotheology of “conservation, not consumerism, need, not greed, enabling power, not dominating power, and integrity of creation, not exploitation of creation.”²¹

Bastiaan Wielenga has articulated succinctly this alternative earth politics. “It is not either anthropocentric or bio-centric or eco-centric, but the challenge we are facing is to learn to be deeply concerned about human life—both individually and collectively—and about all other forms of life and about the planet earth, about society and nature, about human history and the cosmos, about the struggle for justice and water harvesting, about red and green.”²² Drawing from her close association with grassroots social movements, Gabriele Dietrich has consistently challenged and inspired Indian Christians to engage in ecotheological reflections at the

interface of class, gender, and caste.²³ Aruna Gnanadason has advocated the rights of the oppressed and sufferers of injustice, especially women and the earth, and critiqued the obsession of Western ecotheology with misanthropy.²⁴ Wati Longchar broadened the scope of Indian ecotheology movement through his theological and ethical reflections on land from a tribal perspective.²⁵ Drawing from liberation theology's methodological standpoints of confronting injustice and establishing transformation, Geevarghese Mar Coorilos developed a robust green theology of liberation that challenges other social evils such as casteism as well.²⁶

The Christian ecotheology movement in India continues this legacy to develop ecotheological reflections at the interface of different distinctive Indian realities. Christ Sumit Kerketta works in the area of Adivasi ecotheology with special reference to the development and ecological crisis in Jharkhand. Baiju Markose continues his research in the field of postcolonial explorations into subaltern religiosity and ecological practices.²⁷ Zubenthung Humtsoe focuses his attention in developing a Naga Christian earth ethics, informed by indigenous struggles against extractive capitalism.²⁸ Aravind Jeyakumar is doing significant work in the area of ecojustice reading of the Hebrew Bible.²⁹ Vinod Wesley's research is to develop a Dalit Christian climate ethics and his primary text is the Tamil Nadu Women's Collective, a movement of Dalit women in Tamil Nadu.³⁰ This is an incomplete list, and it shows that the Indian ecotheology movement is flourishing.

COMMONS AND COMMONING: TOWARDS A PLANETARY ENVIRONMENTALISM

In the mainstream theological and ethical reflections on different social issues, we tend to develop our arguments without any critical engagement with the dominant narrative and analysis of the problem. We have already seen how corporations invest and engage in the work of constructing and spreading perceptions, diagnoses, and solutions that would help them to maximize their profit. This calls for alternative problematizations of the issue.

The crisis that we face today is the consequence of the colonization of the commons. Commons are nature's gift to the community of creation.

In India, they are known as *jal*, *jungle*, and *zameen*. Traditional commons signify an organic connection between land, water, forest, and subsistence communities that are marginalized by the prevailing social order. Commons are intimately and organically intertwined with the struggles, aspirations, and joys of these vulnerable communities as they sustain each other. The legal systems of nation-states do not define or regulate this rhizomatic relationship between the commons and the commoners. Market economies have no sway over their bond with the commons. Commons are therefore alternative spaces and relationships that contest the prevailing rules and ethos of the system by practicing and propagating alternative politics, ethics, and spirituality of an economy of life.

Massimo De Angelis defines commons as social systems formed by “a commonwealth, that is, a set of resources held in common and governed by a community of commoners who also engage in the praxis of commoning, or doing in common, which produces their lives in common and that of their commonwealth.”³¹ Commons is a paradigm—a paradigm of organic socioeconomic and ecological relationships, social ethics, shared socioeconomic practices, and a covenant of shared responsibility and obligation. The politics and ethics that is practiced in the commons offer moral and spiritual energy to believe in the possibility of an alternative to the prevailing order. This is what sustains indigenous and subaltern social movements today.

The British enclosure movement is the precursor of de-commoning whereby pastures, forests, and waterbodies used by subsistence communities were stolen and declared private property by kings, the aristocracy, and the landholding nobility. As David Harvey rightly observes, the enclosure movement was “accumulation by dispossession,” which resulted in the alienation and pauperization of subsistence communities.³²

Colonial legal systems declared the commons as *terra nullius* and occupied them as the eminent domain of the colonial state. Alien legal and administrative systems were imposed and enforced, desecrating the commons by destroying the earth-healing sacred ethos and practices of indigenous and subaltern communities. Through colonial forest Acts, the jungle, which was previously considered to be the organic abode of the

commoners, became forest—a stockpile of resources under state control. In India, forest Acts resulted in the exclusion of commoners from their traditional habitats in the name of conservation, social forestry, biological reserves, and natural parks.

Since the commons defies the logic of market control and state control, it embodies an alternative paradigm to the prevailing models of socio-economic relations. The commons perspective, therefore, has the potential to disrupt and destabilize the prevailing dominant perceptions, diagnoses, and solutions, and to reimagine our theological vocation in solidarity with subaltern commons and the subaltern commoners in their creative resilience to challenge the forces that continue to desecrate the sacred commons.

The commons paradigm invites and enables us to discern our vocation as commoning—to practice alternative socio-ecological and economic relations that flourish and celebrate life. Commoning is reclaiming our rhizomatic relationality with nature and each other by coming out of the imperial worldview of conquest and plunder. Commoning is an organic activity that breathes life into the commons. Commoning requires a context of mutuality and relationality, and it is not possible without the annihilation of systems and practices of exclusion and domination. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act 2006 (commonly known as the Forest Rights Act or FRA) is an example of commoning in India. The FRA is the outcome of the long struggles of indigenous communities to recognize their rights to live off the forest and to use and govern forest resources, including the right to hold forest lands that they had been using, residing in, or cultivating. The FRA recognizes pre-existing rights and empowers them to manage their customary resources. Commoning is, therefore, the work of planetary solidarity to redeem the commons and the commoners from colonizing systems and practices of domination, conquest, commodification, and exclusion.

DECOLONIZING ECOTHEOLOGY: TOWARDS AN INTERSECTIONAL ECOTHEOLOGY

The commons paradigm and the politics of commoning invite us to explore alternative methodological standpoints and hermeneutical

keys in our ecotheological reflections. Intersectionality is a theoretical category developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. It refers to the ways in which different aspects of a person's identity (gender, caste, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation) can expose him/her/they to overlapping forms of discrimination marginalization, and privilege. The intersectional approach asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression. As Crenshaw explains, intersectionality is "basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.... Intersectionality is simply about how certain aspects of who you are will increase your access to the good things or your exposure to the bad things in life."³³ The politics of intersectionality was best articulated by Martin Luther King Jr decades before even the term intersectionality was coined. "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?"³⁴

Today, environmental activists, particularly indigenous and subaltern communities, use intersectionality in their environmental theories and politics. Leah Thomas defines intersectional environmentalism "as an inclusive approach to environmentalism that advocates for the protection of both people and the planet. It argues that social and environmental justice are intertwined and that environmental advocacy that disregards this connection is harmful and incomplete. It focuses on achieving climate justice, amplifying historically excluded voices, and approaching environmental education, policy, and activism with equity, inclusion, and restorative justice in mind."³⁵

Intersectional environmentalism further exposes how privilege and environmentalism intersect. Living sustainably can also be a matter of privilege. Before we engage in moralistic discourses on ecological virtues like reduce, reuse, recycle, and sustainability, it is important to think about intersectionality and privilege first. An intersectional approach informs us that the distress of the earth and the earth community is essentially a justice issue because those who are least responsible for the crisis are forced to bear its gravest consequences. Oppressions are not isolated because they are interlinked and cannot be solved alone. Intersectional environmentalism exposes the link between oppressive toxins and

toxic oppressions and investigates the correlation between colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, casteism, ableism, and the environmental crisis.

Intersectional environmentalism identifies how injustices happening to marginalized communities and the earth are interconnected and exposes the issue of social inequality. Justice for people and the planet is the focus of intersectional environmentalism. Environmental racism is widespread in BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) communities. It refers to any policy or practice that differentially affects or disadvantages individuals, or communities based on race or color. BIPOC communities are disproportionately exposed to greater levels of pollution, toxins, and natural disasters and are excluded from policymaking bodies. They are forced to live in closer proximity to environmentally hazardous locations such as mines, waste incinerators, and landfill. They are uprooted from their abode as their land and waterbodies are stolen from them for mining, logging, and development projects. Women, disabled people, climate refugees, and gender and sexuality minorities are also disproportionately affected by the ecological crisis.

It is in this context that we need to search for methodological guidelines to decolonize ecotheology. Decolonizing ecotheology is profoundly political as its primary task is to expose and contest those parts of mainstream ecotheology that refuse to perceive the environmental crisis as a justice issue. Decolonial ecotheology is an intersectional ecotheology, and it explores how the care of creation is integrally connected with the care of subaltern and indigenous communities. It examines how dominant expressions of creation-care are envisioned and practiced at the expense of communities at the margins. It further investigates why certain communities are unrepresented or silenced in mainstream ecological discourses and actions. It exposes the correlation between social location and access to ecological wellness and well-being. It also evaluates the racial, caste, gender, and ethnic bias of various ecological philosophies, ideologies, theologies, and movements. A decolonial intersectional ecotheology is essentially a transgressive and transformative theology.

Cynthia Moe-Lobeda proposes three guidelines for decolonizing ecotheology. 1. Elevate the subjectivity and moral standing of the other-

than-human and re-embed the human as a part of rather than apart from the rest of nature; 2. Account for the epistemological inadequacy of reason alone by practicing ways of knowing beyond reason, informed by the cosmogonies, and practices of creation care of indigenous and subaltern communities; and 3. Reclaim the epistemological sources that colonialism dismissed, such as earth's elements and other-than-human creatures, and subaltern social movements.³⁶ Drawing inspiration from these guidelines, let us explore the decolonizing task of ecotheology in India.

MOVEMENTS MATTER: TOWARDS A DECOLONIAL ECOTHEOLOGY OF PLANETARY SOLIDARITY

Decolonial ecotheology entails a methodological transgression. It recognizes the epistemological agency of grassroots social movements because the oppositional knowledge that emerges from these movements not only destabilizes the prevailing order but also decolonizes the commons through resistance and re-creation. Emerging from the emancipatory politics of commoning of grassroots social movements, decolonial ecotheology contests the “mainstream ecotheology enterprise” and its theological methods.

There have been attempts in the past to affirm subaltern social movements as “theological texts” in developing alternative ecotheologies and earth ethics.³⁷ It is important for us to recognize the recent attempts to engage theologically with grassroots social movements. Recognizing the Environmental Justice Movement as a site of “normative creativity,” Willis Jenkins affirms its theological significance by identifying how it deploys rights, sacralize land, and reimagine the human in ways that would utterly reconstruct the basis of politics and ecotheology.³⁸ In the spirit of decolonial thinking, theologies that arise in communion with grassroots social movements emerge from the open wounds created by the conquest and plunder of the commons and commoners. They are not “special-interest” theologies or theological fads. As Joerg Rieger observes, “Rather than being fleeting fads linked to short-term upheavals, these theologies may well be among the few that are able to resist shallow fads and short-term trends because they are dealing with the deeper problems and struggles of our world and because they are providing real

alternatives.”³⁹

Subaltern social movements are the *locus theologicum* of a decolonial ecojustice theology. How do we substantiate this claim? Subaltern social movements are epistemological communities that contest the hegemonic knowledge systems with their alternative epistemology emerging from the interface of ethics, politics, and knowledge. As knowledge, politics, and ethics are integrally connected in the political praxis of the subordinated others and their movements, their vantage point of the reality and vision of alternatives can provide a better perspective that has the potential to interpret and radically transform the prevailing social, economic, and ecological relations. The mediation of the collective testimonials of social movements is crucial not because they present an unmediated version of the “truth” but because they have the potential to destabilize dominant regimes of truth and pave the way for alternative praxis that is life-affirming.

Theology, as collective autobiographical testimonials of communities at the grassroots, is not the story of heroes and heroines. Rather, it is the communal testimonials of dangerous memories of erasure. By invoking these dangerous memories, subaltern social movements contest the dominant episteme and the regime of truth. As sites of life-flourishing politics, subaltern social movements are alternative texts. Contemporary social movements are hence theological texts that can inform and initiate decolonial ecotheological reflections and praxis. As texts of alternative politics, and sites of radical social transformation, subaltern social movements invite those who engage in Christian ecotheological reflections to be in solidarity and conversation with these movements.

Social movements, as agents of counter-hegemonic praxis, are partakers in the salvific project of decolonization where the gospel is happening today. So, the challenge that social movements pose requires a radical shift in our theological method. It invites us to rethink the “given” sources for doing theology. It transforms theology into a transformative political praxis initiated by “the wretched of the earth” to enable the blossoming of the redeemed earth in our own particular local contexts. It provides us with alternative experiences of theophanies to discern who God is, and where God is present in our times, and what God is doing in

our midst. Wherever the victims of colonization and capitalist plunder develop an oppositional consciousness and collectively struggle to reclaim their selfhood and decolonize their commons, we see the presence of the Divine in a special way enabling life to flourish with abundance.

TOWARDS A *POROMBOKE* ECOTHEOLOGY: DECOLONIZING ECOTHEOLOGY IN INDIA

Problematizing and critiquing different strands of mainstream environmentalism, this essay has suggested colonization of the commons and commoners as the root cause of the current environmental crisis. The essay has further identified the work of commoning for the flourishing of life, initiated by different subaltern social movements, as an alternative ecojustice politics of planetary solidarity that is happening in India today. Similarly, the essay has exposed the inherent problems with the mainstream ecotheological enterprise and affirmed the significance of emerging ecojustice theologies that are decolonial and intersectional.

At the same time, it is important to critically engage with the commons and the commoning paradigm to avoid the possibility of them becoming universal theories and models without respecting the distinctiveness of particular commons and the practice of commoning in those communities. Mainstream discussions of the commons and commoning are limited to the neoliberal colonization of the commons, proposing commoning as a countercultural activity against the logic and onslaught of market forces. This is true even though the commoning paradigm affirms the importance of an intersectional approach. However, a conscious attempt to reflect upon the commons and the commoning paradigm from the point of the victims of casteism seems to be rather absent. This calls for a deeper engagement with the struggles of the commons and commoners in solidarity with Dalits and other subaltern communities. This concluding section is an attempt to share some tentative reflections on a *Poromboke* ecotheology, privileging the wisdom and politics of the “polluted” commons and the “impure” commoners of the *porombokes*.

As Nityanand Jayaraman observes, “*Poromboke* is a Tamil revenue category of medieval agrarian origin that denotes lands set aside as commons for the shared use by communities.... *Poromboke* commons

were governed by two rules: they could not be purchased or sold as they were communally held, and they could not be built upon. These lands were untaxed and yielded no revenue to the crown.”⁴⁰ This ethics of *poromboke* posed a challenge to the British colonial project in India. Over the years, the meaning of the word has changed to facilitate the conquest of the land and the people by colonial and capitalist forces.

T.M. Krishna’s Chennai *Poromboke Paadal* begins with the following lines:

Poramboke (n.) /por-um-bokku/

1. places reserved for shared communal uses (waterbodies, grazing lands . . .)
2. a pejorative intended to demean and devalue a person or place.⁴¹

This metamorphosis of the *poromboke* commons from one that was formerly a thriving place of for land, water, forests, other-than-human beings, and humans into an “impure” space inhabited by “polluted people” is the history of *poromboke* in South India. Etymologically, the word *poromboke* comes from two Tamil words: *puram* (outside) and *pokku* (books of account). *Poromboke*, therefore, signifies community land which could not generate any revenue for the state. The English East India Company and the British Raj named it “wasteland” because, within the logic of colonialism, any resource that could not generate a revenue/profit was considered “waste.” Today, *poromboke* is commonly used as a derogatory word in Tamil and Malayalam to demonize and ostracize both the commons and the commoners who are worthless and untouchable to market and casteist forces.

Porombokes are the abodes of subsistent subaltern communities such as artisans, fishers, farmers, grazers, and gatherers. They provide water, fuel, fodder, and medicine for those living beings that live there. Naming this sacred space of life and livelihood a wasteland is equal to canceling the right to life of the commons and commoners. Enclosure and erasure of the *poromboke* commons and the dispossession of all *poromboke* commoners is the history of colonialism and neoliberal capitalism in India.

Recent years have witnessed a renewed engagement with *poromboke*,

thanks to the “Save Ennore Creek” campaign. Ennore is a tidal wetland located in North Chennai. From the 1960s, in the name of development, a host of power plants, refineries, and ports were established there. In Jayaraman’s words, this is what development brought to Ennore: “Riverbeds have become choked with coal ash, estuarine waters slick with oily effluents from the refineries, and tidal backwaters lost to port infrastructure.”⁴² Nevertheless, fishers of the region showed the nerve to expose the violence of development and reclaim their *poromboke* and their right to life and livelihood. The “Save Ennore Creek” campaign has brought together a host of movements and organizations to stop the colonization of the commons and commoners. Their revalorization of *poromboke* has resulted in the emergence of intersectional environmentalism.

The “Save Ennore Creek” campaign and the Chennai *Poromboke Paadal* affirm the importance of the *poromboke* identity as distinctive for a new politics, ethics, and spirituality, celebrating the organic relationship between the commons and commoners:

For one who sold the waterbodies, the lake is mere *Poramboke*
 You and I, then; what are we to him?
 We are *Poramboke* too
 I certainly am *Poramboke*.⁴³

Environmental philosophies and activism in India have always been caste-blind. As Mukul Sharma rightly observes, “The history of caste has shaped the history of environment in some prominent ways... [C]aste created a concept of natural and social order where people, place, occupation, and knowledge are characterized by pollution and ritual cleanliness; where bodies, behaviours, situations, and actions are isolated, ‘out of place,’ and ‘untouched,’ because of deep-down hierarchical boundaries.” Sharma further observes that caste shaped environmental attitudes of the community and enabled the dominant castes “to appropriate and exploit natural resources by segregating and subordinating certain sections of the population.”⁴⁴ The metamorphosis of the term *poromboke* into places and bodies that are polluted, worthless, untouchable is hence an example of eco-casteism.

Corporate occupation of the *poromboke*, according to eco-casteism,

is a civilizing and ecological mission that helps in the restoration of the land to its original state of purity. Cleansed of its accumulated impurity contracted through the “touch” of the impure castes, the *poromboke* is now being converted into Special Economic Zones for corporate plunder and made pure by uprooting the impure commoners. For the state, the subaltern communities who still live in the region are just collateral victims in the battle for development and progress. There are two coal power plants, coal stockyards, coal ash dykes, a petroleum refinery, and a petrochemical industrial estate in the Ennore region. The lament from the *poromboke*, “We can’t breathe,” exposes the casteism inherent in the “ecologically sustainable capitalist development paradigm.”

The Dalit and subaltern resolve to reclaim the *poromboke* is informed and inspired by the historic struggles of Dalit communities for dignity, human rights, and environmental justice. The Chavdar Tale Satyagraha (popularly known as Mahad Satyagraha) is one such struggle. Dalits were not allowed to drink water from the common water tank of the temple at Mahad in Maharashtra because of their “impurity.” On March 20, 1927, Dalits, under the leadership of Babasaheb Ambedkar, marched toward the tank and drank water from it. The dominant caste Hindus were infuriated by this act, and they purified the tank using cow-urine, cow-dung, and ghee. Ambedkar returned to Mahad on December 25, 1927, and he exhorted the people, “Let’s destroy the authority of ancient Hindu scriptures that are born in inequality. Religion and slavery are not compatible.”⁴⁵ And they burned the Manusmriti, the scripture that legitimizes and perpetuates untouchability, caste privilege, caste violence, patriarchy, and eco-casteism.

This excerpt from the speech of Ambedkar succinctly summarizes the politics of decolonial and intersectional environmentalism. “We are not going to the Chavadar tank to merely drink its water. We are going to the tank to assert that we too are human beings like others. It must be clear that this meeting has been called to set up the norm of equality.”⁴⁶ Even after ten decades of this speech, in 2022, a nine-year-old Dalit boy in Rajasthan was beaten to death by his own teacher for touching the water pitcher. The water crisis is more than an issue of scarcity and accessibility. It is a justice issue. Our struggles for environmental justice should be

linked with the struggles for the annihilation of casteism and the rejection of scriptures that perpetuate it.

A *poromboke* ecotheology is a decolonial and intersectional ecotheology that attempts to develop alternative eco-consciousness, and eco-activism in the context of eco-casteism from the vantage point of the *poromboke* commons and the *poromboke* commoners. It is caste-blindness of the dominant ecotheological reflections that necessitates the need for a *poromboke* ecotheology. Caste-blindness of the mainstream ecotheologies is not an innocent deficiency or omission; rather, it exposes the social location and the caste privilege of the ecotheology movement in India.

What are the methodological standpoints of the *poromboke* ecotheology, and what are its epistemological sources? A *poromboke* ecotheology is an intersectional theology that emerges from the subaltern resolve to problematize the ecological crisis at the interface of caste, patriarchy, and neoliberal capitalism. Informed and inspired by Dalit theology, *poromboke* ecotheology originates from the pathos of the community, and hence *poromboke*—the living and breathing community at the margins, condemned as polluted, impure, worthless, and waste by casteist, corporatist forces—is its loci. *Poromboke* is a site of contestation—contestation of different ecological visions, practices, virtues, ethics, projects, and policies. These contestations not only expose and challenge the casteist, patriarchal, and neoliberal politics of the colonization of the *poromboke*, but also proposes alternative ecological visions, politics, and ethics. For *poromboke* ecotheology, annihilation of caste, and the redemption of the earth are integrally connected.

A *poromboke* ecotheology begins with a deeper engagement with Dalit environmental traditions around the commons. Dalit ecological visions emerge from their constant interaction with the commons. However, there is no valorization of the commons in Dalit environmentalism. Sadly, for them, the commons and their labor are closely connected with caste exploitation. It is caste that mediates the relationship of Dalits with the commons. The Dalit experience with animals provides us insights into Dalit environmentalism. Their kinship with the black buffalo is a reason for its lower status in the hierarchy of animals in a casteist society like India. Their food habits, particularly their liking for non-vegetarian food

such as beef, have been condemned as the greatest ecological crime by ecocasteists for whom vegetarianism and cow vigilantism are the purest ecological virtues. In short, a *poromboke* ecotheology begins with a deeper knowledge of Dalit environmentalism manifested in their relationship with the commons. Dalit spirituality, rituals, and religiosity are resources that can inform a *poromboke* ecotheology.

Dalit battles for commons rights are another key source for *poromboke* ecotheology. Dalits, in general, are landless people. Land reforms in India have always been caste-biased. Access to common waterbodies such as wells, tanks, and rivers has been denied to them in the name of purity and pollution. Water is a marker of caste, and it is integrally connected with social hierarchy.

A *poromboke* ecotheology further draws from the theoretical contributions of Dalit intellectuals such as Babasaheb Ambedkar. What we find in their writings is a rejection of eco-casteist environmentalism, and an attempt to look at nature intersectionally. Such theoretical mediations help us to understand with clarity how Dalits approach the environment and the commons at the interface of caste and other ideologies and practices of exclusion.

The Bible is an important source for a *poromboke* ecotheology. For Dalits, the Bible becomes the “Word” when read in the community in the light of the community’s experiences of exclusion and resistance. As Monica Melanchthon rightly observes, “Dalit biblical interpretation and the material force that grips the Dalits are grounded in a materialistic epistemology that is characterized, among other things, by its location of truth not in a world beyond history but indeed within the crucible of historical struggles.”⁴⁷ Biblical hermeneutics, thus, becomes a political activity of resistance and liberation.

Reformulation of the doctrines and moral axioms informed by the above-mentioned sources and resources of Dalit and subaltern communities is a major task of a *poromboke* ecotheology. *Poromboke* is not only the site of the polluted commons and impure commoners who routinely experience exclusion and exploitation, but also a site of contestation of the logic of the empire, patriarchy, and casteism—an ecclesia happening in our

times. For a *poromboke* ecotheology, commoning is more than protecting the commons from colonial conquest; rather, commoning is the organic politics of annihilating all forces, systems, cultures, traditions, and ethics that practice and perpetuate hierarchical relations socially, economically, and ecologically.

Hagar's story from the Hebrew Bible is a paradigmatic text for a *poromboke* ecotheology. The intimate violence on a slave woman's body and the dispossession of their inheritance rights are the reasons for their desert experience and their cry of thirst. The story of Hagar and Ishmael provides us with a new lens to understand the current environmental crisis. It exposes the correlation between patriarchy, racism, casteism, accumulation, and ecological injustice. Hagar's story reveals the social location of God. The colonized and the dispossessed experience the Divine as wells and springs of water in the deserts. Their cry of thirst is more than an innocent cry of helpless and passive victims seeking external intervention to "save" them. Rather, it is the public display of the inherent sinfulness of the prevailing order that kills the springs of life-giving water and water protectors, and the resilience of the communities to decolonize and redeem the earth.

Hagar's vision of springs of water in the desert empowers us to believe that authentic and life-nourishing *porombokes* are possible only outside the logic and projects of conquest, control, patriarchy, capitalism, and caste supremacy. Hagar invites us to create and be part of alternative *porombokes* that flourish life and disrupt the colonial, capitalist, patriarchal, and casteist projects of our times. This is the task of the decolonial and intersectional ecotheology movement in India today.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The following nine books, brought out by the Religions of the World and Ecology series of the Harvard University Press, provide a robust understanding of ecotheological attempts in different religious traditions to engage with the environmental crisis. Evelyn, Mary T., and Duncan Ryūken Williams, eds. 1998. *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*; Evelyn, Mary T., and John Berthrong, eds. 1998. *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth and Humans*; Hessel, Dieter T., and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds. 2000. *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*;

- Chapple, Christopher K., and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds. 2000. *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water*; James Girardot M., and Xiaogan Liu, eds. 2001. *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*; Grim, John A., eds. 2001. *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*; Chapple, Christopher K., eds. 2002. *Jainism and Ecology: Nonviolence in the Web of Life*; Tirosh-Samuelson, Hava., eds. 2003. *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed Word*; and. Foltz, Richard C, Denny, Frederick M., and Baharuddin, Azizan., eds. 2003. *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*.
- 2 Gottlieb, Roger S. 2006. *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 113.
 - 3 Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and John Grim. 2017. "The Movement of Religion and Ecology: Emerging Field and Dynamic Force." In *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, (eds.) vol. 7, edited by Wills Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim: 8. London: Routledge.
 - 4 <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/how-white-supremacists-wield-environmentalism-to-mask-racism-25376>.
 - 5 Quoted in Corcion, Adrian. Apr. 30, 2020. "Eco-fascism: What It Is, Why It's Wrong, and How to Fight It." Teen Vogue. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200621163553/https://www.http://teenvogue.com/story/what-is-ecofascism-explainer>.
 - 6 Pellow, David Naguib. 2018. *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press: 120.
 - 7 Masalha, Nur. 2012. *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*. London: Zed Books: 62.
 - 8 Tomalin, Emma. 2009. *Biodivinity and Biodiversity: The Limits to Religious Environmentalism*. London: Routledge.
 - 9 Sharma, Mukul. 2012. *Green and Saffron: Hindu Nationalism and Indian Environmental Politics*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
 - 10 ———. 2017. *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
 - 11 Dwivedit, O. P. 1996. "Satyagraha for Conservation: Awakening the Spirit of Hinduism." In *The Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb: 159. London: Routledge.
 - 12 Quoted in Sharma, Mukul. *Caste and Nature*: 130–1.
 - 13 Ngelow, Zakaria. 2012 [Unpublished paper]. "Three Rivers in Sulawesi," A Paper Presented at the EATWOT General Assembly, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
 - 14 Rieger, Joerg. 2022. *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 6.
 - 15 Several publications during the last two decades initiated this shift in the ecotheology movement. They include Reuther, Rosemary R., 1993. *Gaia and God: Eco-feminist Theology of Earth Healing*. London: SCM; Boff, Leonardo. 1997. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press; Rasmussen, Larry. 1998. *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press; Gebara.

- Ivone. 1999. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis: Fortress; McFague, Sallie. 2000. *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press; Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia. 2013. *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*. Minneapolis: Fortress; Jenkins, Willis. 2013. *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press; Northcott Michael. 2013. *A Political Theology of Climate Change*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Northcott, Michael and Peter Scott, eds., 2014. *Systematic Theology and Climate Change: Ecumenical Perspectives*. London: Routledge; Bauman, Whitney. 2014. *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic*. New York: Columbia University Press; Harris, Melanie. 2017. *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*. New York: Orbis Books; Ji-Sun Kim, Grace and Koster, Hilda P. 2017. *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women & Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press; O'Brien, Kevin J. 2017. *The Violence of Climate Change: Lessons of Resistance from Nonviolent Activists*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press; Keller, Catherine, 2018. *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*. New York: Columbia University Press; Conradie, Ernst M., and Hilda P. Koster. 2018. *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change*. New York: T & T Clark; Mendoza, Lily and George Zachariah., eds., 2022. *Decolonizing Eco-theology: Indigenous and Subaltern Challenges*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- 16 Kumarappa, J.C., 1945. *Economy of Permanence: A Quest for a Social Order Based on Non-Violence*, Varanasi: Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan. Also see Victus, Solomon. 2003. *Religion and Eco-economics of Dr. J.C. Kumarappa: Gandhism Redefined*, Delhi: ISPCK.
 - 17 <http://lasulawsenvironmental.blogspot.in/2012/07/indira-gandhis-speech-at-stockholm.html>
 - 18 Thomas, M.M. 1972. "The Concern for Cleaner Environment." *The Guardian* 4, no. 24, Jun. 15: 1–2.
 - 19 Gregorios, Paulos Mar. 1978. *The Human Presence: An Orthodox View of Nature*. Geneva: World Council of Churches.
 - 20 Kappen, Sebastian, 1988. *Samskrithi* (Malayalam) Kottayam: Ascend Publications.
 - 21 Abraham, K. C. 1996. *Liberative Solidarity: Contemporary Perspectives on Mission*. Tiruvalla: CSS Books.
 - 22 Wielenga, Bastiaan. 1999. *Towards an Eco-just Society*. Bangalore: Center for Social Action: 137.
 - 23 Dietrich, Gabriele. 2001. *A New Thing on Earth: Hopes and Fears Facing Feminist Theology: Theological Ruminations of a Feminist Activist*. Delhi: ISPCK.
 - 24 Gnanadason, Aruna. 2005. *Listen to the Women, Listen to the Earth*. Geneva: WCC Publications.
 - 25 Longchar, Wati. "Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education: An Indigenous Perspective." Kolkatta: PTCA. Sceptre. 2012.

- 26 Nalunnakal, George Mathew. 1999. *Green Liberation: Towards an Integral Ecotheology*. Delhi: ISPCK.
- 27 Markose, Baiju. 2018. *Rhizomatic Reflections: Discourses on Religion and Theology*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- 28 Humtsoe, Zubenthung. 2022. *Colonization of the Commons: Reimagining Tribal Earth Ethics*. Mokokchung: TDCC Publications.
- 29 Moniraj, Aravind Jeyakumar. 2021. *Yahweh at Work: The Significance and Function of the Theme 'Creation' in Isaiah 40–48*. Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag.
- 30 Wesley, Vinod. 2021. *Church and Climate Justice*. Delhi: ISPCK.
- 31 De Angelis, Massimo. 2019. "Commons." In *Pluriverse: A Post-development Dictionary*, edited by Ashish Kothari et al.: 124. New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- 32 Harvey, David. 2007. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 159.
- 33 <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>.
- 34 Martin Luther King Jr. 2011. *All Labour Has Dignity*, edited by Michael K. Honey, and King Legacy. Boston: Beacon Press: 175.
- 35 Thomas, Leah. 2022. *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet*. New York: Voracious: 32.
- 36 Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia. 2022. "Method in Ecotheology: A Perspective from the Belly of the Beast." In *How Would We Know What God Is Up To? An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'*, edited by Ernst Conradie, and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda: 115–40. Cape Town: AOSIS Books. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK295.06>.
- 37 Zachariah, George. 2011. *Alternatives Unincorporated: Earth Ethics from the Grass Roots*. <https://politicaltheology.com/enemies-of-humanity-political-theology-from-the-pipelines/>. London: Equinox Publishing.
- 38 See <https://politicaltheology.com/enemies-of-humanity-political-theology-from-the-pipelines/>
- 39 Rieger, Joerg. 2019, 569. "Grass Roots Social Movements." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, edited by William T. Cavanaugh, and Peter Manley Scott: 558–71. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- 40 Jayaraman, Nityanand. "The Perils of Climate Activism." <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/survivance/410014/the-perils-of-climate-activism/>.
- 41 Ambedkar, P.G. "The Poromboke Song." <https://www.newsclick.in/poromboke-song>.
- 42 Jayaraman. *The Perils of Climate Activism*.
- 43 Ambedkar. *The Poromboke Song*.
- 44 Sharma. *Caste & Nature* xxi.
- 45 Quoted in Daniel, Monodeep. 2022. "Ambedkar's Vision of Democracy: Are We Committed to It?" In *Bangalore Theological Forum* vol. LIV, no. 2, Dec.: 219.
- 46 Quoted in Siddharthya Sawapan, Roy. Apr. 18, 2016. <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/the-lake-of-liberation/296954/>.

- 47 Melanchthon, Monica Jyotsna. 2012. "Unleashing the Power Within: The Bible and Dalits." In *The Future of the Biblical Past: Envisioning Biblical Studies on a Global Key*. Semeia Studies, edited by Roland Boer, and Fernando F. Segovia. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 66: 49.

About Author

George Zachariah serves the Trinity Methodist Theological College, Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand as Wesley Lecturer in Theological Studies. He has also served the faculty of the United Theological College, Bangalore and the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, Chennai. His publications include *The Word Becoming Flesh* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2022), *Faith-based Health Justice: Transforming Agendas of Faith Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021, co-editor); *The Life, Legacy, and Theology of M.M. Thomas* (New York: Routledge, 2016, co-editor); and *Alternatives Unincorporated: Earth Ethics from the Grassroots* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Land, Development, and the Neoliberal Agenda

Vasundhara Jairath

Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Guwahati

Abstract

With the release of the latest changes proposed to the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2006 earlier this year, known as the Draft EIA 2020, civil society and communities likely to be impacted by it have taken issue to its pro-business stance. This shift in policy needs to be understood as yet another step that seeks to institutionalize processes of capital accumulation already under way under the neoliberal state. This commentary focuses on the processes, mechanisms, and legitimating discourses used to roll out changes in legal structures and state policy relating to land acquisition, 'development' projects, and setting up of business ventures. It points to the moral force of a discourse of development in furthering the agenda of capital accumulation and argues that the ideological character of the mainstream notion of development can only be challenged by articulating a counterhegemonic conception of development that demands people's needs are met through a system of production that places their needs at the center and not that of capital.

Keywords: Development, law, neoliberalism, land acquisition, displacement, capital accumulation, EIA 2020.

INTRODUCTION

The Draft Environment Impact Assessment Notification 2020 (from here on EIA 2020) has caused a stir in civil society and amidst people threatened by forcible land acquisition and displacement in the name of 'national development'. The notification is the latest in changes to state policy in order to facilitate the smooth functioning of businesses and corporations, removing bureaucratic hurdles along the way that allegedly slow down and complicate establishment of new industries. Introduced in the midst of the pandemic caused by the spread of Covid-19, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) released the draft on its website on March 23, 2020, a day after a nationwide lockdown was announced by the government. It gave people a span of just over three months to read and respond to the draft notification, raising questions over the government's willingness to enable citizen participation in discussions about the proposed changes. The notification was widely criticised for its pro-business bias.

The trend towards increasingly molding state policy in favour of business has a long history and can be seen clearly in the growth of the neoliberal state in India since the late eighties and early nineties. The neoliberal turn has been accompanied by an ever-closer association between development and the interests of capital, even as the discourse of development continues to wield a powerful moral force in a country of the Global South as India. In this article, I examine the mechanism through which the system is being constantly shaped to better serve capital, with the assistance of the neoliberal state and riding on the back of a development discourse. It points to the ideological character of a mainstream notion of development, whose close relationship to neoliberal capitalism can only be challenged by an ideologically motivated counter-hegemonic conception of development. Such a conception must not only place the rights of the most marginalized sections of society at the center, but also forcefully argue for a distinctly anti-capitalist notion of development for it to work.

EIA 2020 AND EASE OF DOING BUSINESS

The changes introduced by EIA 2020 to the 2006 EIA Notification have been widely reported. It excludes a significant number of projects (classified as 'B2' under EIA 2020) from requiring public consultations or preparation of an EIA report, presumably on account of their smaller size or 'lesser' impact. Such projects do not need to be placed before an Expert Appraisal Committee, but merely scrutinized based on an Environment Management Plan, to be prepared at the behest of the project proponents themselves. This has been termed Prior Environmental Permission (prior EP), to distinguish it from Prior Environmental Clearance (prior EC) that requires conducting public hearings and constituting an expert committee to assess the EIA report in order to ascertain whether or not the clearance may be given. It reduces the notice period to be given to affected people and interested persons to respond to the draft EIA report from 30 days to 20 days. It makes provisions for post-facto clearance for projects that began without the requisite clearance or permission. It strips agency from citizens to file complaints, and sets in place rules that only allow for complaints filed by official authorities or project proponents themselves to be taken cognizance of. It monetizes violations such that on payment of a fine, the violation is undone. The Notification itself was originally only published in English and Hindi, until the Delhi High Court directed the MoEFCC to publish the Notification in the 22 languages under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. This further allowed for extension in the period given to people to respond, originally set at June 30, and send in their comments and responses to EIA 2020 to August 11.

The proposed changes in the Notification need to be understood as merely one more in a series of onslaughts on working people, cultivators, producers and their resources, as well as the natural resources of the country to place them in the hands of profit-mongering corporations and private entities. Just in April this year, a new application for coal mining was approved in Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve in eastern Assam over videoconferencing, even as bad press has since served to halt further clearances. This fast pace of approving clearances and paving a smooth way for businesses to thrive, grow, and expand is not a coincidence, neither an anomaly. Instead, it is part of improving the Ease-of-Doing-

Business (EoDB) Index that has been propounded by the World Bank. From holding a rank of 142 (out of 190 countries) in 2014, India has jumped 79 positions to the 63rd rank in 2019. The index is meant to be a reflection of the extent to which regulations for businesses are ‘simplified’ including procedures of clearances and permissions fast-tracked through single-window clearance systems.

The index that has been propounded by the World Bank, an institution whose mandate concerns itself with questions of development, draws the strong link between doing business and doing development. While India has witnessed a huge jump in the EoDB Index since the BJP-led NDA government first came to power in 2014, it is by no means a new concept, nor a recent priority for this government, neither is it specific to the current ruling dispensation. The pace of forced land acquisition, dispossession and displacement of local communities and transfer of resources from the poor to the rich has systematically been on the rise since the 1990s, following liberalisation of the economy. The EIA 2020 can be understood as a further step in the institutionalization and legalisation of processes of capital accumulation already under way. It should therefore come as no surprise that the current government proposed changes to the law that will simply facilitate this process. Instead, it is well worthwhile examining the processes, mechanisms, and legitimating discourses used in order to roll out changes in legal structures and state policy relating to land acquisition, ‘development’ projects, and setting up of business ventures.

DEVELOPMENT AND CAPITAL

The neoliberal state draws a natural and already assumed relationship between business ventures and the project of ‘development’, a project that continues to wield significant moral force in a developing country as India. As all businesses create employment, require one or another form of infrastructure depending on the nature of business initiative, and earn profit and therefore, generate revenue — all three seen as important constituent elements of development—the correlation between the establishment of new businesses and a push to development comes to be seen as somewhat logical, if not obvious, to the neoliberal state. A strong consensus is built up around this particular and historical interpretation

of development that draws on the popular, even though sufficiently debunked, trickle-down theory based on neoclassical economics. It is through such reasoning that the EoDB Index becomes a legitimate index of not merely favourable conditions for economic growth but for the possibilities for development itself.

The collapsing of ideas of economic growth with development is an old trend, and one that has been widely critiqued. However, in this renewed correlation between business and development, what lies at the center of the correlation is discourses of employment generation, building up of infrastructure and generation of wealth (and therefore, reduction of poverty). A consensus is thus built up in the dominant sections of society as well as aspiring and ambitious sections eager for a share of the capitalist pie. In a deceptive move, what are only the requirements of capital—labor, infrastructure and generation of profit—are sold to us as indices of ‘development.’ An examination of the motivations and mechanism through which land acquisition and subsequent dispossession takes places leads us to the needs of capital, and not an imperative for development.

In her important work on labor in the ‘land grab’ debate, Tanya Li (2011) reminds us of the inevitability of the failure of policies for poverty reduction that are based on capital’s growth. This is due to capital’s need to reduce input costs, depress rents and price of land, maintain low wages in a race to the bottom in order to maintain comparative advantage and remain competitive in the open market. It is not the work of capital to raise the standard of living of workers. Its principal motor is profit maximization. In conceding the work of development to capital, neoliberal states engage in a deft act of ensuring the interests of capital while attempting to legitimate it through the discourse of development.

Rendering the idea of development void of any commitment towards the particular needs of the most impoverished sections of society, for whom precisely development is a question, it is molded ever more closely to serving the needs of capital. However, the idea of development must remain central in the building of consensus in this story. Even as the notion of development is emptied of meaning within a neoliberal state, it continues to be relevant as a central legitimating discourse. It provides justification for the range of exceptions we see introduced into a number

of laws that put in place protections for people impacted in different ways by large projects of capital accumulation, whether it is EIA 2020 or the Ordinances introduced to amend the new Land Acquisition Act 2013 (RFCTLARR 2013).

In a somewhat circular logic, projects ‘declared’ as public purpose projects or projects of development, for which land is to be acquired through state intervention, compulsorily, and governed by the law, the public character of the projects is itself invoked, most of the time implicitly, in order to justify the exceptions and exemptions. In other words, the state creates an exception, owing to the public character of a project, in a law that was put in place to govern public purpose projects. The larger work of ‘development’ as contributing to the ‘progress’ of the nation then comes to form the legitimating basis for bypassing protections put in place, protections now read as obstacles to the onward march of development. In so doing, the state wilfully negates the very basis of laws like the new Land Acquisition Act 2013 or provisions for Environment Impact Assessment that were put in place precisely to regulate the setting up of development projects, or industries more broadly, where the two are unassumingly equated with one another.

THE MORAL FORCE OF DEVELOPMENT

If we are to examine the nature of activities for which exceptions are increasingly introduced by the state, we arrive at a list that is closely related to creating conditions conducive to capital, in other words, incentivizing capital. This includes facilitating the smooth transfer of land to corporations, industrialists, or land developers, by removing encumbrances along the way, whether it is in the form of conducting Social Impact Assessment studies to determine the public character of a project, amongst other things, or delimiting the list of projects that can be included as public purpose projects. In each of these instances the active involvement of the state ensures land at depressed prices, thus reducing input costs. Where Special Economic Zones, or Export Processing Zones are created, there is the added benefit of already developed infrastructure in place, thus subsidizing the cost of production. Further, as Sampat (2010: 169) points out, competitive wages, tax and tariff rebates, fiscal incentives,

infrastructure developed on lands of people acquired by the state for 'public purpose' together make for the profit earned by corporations as they compete in the global market.

Thus, the range of exception and exemptions introduced by the state merely facilitate profit maximization of corporations—a process we are told contributes to the development of the nation. If we were in fact to call a spade a spade, and demand exceptions in the law for the purpose of profit maximization alone, and not development, the indignant outcry would be far more widespread than it already is. Development, therefore, continues to wield a moral legitimating force that is powerfully employed to build a consensus in society to mold policies increasingly in the interest of capital. Without the discursive power of development, the delicate hegemony of capitalism is likely to fall apart a lot more easily.

The moral force of a discourse of development, even as the concept itself has been emptied of a praxis aimed at marginalized sections of society, continues to play a central role in enabling firstly, the active intervention of the state in processes of land acquisition, and secondly, the molding of laws and state policies in favor of capital. Land hungry corporations, and emphatic proponents of a laissez-faire free market system, *need* the state to ensure competitive prices, a role that is legitimated through the discourse of development. In this conception of development, people whose lands are to be taken, laws that ensure protections and safeguards to them, laws that protect the environment, and grievance redressal mechanisms, all come to constitute hindrances that need to be removed. It is for this reason that both the EIA 2020 and the Ordinance to amend the new Land Acquisition Act 2013 (which finally had to be abandoned owing to widespread resistance by farmers across the country), introduced changes to issues relating to whose complaints will be taken cognizance of. Where public consultations with the people and with civil society were incorporated into the law, projects seen to be of 'strategic importance' were exempted from having to undertake this exercise. What was a recognition of the sovereign ability of people to participate, to be jury, and to have a say in the work of development, is now rendered into an obstacle to be cleared out at the soonest possible.

The discourse of development then maintains a central role in undergirding capitalism, particularly in the Global South where the notion has maximum purchase. Its relationship with strengthening imperial capitalism has had a long history, beginning with the modernization theory that egged the Third World on to 'catch up' with the West by accepting Western capital and technology in the form of 'aid', in exchange for greater control and infiltration of Third World economies. However, the sixties and seventies were equally a period when the development agenda was appropriated by the Third World in a collective anti-imperial assertion, whether through carrying forward the mobilization of the Bandung Conference of 1955, or the establishment of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in 1964. However, in its current neoliberal avatar, the discourse of development, employed by postcolonial states themselves, continues to draw on the moral force of development as a notion, while handing over the work of development to capital.

It is precisely this moral force that allows for capital to be invested in areas seen as backward, marked by the lack of infrastructure, markets, and high revenue generation, that in fact provides cheap land, thus attracting capital in the first place. Similarly, it is directed towards regions inhabited by communities seen as backward, in need of development, where poverty needs to be alleviated, to which capital is only attracted to the extent that they make for 'dispensable' populations, often with limited legal entitlement to the land, if at all. Capital then is neither concerned with development, nor uplifting the conditions of the populations deemed backward, nor providing public infrastructure to citizens, a point driven home by Li (2011) in her examination of the role of labor in land dispossession. It is states that are responsible for the work of development and accountable to its citizens. In framing exceptions and exemptions to laws that pertain to governing development projects, states engage in a suave act of trickery that employ the public character of 'development' to bypass the very laws set in place to govern public projects. This is done to further relinquish the actual work of development to capital, which cannot thrive as it does without the state and its use of the discourse of development.

AN IDEOLOGICAL COUNTER

This calls for a demystification of ‘development’ as a discourse that serves to further the neoliberal project, and a re-appropriation of the notion by those in whose name ‘development’ is carried out time and again. Given its ideological association with the interests of capital, a counter-discourse must necessarily be imbued with an anti-capitalist ideological orientation, where a depoliticized notion of development as doling out handouts to marginalized populations is easily appropriated by neoliberalism. A counter-hegemonic discourse of development, in order to challenge this mainstream notion of development, must put forward a discourse that demands people’s needs are met through a system of production that places their needs at the center and not that of capital, and that produces wealth through relations of equality, collaboration and democracy and protects the autonomy and self-determination of people to articulate, design, and enact the work of development. It is only then that the firm nexus between a development discourse and neoliberal capitalism can be brought down.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This article was first published in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 56, No. 6. February 8, 2021. It is reprinted with the permission of the publisher and the author.

REFERENCES

- Li, Tanya, 2011. “Centering Labor in the Land Grab Debate,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol 38, No 2: 281-298.
- Preeti, Sampat. 2010. “Special Economic Zones in India: Reconfiguring Displacement in a Neoliberal Order?” *City & Society*, Vol 22, No 2: 166-182.

About Author

Vasundhara Jairath is Assistant Professor in Development Studies at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, Guwahati, Assam.

Religion, Ecology, and the Commons An Indigenous Perspective

M. Zubenthung Humtsoe
Clark's Theological College, Nagaland

Abstract

In the context of the colonization of indigenous culture and identity and their natural environment, a search for an alternative not only determines who owns natural resources but also builds a framework for resource management on the basis of the community's rights over these resources. This alternative is to find ways and means in protecting the natural environment and people's cultures and traditions, or, in other words, reaffirming the moral values inherited from the past. It also challenges us to reflect our moral actions towards Mother Earth. A question posed in this context is: What is the ethical discernment towards the groaning creation? By using indigenous ethics as an alternative model, it will be possible to critique the prevailing form of capitalist society while also addressing the earth's cries and attempting to develop an ethics of coexistence and correlation with all of nature. That is where the identity and spirituality of the indigenous people lie: everything is interrelated, and interdependent, which results in coexistence, as everything is sacred/holy. Therefore, preserving social and cultural norms links the indigenous generations and provides them with a shared identity—the narratives of oneness and belongingness. Such eco-

spirituality has been the belief system of indigenous ancestors, which ultimately led to the conservation of the ecosystem without it being abused and misused.

Keywords: Indigenous culture, indigenous commons, communing, colonization, earth community, indigenous ethics, and eco-justice.

INTRODUCTION

David Bollier describes 'the commons' as:

- A social system for the long-term stewardship of resources that preserves shared values and community identity.
- A self-organized system by which communities manage resources (both depletable and replenishable) with minimal or no reliance on the market or state.
- The wealth that we inherit or create together and must pass on, undiminished or enhanced, to our children. Our collective wealth includes the gifts of nature, civic infrastructure, cultural works, and traditions, and knowledge.
- A sector of the economy (and life!) that generates value in ways that are often taken for granted—and often jeopardized by the market/state.¹

From the precolonial period to the present, the colonization of indigenous commons in India has resulted in inequalities, displacement, and dislocation of indigenous peoples through the alienation of land, forests, and waterbodies, as well as various market-led developmental projects. The current hegemonic neoliberal policies encourage free markets and deregulation as a means of achieving global democracy and economic development. However, eliminating the indigenous commons regime will only undermine social relations and cultural patterns that prevent any group within the community from monopolizing power and imposing its will upon others. This deprivation and threat to indigenous people and their culture is an example of India's neoliberal capitalist

developmental mode, which continues to colonize the indigenous life-world and deny their existence.

In contemporary reality, the negative impact on indigenous communities' economies, environmental pollution and degradation, disregard for people's rights, and lack of access to assets are all examples of human deprivation. The forceful expansion of industry, large-scale manufacturing factories, dams, and other developmental activities uproot and colonize indigenous people's land-based economies and communities. The colonization of indigenous people's lands and resources by the market-driven economy of globalization and development escalates displacement and division among people. Indigenous resources are often viewed as instrumental in generating wealth, progress, and development.

ECOLOGY AND INDIGENOUS COMMONS: TRADITIONS AND CULTURES

The word 'ecology' is derived from the Greek word '*OIKOS*' (house or household), and it, therefore, refers to the "earthly habitation which human beings share with other living beings and specifically to the mutual relations between organisms and their environment" (Nirmal, 1991). This ecological concern is not only for the present generation but for all future generations (Deut. 30: 19). The theology of ecology or ecotheology emphasizes the commandment of love, that is, "living in harmony with nature, an inevitable outcome of the genuine reverence, love, and concern for all God's creation" (Raj, 1991). This love is not optional, nor should it be interpreted as showing love only to humans, as Christ's command to love our neighbor includes the world of nature.

Indigenous eco-justice represents a web of interrelationship of all beings, which becomes the true essence of life. It is about a web of relationship between God, humans, and creation, and it rejects the human idea or concept of a 'ruler' or 'master,' instead viewing them as coworker and servant. Thus, all living creatures, including humans, are meant to work toward maintaining balance and harmony, which are to be seen as the ultimate concern of all beings. Tribal tradition rejects the superiority of humans over the rest of creation. Instead, it emphasizes the communal ownership of nature; tribal ethics, religion, culture, and other social

aspects are intertwined with the natural environment. Recognizing the central role of creation is vital in the quest for an ecotheology of creation, which can provide a meaningful response to the pressing ecological crisis of our time.

INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND VALUES: EARTH COMMUNITY

The history of indigenous peoples around the world shows that they have similar values, cultural practices, traditional values, and also “similar philosophies regarding land and their relationships to the land and the rest of the environment/creation” (Sowunmi, 1994). However, it is a fact that the so-called superior cultures (colonizing powers), by taking advantage of their primitive lives and also their ignorance, have imposed their culture and practices upon these people (indigenous groups). The foreign domination of indigenous properties and resources has resulted in vast environmental destruction and the displacement of indigenous people. It has also involved the imposition of socioeconomic and political control over the people and the administration. In the midst of the struggle for ecological resistance against the dominant class of society, the practice of justice and peace of indigenous people “emerge almost naturally out of a self-imagining as part of the whole, as part of an ever-expanding community that begins with family and tribe, but is finally inclusive of all human beings and all of creation” (Tinker, 1994).

Additionally, the indigenous religious experience includes the relationship of the Creator with the creation, which includes values such as “a sense of community, responsibility for others and for the Earth, a sense of sacredness in the world, a deep valuing of aspects of life other than material goods” (Wright & Kill, 1993). As members of the earth community, indigenous people regard or accept all creatures, great and small, and inorganic matter, as having worth that is directly related to their participation in the community of life. So, any harm toward the creation results in chaos within indigenous beliefs; in other words, chaos comes upon the people “when the harmony between nature and humans is in ruins.” Hence, communal spirit and kinship bonds are very strong within indigenous communities; individualism, selfishness, and

greed are discouraged, as “compassion and justice and the mending of the community thus envelop more than human members” (Rasmussen, 1998). The philosophical and ethical basis of many indigenous societies include ecological limits to growth and respect for natural resources belonging to the earth, other species, and future generations.

Sacredness of Mother Earth: Indigenous People's Spirituality

Indigenous people are concerned with the ways they live within a given setting and map out the productive activity that connects humans with nature through responsible living. Their understanding of the ‘Sacredness’ of ‘Mother Earth’ binds humans and non-humans together through their ritual practices. So, their spiritual relationship with nature is “typically associated with the adoption of the native person by the spiritual power believed to reside within the animal, fish or plant” (Grim, 1994). These ritual practices and ceremonials highlight the interdependence between non-humans and humans. In an indigenous community, this relationship is not focused on the self, but rather on an embedded relationship for the good of others too. They recognize the self-interest in nurturing others so that the other will be available to be hunted, fished, or gathered. This interest promotes the continuity of the country as a living system; it is understood to be moral. The continuity of life, sense of locality, belonging, and care are fostered through the nurturing and provisioning of the environment. Indigenous cultures exhibit a heightened sensitivity and reverence towards all forms of life, including the natural environment, fostering a meaningful engagement with the ecological challenges and environmental exploitation.

Indigenous Ethics on Eco-Justice: Community Participation

In a world marked by alienation, colonization, and marginalization, the practice of indigenous communities exerting control over each other gives way to a focus on mutual respect. The rights of indigenous people to have access to their land and properties were recognized at the ‘World Convocation’ (March 1990), which was convened by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Seoul, Korea. It affirmed that “the land belongs to God; [and for the need] to join in solidarity with indigenous communities struggling for their cultures, spirituality, rights to land and sea; with peasants, poor farmers and seasonal agricultural workers

seeking land reform; and to have reverence for the ecological space of other living creatures” (Dorr, 1991). In fact, this affirmation of justice, peace, and integrity of creation and people’s cultures for indigenous people emphasizes the “inseparable connection between the struggle of indigenous peoples for their land and their struggle to retain their culture and spirituality” (Dorr, 1991). Indigenous environmental ethics engages in humanistic activities and links them to the environmental situation, “reflecting both an adaptation to diverse bio-regions and as awareness of spiritual dependence upon the local resources as guides into a sacred bond” (Grim, 1994). It is an approach to show how the relationship between continuing sources (nature) and brief life (humans) is maintained through the everyday activities of the world of which they are a part of.

Indigenous ethics speak to a world of sentient beings whose passion for life is sustained in “connection” (Rose, 1999); this type of eco-consciousness demonstrates a relationship that is at once practical and spiritual. The ethics of indigenous people encompasses imitation, participation, self-discipline, and the unity of life, wherein human existence is situated within a wider reality of sacred places, inter-species communication, and manifold powers. This ethics of life aims to follow the realization of destiny by all creatures without disrupting other forms of life (Deloria, 2005). So, in many indigenous communities, nature is often represented as “enspirited or divine” (Callicott, 2012). In fact, indigenous cultures and practices foster harmony between humankind and the natural environment and also provide a healthy concept of relating to one another.

INDIGENOUS ECOTHEOLOGY AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Indigenous people are known to be close to the natural environment, and their worldview emphasizes the interrelation, interconnection, and interdependence of the Supreme Being, humans, and nature. Therefore, “examining and understanding tribals’ worldview is critical for articulating a relevant and meaningful ecotheology” (Vashum, 2012). In the context of colonization through developmental projects that result in ecological degradation, ecotheology needs to argue for the preservation of tribal commons and sociocultural and religious traditions, which are rooted in

a love for nature. Tribal ecotheology has to encompass tribal worldviews, myths, stories, folklore (Sacred Space), ethics, and spirituality (rites and rituals). Above all, tribal theology is concerned with the tribal person before God (Murry, 1998). Doing ecotheology has to be contextual and liberative, and it cannot be devoid of the rich cultural and traditional values, as “indigenous theology affirms, that the world is our home; it is the home where God, spirit, human and the whole creation live together as a universal family” (Vashum, 2012). In fact, there will be certain elements within the tribal culture and tradition that may not be related; however, theology starts with people’s roots of their identity—where did they come from? Where do they belong? and so on.

In this regard, Vashum writes:

It [tribal theology] is an affirmation and celebration of dignity and worth of every created being. Tribal theology is then an affirmation and celebration of the beauty of God’s creation. Tribal theology affirms and celebrates the beautiful cultures of tribal people. Indeed the beauty of God’s creation lies in diversity and not in uniformity. It is precisely on this ground that we reclaim the cultural past of indigenous people rather than condemn them to be evil and devilish.²

Therefore, ecotheology is an affirmation of their identity, culture, and historical traditions. In the context of neoliberal capitalist society, it is also a revamping of their sociocultural, political, and even religious traditions. Tribal ecotheology is not about denouncing other theologies as vague or irrelevant, but it is an expression or interpretation of tribal culture, values, and norms that are always based on the land or Mother Earth. It takes seriously the issue of tribal identity, equality, and liberation of tribal people and Mother Earth from the hands of colonizers.

AN INDIGENOUS ANALYTICAL MEDITATION: COMMONS AND COMMONING

Politics and economy coexist and influence each other on a daily basis in modern societies. A Christian perspective on this relationship emphasizes the inseparability of ethics and economy, and also the necessity of dialogue between theology and politics. The engagement with these issues becomes a vital public role and responsibility for

churches and Christian theology. Christian ethical analysis is an invitation to inter-religious openness and cooperation with all people of goodwill, to live according to one's own values while respecting and strengthening common global values, i.e., life, together with the whole of creation.

Defined Boundaries: Indigenous Common Identity and Commoning

The indigenous identity is rooted in the practices and ideology of commoning since "commons are not a utopian alternative to systems based on private property" (Wall, 2017). In fact, the tribal as an individual has no identity apart from his/her community and the natural environment, because tribals have a life of sharing and participation in all dimensions, without which they have no meaning or purpose in life. This commoning is rooted in the cultural environment created by the collective life of the people. For tribal communities, forests, biodiversity, and other natural resources are crucial to their identity, economy, and social system. According to their thinking and practices, the environment is an ecosystem, with the human community at its center, and "land is one of the most important economic resources of the people; their livelihood depends mainly on cultivation."³ It is evident that the tribal tradition was founded on the belief that this sustenance had been passed down from their ancestors, and so, it has to be used judiciously and preserved for posterity. This belief and understanding has created a symbiotic relationship between them and nature, as common-pool property is not a resource but a form of ownership.

In the understanding of commons and commoning within the indigenous worldview, Thanzauba views the natural world as sacred for tribals, not because their religion is centered around a temple or a church or a particular shrine, but because the whole earth is sacred and holy, animated by spirits. For them, the whole earth is a temple where they worship God.⁴ And so, the commons can be owned by a community and managed collectively or unowned by all. The entire inhabitable earth is viewed as a source of unity and a symbol of identity; in other words, it emphasizes that their "identity had already been formed before they arrived in the region so they could not create a new one after they reached the region" (Fernandes, 2011). So, the tribals' view of common and commoning becomes the major concern in responding to colonizing activities, as commoning is often invoked as a basis for claiming a common history-affiliation-identity as well as in mobilizing people for a common

cause and a shared future. Land is not only a space but also a place that gives identity to the tribal community. Since the community owns the land, individual personal identity is subordinated to community identity. Land becomes an integral part of the tribals' identity and commoning with one another. As an indigenous thinker remarked:

The land is my backbone I only stand straight, happy, proud and not ashamed about my color because I still have land. The land is the art I can paint, dance, create and sing as my ancestors did before me. I think of land as the history of my nation... we will be the lowest people in the world, because you have broken down my backbone, took away my arts, history and foundation. You gave me nothing. Without land I am nothing.⁵

The tribal common identity and commoning are based on interdependence and inter-relatedness with the commons as “a commons is a resource + a community + a set of social protocols, and the three are integrated, interdependent whole.”⁶

Common Landholdings: Rules and Local Conditions

The ancestral indigenous society is made up of a close-knit group of people who adhere to rights, customs, and discipline, ensuring that “each family got an equal share over the plots allotted to them” (Fernandes, 2011). The tribes were expected to respect as well as fear the laws of the land, since “the customary law ensured the protection of sacred species and regulated the use of ones that were not sacred” (Fernandes, 2011). Traditionally, the tribal village-state is an independent unit with rights of sovereignty, and for which the commons “include all the resources managed under the community tradition or the customary law.” The village's well-being is administered under the leadership of elders elected by the people, and freedom of speech and justice is practiced without any discrimination (Mozhui, 2004). Bollier rightly remarks that “the commons must have within its very structure the capacity to assure its own longevity and self-protection. It must be able to protect its resources and community norms (Bollier, 2014).

Customary law prohibits villagers from misusing any portion of land, as they believe that it will “incur the curse of God—the true owner.”⁷ Subsequently, apart from the lands acquired by a clan, no individual is allowed to claim the common lands, which are kept for *jhum* cultivation, hunting, fishing, food gathering, or timber collection, and for its common usage.⁸ Pangernungbahas has said that the accessible common land is used by

villagers to collect materials for the construction of houses and to meet everyday domestic needs. However, the permission of the village council is sought when it is used for commercial purposes.⁹

Tribal Commons Arrangements: Community Politics

Throughout history, tribals have affirmed the goodness of inter-relatedness and the worth of creation as ordained by God. They depend completely on nature for their sustenance, maintaining a close balance between people and ecological needs. Their culture, beliefs, and practices are developed to maintain a balance between human and ecological needs (Longchar, 2012). The tribal worldview of collective ownership and co-operation in their jobs such as agricultural pursuits, and sharing of their products, is antithetical to the capitalist, market-oriented, consumerist worldviews, and “it does not give a free hand to any individual to accumulate land but ensures that the requirements of each and every family are met” (Fernandes, 2011). In fact, the nature of tribal societies is defined by the social structures of kinship rather than by the importance of the individual, and so, for tribals, the “inhabitants and habitat were one inseparable whole. All were neighbours, all belonged together, though this didn’t rule out resentment and dissent.”¹⁰ As a result, the tribal communitarian worldview dissolves any dichotomy between an individual and the community, land, and human. In fact, there is no distinction between sacred and secular, religious and non-religious, and material and spiritual. Everything is interrelated and interdependent¹¹, with the conviction that the earth belongs to the Creator. Therefore, acquired land and forests come directly under the ownership of the whole village community.

It is said that tribal sociocultural life is communitarian in nature. Tribal communities have never believed in the concept of personal ownership of anything that they get from the commons. Furthermore, the moral values maintained by tribal people are quite remarkable. Listening to the voice of conscience and adhering to it are some of the basic values found in tribal cultures even today.¹² As Bollier says, “indigenous people tend to see their resources and knowledge as embedded in a community of reciprocal care and group stewardship” (Bollier, 2014). At the same time, tribal societies recognize the uniqueness and personal identity of individuals. And these sources of individual identity and power are found in the relationship between the individual and the spiritual world. Thus, the elements of personality consist of a sense of dependence on the spiritual realm for all power as well as the sense of personal ability that arises from that relationship with the spiritual forces.¹³

Monitoring: Tribal Economy and Politics

The tribals are economically self-sufficient because they have their own cultivable land and forests. The commoning of natural resources is based on the barter system, and the economic system is carried out on the basis of moral value rather than on materialism. In fact, tribals emphasize the inherent relationship between human and non-human creation. According to K.P. Aleaz, the tribal concept of history and time are interlinked to and rooted in creation, and “the axis of the concept of time is the celebration of nature’s life-cycle. People move along with the soil and surrounding environment.”¹⁴ Arguably, the land and its resources, which sustain and nourish all beings and give them an identity and selfhood, are not merely a justice issue to be set alongside other justice concerns but the very foundation of history, existence, and identity. Tribal people see land and forest as God-given. They treat the forest as their ancestral home, since it has been their permanent abode. There is an emotional attachment between a tribal and the forest. Bollier observes that,

Indigenous peoples’ commons tend to reflect a perception of the earth as an animate being; a belief that humans are in a kinship system with other living things; a perception of the land as essential to the identity of the people; and a concept of reciprocity and balance that extends to relationships among humans and animals, including future generations, and between humans and the natural world.¹⁵

This bond of kinship is indivisible in tribal cultures and practices, and it is sustained by “daily practices of work, learning and sharing knowledge, of tradition, story and song, proverb, ritual, and prayer.”¹⁶ Lovely Awomi James acknowledges that, “it is true that the worldview, culture and the overall spirituality of the tribals could be considered more eco-friendly and more congenial in the structural gap between the human-nature interrelationships owing to the reality that the tribal life is radically rooted in and dependent upon the world of nature.”¹⁷ Hence, for tribals, land and forest cannot be owned but only used for the common good. Thus, according to the traditional worldview, land cannot be bought or sold as it provides identity to the tribal community.

Conflict Resolution: Tribal Customary Laws

Tribal customary laws, or unwritten laws, have emanated out of people’s customs, traditions, and usage.¹⁸ In other words, “the commons is a practical paradigm for self-governance, resource management and living

well” (Bollier, 2014). Customary law provides regulatory principles for organizing, administering, and maintaining social relationships in tribal societies, and it ensures the protection of sacred species and regulated the use of ones that are not sacred. The laws of inheritance and those governing human relationships are well-defined in their society. Land and other resources, whether they are owned by an individual, a family, a clan, or a village, are “managed according to the community-based customary law.”¹⁹

Tribal laws and customs are concerned with the organization of social relationships with a view to attaining common welfare, justice, and liberty within the community and the state,²⁰ and customary law has played a vital role in maintaining this balance between individual and communal landholdings. In fact, tribal customary laws are not just merely a set of rules; they also contain an ethical force that serves to provide justice and ensures the well-being of the community. Though these laws are unwritten, the goals are to manage people’s behavior in the functioning of the political institution so that the entire village or community can benefit. Thus, tribals are governed by the people rather than the government, and customary laws and ethical values are honored, respected, and obeyed, and the villagers participate in the decision-making process for the welfare of the community.

COLONIZATION OF THE TRIBAL COMMUNITY AND THEIR COMMONS

Colonization of the commons by destroying the sacred communion between nature and ecological ethnicities has always been a strategy of the dominant sections to amass wealth. Dominant doctrines propagate the view that the centralized regulation of the commons by governments or corporations is inevitable to protect the commons. In fact, for the past three decades, the Lotha Naga people in the state of Nagaland in north-east India have been struggling against the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Ltd (ONGC) in Changpang, which has been exploring and extracting oil and gas from their land. What we find here is a conflict between two different worldviews: colonization of the commons for profit and development and the tribal land ethics of the Lotha Naga.

After initial exploratory efforts in the mid-1980s, production began at the Changpang field in March 1991. In less than a year, ONGC officers and staff were threatened with death by the banned National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), an insurgent group. Simultaneously, the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) asked ONGC to close down its operations in the areas. Its contention was that under the provisions of Article 371A of the Constitution, ownership of natural resources within Nagaland lies with the people, and hence ONGC has no right to extract crude from the oil fields that fall under the state's geographical jurisdiction. Unable to ensure security to the staff and bowing to pressures from the NSF and the NSCN, the Nagaland government asked ONGC to cease operations in the state in May 1994. In the aftermath of this, oil has been spilling out from the abandoned oil fields in Wokha village (Changpang) for more than 16 years, contaminating soil and water and turning a cluster of neighborhood villages into a combustible zone.

Asserting Lotha Tribal Nagas' Right over Oil Resources

In 1991, the Changpang Land Owners' Union (CLOU), which included the residents of Changpang and Tssori villages, registered a complaint with the Nagaland government. Its concern was that the state government had granted ONGC a Petroleum Exploration License (PEL) without obtaining free, prior, and informed consent of the community, as required by national and international laws on the rights of indigenous people. In fact, ONGC never signed an MoU or lease agreement with CLOU, the Changpang Village Council, or the Lotha Hoho (the highest parliamentary body for the tribe). And no Petroleum Mining Lease (PML) was issued, even though this is legally required. According to CLOU, the license was therefore illegal.

CLOU felt that the profit-sharing arrangement in the MoU between the Nagaland government and ONGC was unfair to the community. It argued that the compensation was inadequate since their land and natural resources had been totally destroyed by the exploratory works and that nothing could be cultivated on the sites anymore. CLOU demanded the the state government share 20 percent of the royalty with the community, instead of the meager 2 percent guaranteed by the MoU. As neither ONGC nor the state government responded to CLOU's complaints, the NSF

organized protest rallies and general strikes in the state, expressing their concern over the illegal extraction of oil and natural gas from Nagaland in general and the Changpang-Tsori area in particular.

People's Rights over Natural Resources as a Community Right

A decade after ONGC's Petroleum Exploration License was withdrawn, discussion over reopening oil exploitation in Nagaland resurfaced. The Nagaland government, which is consistently in fiscal deficit because of insufficient revenue generation, depends on the Government of India for running its activities. The Union government has put pressure on the state government to generate revenues from the abundant natural resources available in the state. The Nagaland State Human Development Report 2004 states that for the state to develop, its natural resources have to be harnessed. The most promising resource is the Schuppen belt's oil (Changpang oilfield). On its side, ONGC has been putting pressure on the state government to ensure that it recovers access to this abundant oil reserve.

However, local people deplore the manner in which India's oil giant had duped the landowners by saying it would provide hospitals, educational institutions, marketing centers, and so on, once the exploration began. All these commitments were never been fulfilled, and this made the Lotha people, particularly the landowners, to lose trust in ONGC. People are now demanding that all the necessary offices and refinery units be located in the state, because this will not only encourage the local people and landowners but build trust in the people of the state.

The Oil Spill Rehabilitation Struggle

A more recent phase in the Lotha Nagas' assertion of their rights has been centered on a controversy about widespread oil spills from the wells earlier operated by ONGC. The villagers allege that when ONGC closed work at the Changpang oil field in 1994, it did not invest enough to ensure that the oil well sites were properly secured, and that improper and negligent capping led to spillage. Over the years, oil has seeped into the soil, rendering acres of farmland barren, contaminating rivers and streams in lowland areas, and affecting aquatic life. With crude petroleum staining large swathes of the village area, residents fear devastating fires will damage the property and resources and endanger their lives.

The Indigenous Women Forum of North East India (IWFNEI) issued a rallying cry to all indigenous peoples and communities of the north-eastern region to fight and secure the rights of the people affected by the corporate wrongdoings. "The oil spill hazard of Changpang oil field has been lying unattended and ignored for almost two decades by the various concerned responsible government agencies and companies, leaving the affected people and their surrounding environment in despair with no sight of respite till some recent news reports and the latest filing of a PIL [public interest litigation] which has been long overdue..., as hazardous to the health of human kinds, notwithstanding all living things including floras and faunas."²¹

TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE FROM INDIGENOUS RIGHTS: RECLAIMING MORAL AGENCY

In the context of the colonization of indigenous culture and identity and the natural environment, the search for an alternative goes beyond determining who owns natural resources, as it did in the initial days of the struggle, to developing a framework for resource management based on the community's rights over these resources. This alternative is to find ways and means to protect the natural environment and people's cultures and traditions. In other words, it is "reaffirming the moral values inherited from the past."²² It also challenges us to reflect our moral actions towards our neighbor, i.e., Mother Earth. In this context, one can ask: What is the ethical discernment towards the groaning creation? According to an ecofeminist perspective, "The way to the attainment of more harmonious interactions between humans and the earth environment is not simply a matter of establishing more egalitarian relations; it is also a matter of retrieving a sense of the sacred."²³

Rights over Traditional Resources

The tribals' rights to control their resources and to preserve their common pasture land needs three things: an autonomous organization that governs community life; rootedness and identification with a specific land/place; and a lifestyle defined by just and necessary limitations. This moral right to control over resources is sanctioned by the UN Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, which endorses the right of the tribal people "to

maintain their traditional structure of economy and culture” and stresses that “their land, and rights over natural resources, should not be taken away from them.”²⁴ This, in fact, endorses the notion that the management of natural resources remains in the “hands of the local community, and not in distant impersonal and authoritarian government departments which only become sources of corruption and exploitation.”²⁵

The right to control over traditional resources is not based on individualism or privatization of community-owned land or property, but on a demand for recognition and respect for the territorial and cultural rights of indigenous peoples, enabling them to take control of their own destiny. It is the protection of one’s cultural and religious identity, which is closely linked with the natural world. As Aldo Leopold says, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”²⁶ Therefore, the norm of the right to control one’s own resources is conditioned by culture and traditions, and this right to self-determination in matters of sociocultural, economic, and political life is the final solution to tribal issues in India today.

Community Participation and Management

The idea of community participation and management represents an alternative mode in the developmental process that moves towards equal share and equal benefits for the welfare of the community in managing the commons. It encourages an effective traditional communitarian system and practices of sharing and caring within the community, as well as local people’s participation and control of natural resources. In this respect, the knowledge of local-level planning and management, and the capabilities of the local communities, play an important role in the prudent management of natural resources. Thus, the norm of community participation refers to incorporating community moral principles in any developmental activity; a principle of care and respect, responsibility, and love towards all God’s creation—humans and nature. Hence, “the value system of tribal societies are determined not by dogmatic rules but by the expectations of the community.”²⁷

It is evident that the present mode of developmental projects negates local community involvement in the decision-making process

and participation, leading to an unjust accumulation of wealth and the displacement of people, and ultimately contributing to an ecological crisis. In such a scenario, community participation and management as an alternative engage not only in economic production functions but also in matters related to law and order and justice. Hence, the norm of community involvement in developmental projects promotes local participation and empowerment. This can be achieved through proper guidance and the implementation of policies that prioritize basic human needs and maintain ecological integrity.

Participatory Model

The participatory model in any decision-making efforts for developmental projects does not function in isolation, but in cooperation with government and private firms/organisations. It is an affirmation of all forms of life to respect and include God's creations in human decisions that affect their well-being. "Voices should be heard, and if not able to speak, which is the case for other species, then humans will have to represent their interests when those interests are at stake."²⁸ This alternative form recognizes the "right of access to biodiversity and community right to intellectual property and traditional knowledge related to biodiversity and cultural diversity."²⁹ So, in claiming the moral agency of tribals, any developmental project within their lands has to incorporate people's right to determine and participate, and freedom to express, and above all, be founded on community (people)-centred tribal-rich socio-cultural values and traditions. Joseph Femia puts forward that the human essence is an ensemble of social relations as entailing

- a refusal to see individuals as unique selves,
- a license to vanguard parties to assume unconstrained authority, and
- a moral injunction to identify one's self-interest with communal well-being.³⁰

Thus, the norm of participation requires listening to all voices, especially the groaning creation, and including all interests. In other words, it is a reversal of exclusion, discrimination, displacement, rejection, and domination.

Relationality and Sustainability

Sustainability may be understood in terms of *telos*, a future-oriented state, in which the future will be determined by the present act of a moral agent, that is, “the means must be consistent with the ends.” It expresses an ongoing relationship or interdependence between the human and the non-human world from time immemorial. In contrast, it is also argued that since sustainability advocates all life as valuable, it may result in conflicts and problems.³¹ Indeed, sustainability encompasses not only equitable access to resources but also the implementation of socially relevant technologies. In this regard, the WCC has emphasized the importance of a development based on human dignity and justice, a mutual responsibility towards one another. In other words, “development is to care, share and develop the riches of the world together, so that all may benefit and come to their full human stature.”³²

Comparatively, tribal life-ways, which are close to nature, have respect for all living creatures, and thus their wisdom “offers other communities and in India a vision of future survival based on a lifestyle of harmony with nature.”³³ In traditional Christian parlance, a sacramental approach to creation will help, correct, and balance an overly anthropocentric approach. The realization and experience of the immanent presence of the Spirit in all of creation helps us to overcome the gulf that divides the traditional understanding between the Creator and the created universe. Thus, the integral relationship with nature becomes an alternative way of responding to the various ecological crises caused by the capitalist economic system and other developmental projects.

Eco-Justice as an Alternative Model

The eco-justice perspective envisages the common responsibility of religions towards the earth, prompting a reexamination and reinterpretation of their foundational beliefs regarding God, human beings, and nature. Richard Niebuhr states that the essential character of Christian living is to live in responsibility before God and responsibility with others (nature). One’s action is thus relational and responsible, and he/she does not act like a machine that obeys fixed rules, but rather takes full responsibility for his/her action. In other words, people cannot remain just explaining meaningfully the traditional doctrines from an

evolutionary perspective, but they need to see what kind of praxis and attitudes the doctrines imply.

The norm of equality and justice also arises from the understanding that there is a living organic relationship between human beings, trees, animals, insects, water, air, sunshine, and the soil of this earth. Tribal people have been holding these views from time immemorial and they have also understood human beings as an integral part of this macro-organism. It reinforces the importance of considering the interests and welfare of all. In this regard, the tribal people of the world truly reminds us that space and land determine their personhood and that justice—social, economic, and political—must be done horizontally and not vertically.

Concluding Remarks

The injustices faced by indigenous communities in relation to their commons are a daily reality experienced by marginalized people worldwide. It is at this juncture that the shattered dreams and visions of the indigenous become fresh in the form of social movements reclaiming and rebuilding their moral agency, actively working towards a different world. In fact, the ideology of colonization of the commons needs to be critically analyzed by theologically reimagining and affirming the interrelationship between the experiences of indigenous people, whose lives are connected with nature. By using indigenous ethics as an alternative model, it will be possible to critique the prevailing form of capitalist society while also addressing the earth's cries and attempting to develop an ethics of coexistence and correlation with all of nature. That is where the identity and spirituality of the tribal people lie: everything is interrelated and interdependent, which results in coexistence, as everything is sacred/holy. So, in the course of this colonization, indigenous identity becomes an important factor, an identity that must be preserved through the participation of the indigenous community in any developmental projects within their own jurisdiction.

Without indigenous cultural values, people would find themselves surrounded by an empty physical space of alien natural surroundings. Therefore, preserving their social and cultural norms links the tribal

generations and provides them with a shared identity—the narratives of oneness and belongingness. Such eco-spirituality has been the belief system of the indigenous ancestors, which have led to the conservation of the ecosystem without it being abused and misused.

ENDNOTES

1. Bollier, David. 2014. *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*. Canada: New Society Publishers: 15.
2. Vashum, Yangkahao. 2009. "Tribal Theology: A Search for Relevant Theology and Ministry in Tribal Context." In *Tribal Theology: A Search for Quality Theological Education and Relevant Ministry*, edited by Yangkahao Vashum: 29. Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre.
3. Ovung, Athungo. 2012. *Social Stratification in Naga Society: A Study of Lotha Society*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications: 38.
4. Thanzauva, K. 2012. "Community Ownership and Management of Land and Forest: The Mizo Perspective." In *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Culture and Practices of the Tribes of North East India*, edited by Razouselie Lasetso et al.: 126. Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination.
5. Haokip, Thongkhosei M. "Interaction Between Gospel and Kuki Culture". In *Journal of Tribal Studies*: 32 (X, no. 1, Jan.–Jun. 2006).
6. ———. 2014. *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*. Canada: New Society Publishers: 15.
7. James, Woba. 2012. "Ecological Resources from Poumai Naga Tradition." In *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Cultures and Practices of the Tribes of North East India*, edited by Razouselie Lasetso et al.: 141. Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination.
8. ———. *Social Stratification in Naga Society: A Study of Lotha Society*: 39–40.
9. Pangernungba. "Land Being and Ali-Rongsen (Cultural-Political Economy): An Ao-Naga Perspective." In *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Cultures and Practices of the Tribes of North East India* vol. 166.
10. Menzies, Heather. 2014. *Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good: A Memoir and Manifesto*. Canada: New Society Publishers: 27.
11. Lasetso, Razouselie. 2009. "Tribal Theology and the Bible: A Contextual Reading of the Bible." In *Tribal Theology: A Search for Quality Theological Education and Relevant Ministry*, edited by Yangkahao Vashum: 33. Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre.
12. Lemtur, Asangla. "An Ethical Analysis of the Tribal Ethnic Identity Crises in India: A Feminist Critique." In *Religion & Society*: 35 (50, no. 3, Sept. 2005).
13. ———. 2001. "A Native American Theology." Maryknoll: Orbis Books: 15.
14. Aleaz, K. P. "A Tribal Christian Theology from India". In *Journal of Tribal Studies*: 303 (VII, no. 2, Jul.–Dec. 2003).

15. ———. *Think Like à Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons* 132.
16. ———. 2014. *Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good: A Memoir and Manifesto*. Canada: New Society Publisher: 27.
17. James, Lovely Awomi. 2017. *Tribal Theology: Reviewing the Naga Traditional Worldview*. New Delhi: Christian World Imprints: 67.
18. Wati Longchar, A. "The Land Ownership System in Nagaland". In *Journal of Tribal Studies*: 9 (III, no. 2, Jul.–Dec. 1999).
19. Fernandes, Walter et al. "Commons Resources, Community Management". In *Vocabulary of Commons* 86.
20. Wezah, Yiepetso. "Ethical Perception in Tribal Culture." In *Journal of Tribal Studies*: 16–8 (VI, no. 3, Jan.–Jun. 2002).
21. "Rally Against ONGC Changpang Oil Spill." <http://morungexpress.com/rally-against-ongc-changpang-oil-spill/> accessed on 28th March 2023. In.
22. Martin-Schramm, James B. et al.. 2015. *Earth Ethics: A Case Method Approach*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books: 46.
23. Smith, Pamela 1997. *What Are They Saying About Environment Ethics?* New York: Paulist Press: 19.
24. Bhubaneshwar Sabar, "Development-induced Displacement and Human Rights Violation in Orissa: An Anthropological Insight," in *Social Action* (Vol. 60, No. 2, April – June), 174 – 175
25. Rajaratnam, K. "Economic Implications of Environmental Rights and Privileges". In *Ecology and Development: Theological Perspectives* vol. 14, edited by Daniel D. Chetti (UELICI/GURUKUL & BTE/SSC, 1991).
26. Leopold, Aldo. 1970. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Ballantine Book Company: 262.
27. Kidwell, Clara Sue, H. Noley, and G. E. "Tink" Tinker. 2003. "A Native American Theology." *Pro Ecclesia* 12, no. 2: 240–2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385120301200210>.
28. ———. 2015. *Earth Ethics: A Case Method Approach*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books: 53.
29. Shrivastava, Abhinav. "Assessing the Impact of 'Land Rights' and 'Use Rights' Under Forests Rights Act, 2006 on the Development of Tribes and Forest Dwellers,'." In *Social Action*: 238 (67, no. 3, Jul.–Sept. 2017).
30. Femia, Joseph V.. 1993. *Marxism and Democracy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press: 145–6.
31. See, ———. *Earth Ethics: A Case Method Approach* 49.
32. Razu, John Mohan. 1989. *The Transnational Corporation and the Development Debate*. Bombay: BUILD Publication: 18.
33. Prabhu, Pradip. 2003. "Nature, Culture and Diversity: The Indigenous Way of Life." In *The Value of Nature: Ecological Politics in India*, edited by Smitu Kothari et al.: 44. Noida: Rainbow Publishers Ltd.

REFERENCES

- Nirmal, Arvind P. "Ecology, Ecumenics and Economics in Relation: A New Theological Paradigm". In *Ecology and Development: Theological Perspectives* vol. 18, edited by Daniel D. Chetti (Madras: UELCI/GURUKUL and BTESSC. 1991).
- Sanjeeva Raj, P. J. "Ecology and Development: A Theological Perspective". In *Ecology and Development: Theological Perspectives* vol. 61, edited by Daniel D. Chetti (Madras: UELCI/GURUKUL and BTE/SSC. 1991).
- Adebisi Sowunmi, M.. 1994. "Giver of Life – 'Sustain Your Creation',". In *EcoTheology: Voices from South and North*, edited by David G. Hallman: 152. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Tinker, George. 1994. "The Full Circle of Liberation: An American Indian Theology of Place." In *Eco-theology: Voices from South and North*, edited by David G. Hallman: 224. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Wright, Nancy G., and Donald Kill. 1993. *Ecological Healing: A Christian Vision*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books: 57.
- Rasmussen, Larry L.. 1998. *Earth Community Earth Ethics*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books: 345.
- Grim, John A.. 1994. "Native North American Worldviews and Ecology." In *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment*, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John A. Grim: 46. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Dorr, Donal. 1991. *The Social Justice Agenda: Justice, Ecology, Power and the Church*. Ireland: Gill & Macmillan Ltd.: 80.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. 1999. "Indigenous Ecologies and an Ethic of Connection." In *Global Ethics and Environment*, edited by Nicholas Low: 185. London: Routledge.
- Deloria, Vine Jr.. 2005. "Indigenous Peoples." In *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, edited by William Schweiker: 558. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 1994. "Toward a Global Environmental Ethic." In *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment*, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John A. Grim: 32–3. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Vashum, Yangkahao. "Eco-theology from Tribal/Indigenous People's Perspectives of the North East India." In *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Cultures and Practices of the Tribes of North East India* vol. 26, edited by Razouselie Lasetso et al., (Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination. 2012).
- Murry, Ezamo. "Awakening Tribal Consciousness and Concerns in Pastoral Care." In *Journal of Tribal Studies*: 2 (II, no. 2, Jan.–Jun. 1998).
- Wall, Derek. 2017. *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict, and Ecology*. Cambridge: MIT Press: 3.

- Fernandes, Walter et al.. 2011. "Commons Resources, Community Management." In Vocabulary of Commons, edited by Dipankar Datta: 96. Bangalore: Foundation of Ecological Security.
- Mozhui, Zanao. 2004. The Impact of Christianity on the Naga People. Dimapur: Leukaemia & Blood Cancer New Zealand: 8.
- Longchar, Wati. 2012. 'Eco-Justice and Mission: A Methodological Exploration,' in Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Cultures and Practices of the Tribes of North East India, edited by Razouselie et al. Jorhat: ETC: 13.

About Author

Rev. Dr. M Zubenthung Humtsoe teaches at Clark Theological College, Nagaland. He is the author of *Colonisation of the Commons: Re-imagining Tribal Earth Ethics*.

Religion, Ecology, and Politics Movement Matters

Y.T. Vinayaraj

**Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS),
Bengaluru**

Abstract

Drawing upon the contemporary post-continental materialistic philosophical traditions, this essay affirms the social agency of the earth and thereby upholds the social agency of the people who depend on the earth's resources for their survival. It endeavors to effect a paradigm shift from environmentalism to political ecology, prioritizing the vital materiality of trans-actions happening within the ecology of relations, rather than just "care for the environment." Religion is envisaged here as embodied political practices of being and becoming planetary beings. Within this materialistic framework, indigenous traditions are relocated as eco-religious movements entwined with the agonies and vulnerabilities of life's materialities and embodied with the radical politics of restructuring settled notions of religion, ecology, and politics. This radical indigenous philosophical thread upholds the "irreducible singularity" of land struggles and anti-displacement eco-political movements of indigenous people, providing a radical indigenous political theology of the earth in India.

Keywords: Religious environmentalism, ecotheologies, new materialism, indigenous eco-political movements

INTRODUCTION

Here is a new way to think about Earth, not as an object of human exploitation, or as a harmonious womb from which we became alienated and need to return, but as an intensive space of theological becoming and change.

—Jeffrey W Robbins and Clayton Crockett¹

As scholars of religion, we need to investigate more thoroughly how alternative religious experiences shape up in the history of particular movements of exploited working people, in touch with the exploited earth, and what difference these experiences are making in the context of the dominant religion. Neither scholars of religion nor theologians can produce such alternative religious experiences synthetically. They will have to study them while involving themselves in the resistance movements of our time, exploring what it all means for religion as a whole, including its practices, its doctrines and beliefs, and its way of life.

—Jeorg Rieger²

No religion can avoid participating in the collective act of “care for the earth,” especially in an age when we face nothing less than an “Ecodemic” (Walters 2003). Like in any other religion, Christian theologians too have responded to the ecological crisis by formulating confessional and ethical ecotheologies; these range from Lynn White’s widely renowned “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” (White 1967) to Ivone Gebara’s “holistic ecofeminism” (Gebara 1994), which exposed the patriarchal content of eco-criticism. However, in the contemporary epistemological context, where the earth affirms its own social agency and the inherent vibrancy of matter (Crockett & Robbins 2012; Bennett 2010), humans affirm a planetary ontology that rejects the dichotomy between human and nature (Latour 1997; Braidotti 2022). As a result, environmentalism is transformed into a political ecology of things (Bennet 2010) rather than mere slogans for the “care for the earth.” Abrahamic and non-Western mystic religions are alike urged to deconstruct their doctrinal, theological, and liturgical tenets so as to embark on a radical political theology of the earth in a neo-capitalist era.

By tracing the historical trajectories of Christian ecotheologies, this essay tries to expose the inadequacy of traditional (Platonized) Christian theology in approving the agency of the earth, and the planetary ontology

of human beings, and delineate how it becomes insufficient to deal with the contemporary political philosophy of ecology as explained by philosophers of contemporary materialistic tradition such as Bruno Latour, Rosi Braidotti, and Gilles Deleuze. By engaging with “new materialism,” one of the most prominent contemporary political philosophies of religion in the neo-capitalist era, this essay explores the possibility of constructing a radical political theology of the earth. Relocating religion as materialistic practices of becoming, rather than a “mystical and otherworldly” enterprise (Jones, 2016:9), this study offers a paradigm shift from religious environmentalism to political ecology of things, thereby restructuring the epistemological and doctrinal foundations of ecotheology in the contemporary times of *Capitalocene*.³ Drawing on the land struggles of Dalits and tribals in India, where indigenous ecopolitical movements envision eco-religious political practices of becoming to uphold their social agency and the agency of the earth, this essay proposes a radical indigenous political theology of the earth in India.

RELIGION AND ECOLOGY: TRAJECTORIES OF ECOTHEOLOGIES

Discussing the question of religious environmentalism, Lawrence Troster contends that it is not reasonable to expect pre-modern religions to respond creatively to the modern environmental crisis (Troster 2013). He questions how religions can be “green” when the modern environmental crisis is unparalleled in scope and scale in human history and when sacred texts are written from an ancient environmental viewpoint (Troster, 2013). He argues that there is a qualitative difference between modern and premodern technology in terms of how it affects the environment in both spatial and temporal terms. According to him, the incessant development and change in the scientific worldview makes religious environmentalism inadequate and insufficient. However, religions have gone far from their premodern worldviews and have tried to engage with new scientific theories and technological innovations so as to envisage a contemporary significant ecological response. Today, such innovative engagements between science and religion have opened up new vistas of the interlinking relationship between religion and ecology, initiating new forms of ecotheologies and eco-religious practices that even deconstruct

and reconstruct religious scriptures, doctrinal expositions, and ministerial engagements.

Christian theological response to the ecological crisis begins with Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", published in 1967, which sparked dynamic and reflective debates. In his paper, White critiqued the dualistic worldviews ingrained in religious traditions, resulting in the separation of humans from nature and the divine, as well as the anthropocentrism that pervades religious discourses. Critically examining the Judeo-Christian tradition that defines nature in terms of its absolute dependency on God, who created nature out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), and humans as the worldly custodians of nature (*imago dei*), White envisaged ecotheology as a critical tradition within Christianity (White 1967). According to White, it was this anthropocentric worldview, which was legitimised by scriptural hermeneutics, that resulted in the notion of human dominion over nature and the subsequent exploitation of nature in the modern world. At the same time, he argued that this also enabled Christian theologians to seek alternative scriptural hermeneutics to overcome the Judeo-Christian hermeneutics of domination. Positing that religions had the potential to enable and disable responses on the environmental crisis, White argued that religion has always been a *pharmakon* (either remedy or poison).

Connecting the notion of human dominance over nature with the patriarchal idea of domination over women, ecofeminists highlighted the gender-based framework in Christian ecotheologies. In the 1970s, a group of feminist theologians sought the historical roots of the ecological crisis and called for a gender-based framework in the analysis of the human-nature relationship. French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne, who coined the term ecofeminism in 1974, argued that "the destruction of the planet is due to the profit motive inherent in male power" (quoted in Adams 1994: xi). The ecofeminist movement emerged in response to the damaging dichotomies of humanity versus nature, and masculine versus feminine, and the correlation between these two binary categories. Ecofeminism helped us to assess the interconnections between ecological crises and women's oppression, and even more, it encouraged women to reconceptualize themselves in relation to nature beyond the patriarchal

“conceptual trap” (Warren 1987: 7). Ivone Gebara, one of the prominent ecofeminist theologians, developed an earth-centered theology based on women’s embodied experience in daily life and offered a “holistic eco-feminism” that overcomes the dualistic paradigm of traditional Christian theology (Gebara 1994:9-11).

The debate concerning the role of religion/Christianity in response to the contemporary environmental crisis assumed a postcolonial turn with Vitor Westhelle, Catherine Keller, Kowk Pui-lan, and like-minded postcolonial theologians. Critiquing the patristic notion of *creatio ex nihilo* that justified the hierarchical thinking in Christian environmentalism, Westhelle contended that the idea of creation from nothing gradually legitimized an omnipotent God and the problem of land acquisition in Latin America.⁴ Keller, on the other hand, offered a theology of *creatio continua*, which affirmed the multiple origins and the relationality of creation. Keller’s intention was to dismantle the dichotomic relationship between God and the natural world and to highlight the organic continuity between the supernatural and the natural, and religion and ecology. Denying the (Western) Christian theological notion of a sovereign/Omni God who creates everything out of nothing, she offered a counter-divinity that is persuasive, not domineering; immanent, not absolute transcendent; relational, not inert and redundant.⁵ Keller offered a theology of *theopoiesis* that affirms the fluidity, mutability, relationality, and transactionality between divinity and creation and thus between spirit and matter, and religion and ecology.⁶

In the same vein of thought, Whitney Bauman critiques the colonial content of the patristic theology of *creatio ex nihilo*, which the West used to justify colonizing the deep, the dark, and the Other—the ostensibly “undeveloped” natures, cultures, and people—on the basis of its theology of the Omni God, who is the cause of the origin of the cosmos.⁷ Bauman argues that *creatio ex nihilo* provided a justification for the colonial concept of “individual property,” articulated by John Locke, along with its corollary, the colonial, national legal claims of *terra nullius* (meaning “no prior presence” so that any land can be conquered). Bauman defines religion as a nature-culture meaning-making system that emboldens planetary interconnections and materialistic identities. He speaks about

an eco-religious identity of human beings through which we envision a planetary ontology and epistemology.⁸ Both Keller and Bauman call for a relocation of ecotheology that overcomes the dichotomy between (Omni) God and nature, humans and nature, and religion and ecology. As Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey Robbins argue, it is an effort to de-transcendentalize theology, doctrines, liturgy, and politics and expose the repressive social, sexual, political, and economic order—the material realities of the world that makes ecotheology agonistic political and materialistic in content and practice.⁹

RELIGION AND ECOLOGY: NEW MATERIALISM AS A PARADIGM SHIFT IN ECOTHEOLOGY

The philosophers of new materialism take a “materialist turn” in the philosophy of religion and envision a shift from transcendence to immanence, mind to body, spirituality to materiality, liturgy to politics, epistemology to ontology, and environmentalism to political ecology. New materialism affirms the material reality of the social/political agency rather than the phenomenological and linguistic discursive formation of subjectivity. Matter, according to new materialism, is not dormant, passive, and inert so that it can be manipulated by the spirit as theorized by Cartesian-Newtonian modernity; rather, it is vibrant and agential and has the potential to become new. New materialism, in that sense, rejects the Cartesian duality between spirit and matter and postulates a kind of monism that is materialistic in content (Deleuze 1987). Thus, matter is not “mere matter”; it is agential matter.¹⁰ Body, in new materialism, is an agential body. Matter, in this philosophical framework, is a vibrant matter. Considering humans as always already part of the material world, new materialism postulates itself within a “posthuman world.” Engaging with the material realities of the world, new materialism urges us to address the socioeconomic practices that reproduce embodied subjectivity and existential inequalities, especially in the contemporary context of neo-capitalism.

The most important characteristic of new materialism that emerges out of its Spinozian-Deleuzian roots is not just the denial of modern dualism between spirit and matter, but the denial of transcendentalism

that unites dualism idealistically (Cartesian-Newtonian-Kantian framework). Philosophers of new materialism expose the role of religion/Christianity in legitimizing the idea of transcendentalism that relegates body, matter, and nature to dependent realities. The unwillingness to sacrifice transcendentalism and to accept the agential position of the earth make ecotheologies problematic. On the other hand, new materialism proposes a “material turn” in the philosophy of religion, shifting the focus from interiority, ideality, and transcendentalism to exteriority, materiality, and immanence. In new materialism, religion is defined in terms of our materialist existence and inhabitation. Religion, for new materialism, is not a metaphysical engagement, but a lived reality and a social movement of being and becoming planetary beings. Here, religion is interlinked with ecology organically, affirming the planetary ontology of human beings. New materialism envisions an intersectional ideological space in-between ecology and religion and thus embarks on postulating eco-religious identities of human beings.

Signifying this new materialistic tradition, Crockett and Robbins expose the material basis of our religious experience/feeling in which religion, ecology, economy, anthropology, ethics, and politics are inextricably linked with one another. They state it more succinctly as follows: “The religious subject is not only born out of the infinitude of the power of feeling but also by its objectification of that feeling; religion becomes more than feeling. It becomes ontological. It becomes material.”¹¹ Religion, for new materialists, has a functional role in manifesting life’s material content and responding to the material vulnerabilities of life. Defining religion as an embodied practice of becoming, Kimerer L. LaMothe defines human being “as an ongoing rhythm of bodily becoming” and religion as a social movement that “empower our resistance to the unsustainable modes of production that exhaust life.”¹² In their essay on “Ecology and Social Movements: New Materialism and Relational Christian Realism,” Clayton Crockett and John Reader explicate how Relational Christian Realism (RCR) in the United Kingdom offers alternative political practices of the church in resistance to the neo-capitalist invasion on labor, land, and the environment.¹³

In the context of new materialism, religion attends to the politics of material production and reproduction and how it maintains eco-sensitive

relations in society in the post-globalized era. Tamsin Jones explains the rationale and the content of the new materialist approaches to the study of religion thus: "New materialist approaches to the study of religion find their common ground in the insistence that religious experience is never purely interior and private, for it is writ in our actions, our orientations, and turnings, marked on our bodies and our expulsions, generative of energies and social movements that track one way or another."¹⁴ Along the same lines, Jane Bennett offers a paradigm shift in our understanding of ecology. She distinguishes between environmentalism and political ecology. Considering nature as the political realm of human and non-human actants and agentic assemblages, Bennett speaks about the political ecology of things. Focusing on the inherent vitality of matter, Bennett asks us to give attention to the vital materiality of trans-actions happening within the ecology of relations rather than care for the environment. For Bennett, materiality is different from environmentalism. Bennett argues that "if the environment is defined as the substrate of human culture, materiality is a term that applies more evenly to humans and non-humans."¹⁵ In materiality, human agency is counted not in terms of the "ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being"; rather it horizontalizes the relations between humans, biota, and abiota. "Can worms be considered members of a public?" "Are there nonhuman members of a public?" "Are the trans-actions of the nonhuman actants' political actions that determine democracy?" By asking these questions, Bennett tries to expose the anthropomorphic content of our common notion of environmentalism and environmental politics.

In short, new materialism unsettles and deconstructs our settled notion of religion, ecology, democracy, theology, and politics and relocates it in a "plane of immanence"—rhizomatic interconnections of life (Deleuze 1987) which do not need any transcendental legitimization. Ecotheologies that never compromise with the materialistic epistemological foundation that neglects transcendence as the legitimizing point faces an existential crisis here. Denying the transcendentalist, the idealist, and the metaphysical content of established religions, which often serve to legitimize all kinds of hierarchical-patriarchal-casteist and fundamentalist exclusive practices even in the contemporary neoliberal era, new materialism helps us to re-articulate religion as the ethico-political practices of justice by which the

weak and the marginalized reaffirm their social agency and social power along with Mother Earth. It is here that indigenous peoples' struggle for their right to natural resources, through which they reclaim their social agency and social status, becomes quintessential for contemporary eco-theologies to retrieve their fecundity and significance in order to respond creatively to the current ecological crisis.

RELIGION, ECOLOGY, AND POLITICS: INDIGENOUS ECO-POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AS TEXTS

Georg Rieger offers a sharp revision to the idea proposed by the proponents of new materialism to view religion as a social movement. Rieger asks us to learn from the alternative religious experiences of the working class, in which people formulate their religious experiences out of their material vulnerabilities and struggles. He warns us not to let the metanarrative of the agency of the earth sweep the agency of the working class and their political movements, which are entwined with the pain and pathos of resistance and resilience. Rieger urges us to look at and participate in labor movements and land struggles of the marginalized sections, where we see enmattered social agency and social power. He writes:

As scholars of religion, we need to investigate more thoroughly how alternative religious experiences shape up in the history of particular movements of exploited working people, in touch with the exploited earth, and what difference these experiences are making in the context of the dominant religion. Neither scholars of religion nor theologians can produce such alternative religious experiences synthetically. They will have to study them while involving themselves in the resistance movements of our time, exploring what it all means for religion as a whole, including its practices, its doctrines and beliefs, and its way of life.¹⁶

George Zachariah has highlighted this inadequacy in traditional ecotheology. Offering a grassroots ecotheology and earth ethics by locating subaltern ecological movements as texts, Zachariah says that the victims of environmental destruction and their sociopolitical movements for rights to natural resources are often sidelined in the [dominant] ecotheology and environmental discourse (Zachariah 2011). Rendering it

not as a theological lapse, but an inherent inability of Christian theology, Westhelle argues that the question of space (Earth) has always been a lost dimension in Christian theology. It has ever been a treatise of heaven (Westhelle 2012). Westhelle invites us to deconstruct the Christian theology of creation in and through the ideological framework of the question of landlessness of the Latin American people. The question of landlessness, beyond “bourgeoise environmentalism,” raises political issues rather than the naïve slogan—care for the earth. There are eco-theological initiatives that are apolitical in content and silent on political issues such as landlessness of Dalits and tribals. Of course, Liberation theologians have tried to expose the hyper-transcendentalism of (Western) Christian theology and its inadequacy to address political issues of land acquisition, landlessness, and displacement (Dussel 1985; Boff 1997), but they have hardly paid attention to the agential position of the earth and the working class. The problem with liberation theologies of ecology is the epistemological inadequacy to challenge the transcendental axis of thinking and practicing theology (Taylor, 2012). Ellen T. Armour says: “Christianity’s inability to engage deeply with non-theistic or polytheistic religious traditions is hampered by its enthrallment to a personal, agential, monotheistic understanding of divinity” and its ontological discontinuity with the nature-culture world.¹⁷ Realizing this and with the influence of new materialism, Keller develops a radical political theology of the earth through which she rejects divine sovereignty and its exceptionalism and unveils our planetary emergency and the necessity of struggling for a new political public that stands for an agential earth (Keller 2022).¹⁸

The politics of the agential earth is integrally connected with the agency of the people who depend on the earth’s resources, especially in this neo-capitalist era. The struggles of Dalits and tribals for their rights to natural resources exemplify how the neoliberal policies of the state become devastating to the life-worlds of the vulnerable communities and the ecological system at large. The political economy in the era of neo-capitalism has already shown its deadly nature of violence, violation, and virulence against the indigenous sections—people who live in close affinity with the earth and its resources. As Ashish Kothari comments, these social movements not only reveal the tenacity and the veracity of our desires for growth and development, but they also highlight alternative eco-religious

visions of hope and transformation.¹⁹ They signify the indigenous wisdom of our hybrid identities by which they affirm an organic vision of the well-being of humanity, the economy of life by nurturing nature-culture, and alternative religiosities/spiritualities that prompt us to treat nature as sacred and agential. Religion is not a private affair for them to achieve heaven; rather, it is a culture that they collectively uphold for the well-being of the wider ecology of relations. The song sung by Dambu Praska, in connection with the struggles of Dongria Kondh tribes to protect the Niyamgiri mountains from multinational mining corporations, exemplifies the interlinking facets of tribal theology of the sacred, the economy of life, and the ethics/politics of their collective life:

Niyamraja created fruits in the hills, grains in the plains
 He is the first of the Dongria Kondh
 No one knows his story, lakhs of people are unaware I will sing,
 I will sing why the outsiders must spare our land
 After making pineapple, mango, jackfruit and grains
 Niyamraja said to us 'live on what I have given you'
 Niyamraja decided where there would be fruits and grains
 Which seed will be soft and which one would be hard.
 What will we do without the fruits, grains and buffaloes,
 What will we do without Niyamgiri...
 What will the animals do without the big forests,
 What will we do without the plants that save lives.²⁰

Vasundhara Jairath argues that the politics of indigenous peoples' anti-displacement struggles, which upholds land as a productive and reproductive space of their own collective identities—'planetary identities' (Whitney Bauman)—and exposes the material ordering of the wider social inter-actions and eco-social relations, in fact, brings in a new facet of environmental understanding and represent a radical shift from environmentalism to the politics of land.²¹ The naïve environmentalism that renders nature pristine and virgin faces a challenge here and it urges us to look at the economy and politics of labor, providing us with a new frame of a radical praxis of environmentalism. The perspectival shift from "care for the earth" to "the agency of the earth," in fact, unsettles the settled notions of ecology, economy, anthropology, and politics and calls us to look into the environmental praxis of indigenous people and

how they envisage a materialistic philosophy of everyday life in common. It is interesting to look into their religiosities and spiritualities that are enmattered and embodied in their everyday life of productive-reproductive labor, survival, and resistance. Jairath comments:

A close look at why Adivasi peasants make the claims that they do, through the discursive practices that they do, allows us to discern a more radical praxis of environmentalism, one that places the producer, the cultivator, at the center of the story. Such an environmental praxis, through an invocation of land, challenges an abstracted notion of the environment as “nature” divorced from its historical and material context within which communities live and reproduce themselves as people in interaction with “nature.” By placing this context at the center, it emphasizes the nature of relations communities weave with their surroundings through productive processes and through labor, knitting together social relations between themselves and with other communities, actors, and institutions that intersect with their lives. It challenges a dominant environmental narrative that places nature in isolation within which human-nature interactions take place, forging a material praxis and relating ecological concerns with broader structures of political economy and the place of the cultivator within it.²²

CONCLUSION

Indigenous ecological movements unsettle our common understanding of religion, the sacred, ecology, ethics, and politics. The sacred is enmattered, ecology is embodied, and politics is agonized here. These counter-movements call on us to redraft our ecotheologies from incarnational to intercarational (Catherine Keller), where we consider God to be in and by the world and theology to be agonistic and political. New materialism, as a tool of interpretation, helps us to understand how indigenous eco-political movements signify the agential position of the earth and thereby the social power of the people who depend on the earth's resources, especially in the era of neo-capitalism. It takes us from the “bourgeoise environmentalism” that offers shallow slogans like “care for the earth” and, at the same time, neglects the politics of land and labor in and around us. Ecotheology in the era of new materialism has to attend to the politics of the production and the reproduction of labor and the subjectivity of the working class and thereby enable them to achieve their social power. This radical awareness leads us to embrace a radical political

theology of the earth by which we envisage a culture of deep solidarity (Joerg Rieger) with the struggling, indigenous people who call upon us to redraft our notion of religion, nature, god, and politics and put them into intersectionalities.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Robbins, Jeffrey W., and Clayton Crockett. Oct. 13 2015. "A Radical Theology for the Future: Five Theses." *Palgrave Communications* 1, no. 1.
- 2 Rieger, Joerg. 2016. "Rethinking the New Materialism for Religion and Theology: Why Movements Matter Most." In *Religious Experience and New Materialism: Movement Matters*, edited by Joerg Rieger, and Edward Waggoner: 151. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 3 According to Joerg Rieger, Capitalocene is the geological age when the maximization of economic profit has made it to the center stage in the global setting and dominates whatever other ages have been proclaimed, including the Anthropocene. See, Rieger, Joerg. 2022. *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 2.
- 4 Westhelle, Vitor. 1990. "Creation Motives in the Search for a Vital Space: A Latin American Perspective." In *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, edited by S. B. Thistlewate, and M. P. Engil: 128–40. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.
- 5 Keller, Catherine. 2002. *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. London: Routledge.
- 6 ———. 2017. *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- 7 Bauman, Whitney A.. 2009. *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethos: From Creatio Ex Nihilo to Terra Nullius*. London and New York: Routledge: 69–71.
- 8 ———. 2014. *Religion and Ecology: Developing A Planetary Ethic*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 9 Crockett, Clayton, and Jeffrey Robbins. 2012. *Religion, Politics, and the Earth: The New Materialism in Radical Theologies Series*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 17.
- 10 Coole, Diana, and Samantha Frost. *New Materialisms* vol. 37.
- 11 ———. *Religion, Politics, and the Earth* vol. 17.
- 12 LaMothe, Kimerer L. 2016. "Becoming a Bodily Self: An Ecokinetic Approach to the Study of Religion." In *Religious Experience and New Materialism: Movement Matters*, edited by Joerg Rieger, and Edward Waggoner: 14. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 13 Crockett, Clayton, and John Reader. 2016. *Ecology and Social Movements: New Materialism and Relational Christian Realism*, Clayton Crockett and John Reader in *Religious Experience and New Materialism: Movement Matters*, edited by Joerg Rieger, and Edward Waggoner. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 82–103.

- 14 Jones, Tamsin. 2016. "New Materialism and the Study of Religion." In *Religious Experience & New Materialism*: 1–23, 18. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 15 Bennet, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press: 113.
- 16 Rieger, Jeorg. 2016. "Rethinking the New Materialism for Religion and Theology: Why Movements Matter Most." In *Religious Experience and New Materialism: Movement Matters*, edited by Joerg Rieger, and Edward Waggoner: 151. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 17 Armour, Ellen T.. 2006. "Toward an Elemental Theology." In *Theology That Matters: Theology*, edited by Economy, God, and Darby Kathleen: 55. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- 18 Keller, Catherine. 2018. *The Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for A New Public*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 19 Kothari, Ashish. "The Flower of Transformation." *Wall Street International Magazine*. Mar. 2022.
- 20 Dongria Kondh is the hill tribe that survives in the Niyamgiri mountains spread over 250 square kilometers through the Raygada and Kalahandi districts of Odisha. Their symbiotic relationship with nature involves sustainable agriculture and traditional systems of kinship. However, international bauxite mining corporations threatened their peaceful existence and started looting natural resources with the support of the state-industry nexus. Vedanta Aluminum Limited (VAL) offered industrial growth and development but in effect, but at the cost of the displacement of the most vulnerable tribes in India and one of the most vulnerable ecosystems on the planet. For Dongria Kondh, the Niyamgiri hills are the kindom of 'Niyamraja—their supreme deity and ancestor. They believe that it was Niyamraja who offered them the 'sacred law' which disallows greedy, unsustainable exploitation of the forest and the land. See, Neera Sing, Seena Kulkarni and Neema Pathak Broome, *Ecologies of Hope and Transformation: Post-development Alternatives in India* (Pune: Kalpakavriksh, 2018), 91.
- 21 Jairath, Vasundhara. . Apr. 2021. "Environment as Land: Understanding Anti-displacement Politics in Jharkhand." In *Journal of Developing Societies* 37, no. 2: 216–31.
- 22 ———2021. "Environment as Land: Understanding Anti-displacement Politics in Jharkhand." *Journal of Developing Societies* 37, no. 2: 216–31.

REFERENCES

- Boff, Leonardo. 2002. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Orbis Books.
- Latour, Bruno. 1997. "To Modernize or Ecologize? That Is the Question." In *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, edited by Bruce Braun, and Noel Castree. London: Routledge.
- Adams, Carol, ed.. 1994. *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*. New York: Continuum.
- Dussel, Enrique. 2013. "Ethics of Liberation." In *This Age of Globalization & Exclusion*. Duke University Press.

- Zachariah, George. 2011. *Alternatives Unincorporated: Earth Ethics from the Grass Roots*. London and New York: Routledge-Taylor and Francis Group.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari. 1987. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by R. Hurley, M. Seem, and H. R. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gebara, Ivone. 1994. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Warren, K. J. 1987. "Ecofeminism and Ecology: Making Connections." *Environmental Ethics* 9, no. 1: 3–20.
- Troster, Lawrence. Dec. 2013. "What Is Eco-theology?." In *Crosscurrents* 63, no. 4: 380–5.
- Taylor, Mark Lewis. 2011. *Theological and the Political: Weight on the World*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Walters, Mark Jerome. 2003. *Six Modern Plagues: And How We Are Causing Them*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Hoel, Nina, and Elaine Nogueira-Godsey. Jan. 2011. "Transforming Feminisms: Religion, Women, and Ecology." *Journal for the Study of Religion*.
- Westhelle, Vitor. *Eschatology and Space: The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present*. New York: Springer: 1012.

About Author

Dr. Y.T. Vinayaraj is the director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS), Bengaluru.

Book Reviews

Whitney A. Bauman, *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic*, Columbia University Press, 2014, pp. 253, \$34

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler writes, “I am my relation to you” (2005:81). What she means is that we cannot account for ourselves without accounting for our connections to others. But since we can never fully know others, she argues, we can never fully know ourselves. So we must make do—and do good—with partial knowledge. Whitney A. Bauman forwards a closely related project. Both Butler and Bauman share a central deconstructive task of understanding individuals as embedded in contexts larger than themselves and of tracing out the ethical implications of that embeddedness and contextuality. As Bauman puts it, “we are contextual beings through and through” (60). While Butler works out her ethics in terms of psychoanalysis, Bauman works out his in terms of religion and science. This shift in terms allows Bauman an expanded vision. Whereas Butler shows us how we are in our relation to other people, Bauman shows us how we are in our relations to all earth others. He writes, “It is only through our interactions with human and earth others that we ourselves are formed” (60). For that reason, he urges, “the tools of queer theory, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and other critical theory need to be expanded beyond the human species boundary to include the rest of the becoming planetary community” (154).

Bauman begins to make his case in a quirky and particularly vivid way in the acknowledgments section of his book. Where writers usually thank people who have helped make a book possible, Bauman thanks “the histories of thinking in many different cultures throughout the world,” “the elements of the 13.7-billion-year process of cosmic expansion and 4.5 billion years of geoevolution,” and the “human, animal, plant, mineral, machine, and the processes” that have made possible not only the book but also his “own subjective becoming” (vii). When we try to

imagine ourselves as separate individuals—the Enlightenment idea of the self-contained, self-sufficient Self—we “background” literally countless “planetary others,” ignoring or denying everything that makes our lives possible and, thereby, distorting our view of both ourselves and the world (7, vii). As an alternative, Bauman asks us to understand ourselves as deeply embedded in the world and its processes. He asks us “to understand ourselves as naturalcultural, biohistorical, embodied thinking creatures” and “as part of a becoming process” (109). In other words, who we are is evolving and is made of meaning as well as matter, history as well as biology, culture as well as nature.

We can never fully know who we are because we are made up of many parts: many moving, interconnected, inexhaustible parts. All things are this way. Bauman writes, “I can never exhaust the knowledge of you, nor of a tree or a dog or an ocean or a galaxy” (117). So how can we act ethically? How can we choose one path as better than another when we do not have all the information? As his answer, Bauman calls for ways of seeing and being that are ethical not in spite of but in and through very partial knowledge. More specifically, he calls for “negative, apophatic, agnostic, hybrid, queer, multiperspectival, embodied, and planetary meaning-making practices” (84). As the terms in this list make clear, we can draw on many traditions of critical theory for this work. We can also draw on many religious traditions. Bauman uses the term “apophatic” to refer to the “long histories of unknowing” found in “many different religious traditions and philosophies” (9). The apophatic names that religious sensibility which does not grasp after impossible certainty but rather sits with and embraces beloved uncertainty—or, to put it more fully, sits with and embraces the beloved in uncertainty. The religious connection between love and unknowing are vital to Bauman’s project. We live in a world we cannot pin down with our minds. But we can nonetheless seek to practice “a viable, agnostic, and planetary agape or divine love” (170).

In a key passage at the end of the book, worth quoting at length, Bauman weaves together science, religion, unknowability, and love:

Built into both science and religion is a sense of the unknown and ever changing process of becoming life [...] To love, then, is to embrace the evolving and necessary unknowability of all our thoughts, ethical

justifications, imaginations, hopes, dreams, values, and knowledge. [...] The only certainty is that when certainty is imposed on the world love is impossible and violence is inevitable. Hence at the very center of the emergence of planetary identities is an embrace of the god of the gaps, the cloud of unknowing that is the source for the continuation of the becoming planetary community. (172)

In short, Bauman calls us to respond to the irreducible complexity of life with a sort of unknowing in which a sort of divine love both flourishes and leads to the flourishing of all.

What does this flourishing look like? Bauman cautions us not to answer this question *a priori*. Instead, he proposes, as the foremost ethical principle of the book, that we should seek to shape the world not according to “any sort of foundational understanding of what is natural” or “right” as determined by God, Nature, or Reason but rather according to what we find most “aesthetically, socially, and ecologically persuasive” (108). Bauman illustrates this principle by applying it to the choice we face between economic globalization and environmental planetarity, terms he adapts from Gayatri Spivak (116). If we follow economic globalization through to its end—more oil, more malls, more stuff—we will have a much hotter planet with much less diversity of life. But, Bauman insists, this future would be “just as natural or real as any alternative” (108). The planet would continue spinning. Life would continue evolving. But—and this is why Bauman still considers it unethical even if not unnatural—we would not like to live there. We might not even be able to. So “planetary boundaries” are not “ontological” but “aesthetic” (3). Bauman writes, “as human beings, we must begin to think about what types of futures we want to cocreate” (3). Environmental planetarity represents a far more compelling future.

When Bauman spells out the practical implications of his argument, he moves in an unexpected direction. Instead of calling for, say, an end to dependency on fossil fuels, he calls for universal healthcare, free higher education, and more opportunities for leisure (147-48). Though ethical insofar as they relate to the quality of human life, one might wonder how these concerns are specifically environmental. Bauman’s point is that when people are constantly treading water economically—working overtime

just to stay clothed, fed, and insured and to try to get out of debt— they have little time or energy to consider the complexities of the world or solve complex problems. “Where,” Bauman asks, “is the space-time for new generations to think together imaginatively?” (145). His answer is that we need to create it. We need to resist the “‘who has time for that, we need answers mentality” (144). We need to make time for reflection, meditation, discussion, reading, writing, and “creative/imaginative/existential thought” (144). Engaging the complexities of the world as it has become and the possibilities for its future becoming requires sustained thinking. So the first ethical act is to create the conditions necessary for subsequent ethical acts.

Religion and Ecology is a creative, penetrating, important book. Readers willing to wrestle with its difficulties may find it deeply meaningful. Bauman invites us to contemplate the complexity of the world, our evolving embeddedness in it, the limits of our knowledge, and the possibility of cocreating—through an agnostic, apophatic, agapic love—a meaningful, beautiful, ethical planetary future. May we take up that invitation.

Paul T. Corrigan

Associate professor of English at Southeastern University, Lakeland

Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*, Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 232, £21

Political theology, as a subject of discourse and deliberation, is entwined with political philosophy, ecology, and theology, whose purpose is not just to theorize but to agonize and mobilize, as noted by Catherine Keller, whose book is currently under review. The book is divided into three chapters namely, “The Political: Sovereign Exception or Collective Inception”, “The Earth: Climate of Closure, Matter of Disclosure,” and “Theology: ‘Unknown Better Now,’ and a “Beginning” and an “Apophatic Afterword”, in which the author aims to read the “collective earth moment” (p. 7) through an account of the political, the ecological, and theological dimensions. This schematisation of three chapters, according

to Keller, is an argument built up to establish the political theology of the earth.

Keller, a noted ecotheologian and feminist philosopher of religion, says that the sub-discipline of political theology developed into a branch of theology only quite recently although attempts to establish it had begun with the movement of European solidarity with the voices of liberation theology in the Global South. Notable figures such as Johannes Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Dorothee Sölle as well as John B. Cobb Jr (*Process Theology as Political Theology* (1982)), whose works remained largely influential yet did not quite establish their hold in theological circles, played a significant role in its early development. It seemed that political theology was too Eurocentric to gain traction among progressive Christian thinkers in the twentieth century. However, it has staged a comeback in recent times with its involvement in philosophy and in social activism as well as in political theory. Keller proposes reducing the entanglement of differences so that it takes a constructed theological form, or what Moltmann referred to as “the solidarity of hope”, and debunks the “radical political theologians” who set forth the “insurrectionist manifesto” of a radicalized democratic possibility. Keller views her project as theo-political, which is also collated with ecotheology and which responds to “revolutionary messianism.”

The book centers around the notion of ‘political theology’ as understood by the famous twentieth century German legal theorist Carl Schmitt. His “pivotal and problematic” text *Political Theology* (1921) has influenced generations of political scientists. Keller tries to reconsider Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty decided “in the exception.” She adds that theology has an ancient practice of liberating insight from certitude in order to think on the edge of the unthinkable, a practice she calls negative theology or apophysis—“unsaying” that was used to negate any name, dogma, or knowledge of the divine, however true and non-negotiable it may seem. Apophatic theology, according to her, operates as a means of mystical insight and takes the shade of an ethical critique. Keller says that a political theology of the earth always and mindfully casts a shadow of darkness and, therefore, it can sometimes appear as a “negative political theology.”

Chapter 1, “The Political: Sovereign Exception or Collective Inception”,

takes on the classical standpoint of the political theology of Schmitt's friend vs foe, to which William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe respond with the notion of "democratic agonism," which is a "vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests" (p. 26). Agonism or healthy antagonism is hard to be missed in the contemporary politics of 'we versus them' or 'us versus them.' Here, Keller tries to introduce Kelly Brown Douglas' geneology of white exceptionalism, correlating it with multiple registers of exceptionalism trending towards planetary emergency.

Chapter 2, "The Earth: Climate of Closure, Matter of Disclosure," attempts to highlight the havoc and destruction caused by the great crisis of our times, namely climate change. This section has frightening imageries of natural/man-made disasters, including the melting of ice and flooding, droughts and fires, and immigration and inequities reaching epic proportions in the Anthropocene. In this section, Keller introduces Donna Haraway and Karen Barad for some energizing loops through the nonhuman.

Chapter 3, "Theology: 'Unknown Better Now,'" mediates on a theological unknowing, apophatic theology, in relation to the standard certitudes of a theology of Christian exceptionalism. Process theology offers constructive alternative metaphors in which sovereign omnipotence gives way to a depth of creative indeterminacy known as 'seculareligious' political potentiality.

The conclusion titled "Apophatic Afterward" tries to read the ruptured and hyphenated present of the earth from the perspective of theology. According to Keller, political theology is always negative theology and secularization is a kind of apophasis, as a logos of theology itself but which needs its own 'docta ignorantia.' She further says that political apophasis does not silence all traces of religion but listens to its echoes. According to her, the argument of the book has proceeded from the juxtaposition of the power of the sovereign exception to the potentiality of an eco-social inception.

Key to political theology has been its readings of Schmitt's definition of sovereignty in terms of emergency. The current conversation in political

theology has been unfolding with the rush of a theoretical currency fueled by old, indeed ancient, theo-political language. It also explains how a theology forged in alliances of entangled difference helps that alliance to emerge in the face of what may be mounting planetary emergency. The author supports local movements of planetary resistance to the new merger of capitalism with white male authoritarianism. There have been umpteen examples of public angst and dissent on matters of freedom of speech and that of religion to begin with; India along with many others in the Eastern and the Western world are classic examples.

Keller tries to interpret the feedback loop of political and ecological depredation; one can safely add catastrophes such as global climate change and health emergencies such as the pandemic as secularized apocalypses. Keller calls for dissolving the opposition between the religious and the secular in favor of a broad planetary movement for social and ecological justice. She also adds that populist, authoritarian right wings that are founded on white male Christian supremacy can be countered with a messianically charged, often unspoken, theology of the now-moment that calls for a complex new public. A political theology of the earth, like what Keller proposes, has the capability to activate the world's entangled population, which united in their commitment to revolutionary solutions to the crises of the Anthropocene.

Keller has been labeled a “poet theologian” by her colleagues, one who has tried to push the case for a progressive theology and as one who argues that the resource of Christianity allows hope to prosper and a new public to emerge. The book calls upon eco-activists to explore the spiritual affinities between us to respond to the emergencies of the Anthropocene. This is surely an evocative and thought-provoking book, especially in these times when the world faces threats and ideological warfare—terrorism, racism, casteism and gender violence—or popular resistance against tyrannical governments among others.

Dr Subir Rana

Research scholar, Bengaluru.

CISRS Publications

1. *Church at the Crossroads* Edited by Rt. Rev. S. Vasantha Kumar: 2018 pp.216
2. *Labor Migration in the Post Liberalization Era.* Edited by Denzil Fernandes & P.O Martin, 2019
3. *Fragrance amidst Fragments* Edited by Rt. Rev. S. Vasanth Kumar: 2020 pp.171
4. *Reflections on COVID -19* Edited by Rev. Arun Kumar Wesley: 2020 pp.68
5. *Method and Message of Gautama Buddha and Jesus Christ Explorations in Cross- Scripture Hermeneutics* by Sr. Sam P. Mathew: 2020 pp. 274
6. *The Meghalayan Congress* Edited by Rev. Ananad Veeraraj: 2021 pp.52
7. *Universal Restoration Re-reading Luke – Acts in Indian Context* Edited by Rt. Rev. S. Vasantha Kumar: 2021 pp.188
8. ***Living Theologies*** *Reflections from Diverse Specificities* Edited by Dr. John Mohan Razu and Rev. Arun Kumar Wesley: 2021 pp.361
9. ***Salvation and Humanization*** *Some Critical Issues of the Theology of Mission in the Contemporary India* by M.M. Thomas reprinted 2022, pg.58
10. ***Response to Tyranny*** *writings between July 1975 and February 1977* by M.M. Thomas reprinted 2022, pg.122
11. *Religion and Justice* Edited by Rev. Dr. Y.T. Vinayaraj : 2022, pg.202

Religion & Society

Back issues

Vol.59

No.1 March 2014	Elections 2014
No.2 June 2014	Indigenous Womanist Theologies: Justice Perspective
No.3 September 2014	Discerning the signs of the Times: The Post Election Scenario
No.4 December 2014	Srilanka : Post war Experience

Vol.60

No.1 & 2 Mar - June 2015	Diaconal Church in Changing India
No.3 September 2015	Ghar Wapsi: A 'Home coming' Re-conversion Initiative
No.4 December 2015	Democracy and Governance

Vol.61

No. 1 & 2 Mar - June 2016	Laity in the mission of God
No. 3 & 4 Sept - Dec 2016	Centenary Commemorative Volume – M.M. Thomas: Celebration of Humanist

Vol.62

No. 1 & 2 Mar - June 2017	Church Reformed: Always Reforming
No. 3 & 4 Sept - Dec 2017	Re-Thinking Advasi / Tribal Awakening

Vol.63

No.1 March 2018	Diamond Jubilee Commemoration Volume 1957 -2017 Revisit to Revision
No.2 April 2018	Women in India Today: Issues and Challenges
No.3 July 2018	Nationalism
No.4 October 2018	Indian Women Reshaping Theology

Vol.64

No.1 January 2019	Indian Constitutional Democracy: Governance in Crises
No.2 April 2019	Dalit Politics and Dalit Theology
No.3 July 2019	Verdict and Beyond: Post Election Scenario 2019
No.4 October 2019	Interfaith Relations

Vol.65

No.1 & 2 Jan - April 2020	Theology in the Age of Empire
No.3 July 2020	COVID -19 Political and Social Implications
No.4 October 2020	The National Education Policy 2020 A Critical Appraisal

Vol.66

No.1 January 2021	Challenges to Indian Democracy
No.2 & 3 April - July 2021	Rethinking Mission
No.4 October 2021	Christian Social Thought in India

Vol.67

No. 1 January 2022	Religion as the Ethico- Political Practise of Justice: Prospects and Challenges
No. 2 April 2022	Religion, Scripture and the Hermeneutics of Justice
No. 3 September 2022	Emergencies of our Times
No.4 November 2022	Religion and Gender Justice

Religion, Ecology, and Politics

Volume 68 | Number 2 | June 2023

Editorial

Articles

Religion, Theology, and Ecology in the Capitalocene

Jeorg Rieger

Poromboke Ecotheology: Towards a Decolonial and Intersectional Ecotheology

George Zachariah

Land, Development, and the Neoliberal Agenda

Vasundhara Jairath

Religion, Ecology, and the Commons: An Indigenous Perspective

M. Zubenthung Humtsoe

Religion, Ecology, and Politics: Movement Matters

Y.T. Vinayaraj

Book Reviews

Whitney A. Bauman, *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic*

Paul T. Corrigan

Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth:*

Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public

Subir Rana



Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society
Bengaluru