HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

Towards an eco-practical theology: An eschatological horizon of true hope

Author:
Gordon E. Dames[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology, Faculty of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Gordon Dames,
damesge@unisa.ac.za

Dates:
Received: 26 Feb. 2024
Accepted: 24 May 2024
Published: 22 July 2024

How to cite this article:
Dames, G.E., 2024, 'Towards an eco-practical theology: An eschatological horizon of true hope', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a9768. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9768

The ecological crisis in the world necessitates the reconfiguration of the hegemony of modern science, theology, politics, economics and technology – the root cause of a pending ecological catastrophe. The aim is to redress a growing culture of apathy in the context of devastating weather conditions, social and political discord, and unrelenting violent wars. Public theology serves as a conceptual framework with transversal rationality as an interlocutor between the different theological (systematic, ethics, pastoral care and eco-theology), religious and philosophical perspectives. The theological ontology of care is presented followed by the role of communities of critical prophetic discourse. The notion of earth as a community leads to the prospect of a new eco-theology. Finally, the pending ecological catastrophe is reconceptualised in and through Christian eschatology. This is an inter- and intra-disciplinary discussion on the disastrous consequences of modernity and anthropocentric behaviour in terms of the current environmental crisis. Various scholars offer valuable insights into what the problem is, who responsible is for the environmental crisis, and how Christian communities should forge an accountability of care for the earth and vulnerable human beings. The eschatological reality of God's preferred future remains a constant of hopeful and sustainable life in the Anthropocene age. It is recommended that we change the way we exist by transforming modernity as developed and sustained through theology, socio-political, economic and technological 'advances'.

Contribution: This article focussed on the ecological crisis because of anthropocentrism and distorted theological, political and socio-economic paradigms to serve human interests despite the consequences for the earth. We need to reconfigure interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary scientific approaches to embrace earth as a key scientific interlocutor. The ecological crisis should be conceptualised within the reality of Christian eschatology – Jesus Christ is ultimately, the eschaton.

Keywords: ecology; eschatology; public theology; pastoral care; eco-practical theology.

Introduction

Dangerous levels of despair are evident in global communities, social organisations, religious fraternities and even science (Botman 2002:23). The foundation of hope has been crushed by global social despair, so prominent in natural hazards, violent events and the brutality of wars. Despair has even led to a culture of death in some circles (Moltmann 2019). Some even suggest a total change of the world order, the obliteration of the future, the end of history and the decline of secular hope (Botman 2002:22; Rose 2023:13). The same view holds for theology that shaped a world with 'immeasurable, incomprehensible, and irredeemable violence' (Rose 2023:194). In a scenario of the loss of the plausibility of belief, Firet as cited by Heitink (1993:15), calls for a 'theologische futurology'. Life, as we once knew it, has changed and immersed Christians into an existential crisis of faith (Volf 2011).

This calls for a multidisciplinary approach to deal with human and nature's life and death issues. To do so, we need to draw on insights beyond the general theological premises.

This article is therefore based on an inter- and intra-disciplinary study focussing primarily on the current ecological crisis in the world as its context. Firstly, Harvie's (2019) public theology will serve as a conceptual framework. Secondly, Van Huyssteen's (2010) transversal rationality will function as an interlocutor between the different theological (systematic, ethics, pastoral care and eco-theology), religious and philosophical perspectives. Thirdly, a theological ontology of care (Bonhoeffer in Harvie 2019; Moschella & Butler 2020) is presented followed by the role of communities of prophetic imaginary discourse (Verhey 2005) and Rasmussen's (2005) theory of

the earth as a community. Furthermore, a new eco-practical theology is offered (Moltmann 2019) and finally, Adro König's (1985) seminal text, Jesus die laaste is applied as a convergence of the different theoretical positions. As an aim to redress natural and human suffering, the suffocation of life, I hold that we can only redress the pending ecological catastrophe in and through Christian eschatology.

A practical theology response

No wonder Heitink (1993:14–15) refers to a deep crisis of authority in Western society. Wolfgang Huber, according to Botman (2004b:514), describes the nature of this crisis as a loss of hope. Yet two decades ago, Heitink (1979:19) predicted the function of modern practical theology as a science reflecting on the actions between God and humans in the tension field of interpersonal relations and corresponding structures and actions (Heitink 1979:20–21). Consequently, theological reflection on creation, ecology, Christology and pneumatology was advanced from the perspective of the praxis of God. I will discuss the historical concretisation between the divine praxeology and human praxeology in terms of Christopraxis in this section (Botman 2000). The praxis of humanity should be viewed as God's creation and not solely as a human praxis of superiority over others and nature. Nature is God's creation. The world, Africa and/or nature is the 'theatrum gloriae Dei' (Botman 2002:29; Heitink 1979:21). The actions of God, in and through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit render the re-creation praxis of God not just as a future prospect, but as an imminent, contemporary reality, particularly, in the light of a growing reality of despair, engineered by 'the fruits of globalisation' (Botman 2004b:514).

Globalisation has inflicted permanent wounds and scars on humans and nature, specifically in marginalised communities. It serves the interests of the wealthy and those who trample over the dignity and values of 'the people living in the squatter camps of South Africa and the ghettos of the world' (Botman 2004a:319). The restoration of human dignity of the poorest and most vulnerable and the promotion of environmental consciousness in South Africa serve as an example of how countries can partake in the imminent re-creation praxis of God (Botman 2004a:319).

However, devastating weather conditions, unrelenting violent wars, social and political distrust and discord, and violent community upheaval seem to be the new normal. Moreso, technology undermines the fibre of communities resulting in fractured realities in human life and nature. Globalisation subsequently subverts the restoration of human dignity and the flourishing of the environment (Botman 2004a:321).

Zoloth (2023:3) maintains that climate change is more profound than life-threatening pandemics and that we need to stop how we are living and reflect on changing our imminent fate. This could help to redress the plight of the Other and the environment (Nürnberger 2017:14; Zoloth 2023:7). Climate change forces us to reconceptualise nature and the human family (Zoloth 2023:9–10). Hence, a theology of interruption could enhance a reconfiguration of life on earth (Zoloth 2023:184–185). For instance, we should discourage the popular illusion of living in apocalyptic times. The term 'apocalypse' is a Greek word *apokalupsis* meaning revelation or unveiling (Rose 2023; Zoloth 2023). In apocalyptic literature of the Jewish and Christian traditions, this moment of revealing – of seeing the world as it is – is radically transformative and revolutionary (Taubes in Rose 2023:2). Note Botman's (2004b:513) notion that '[*t*]ransformative living is living in the presence of the future inaugurated by Jesus Christ'. It calls us to seek for actions of God in our times and places and to move beyond the status quo (Botman 2002:26).

Therefore, Heitink (1979:78–81), from a pastoral theology perspective, proposes the notion of solidarity to deal with the bipolar tension between faith and life challenges. Our actions and the way we know, believe and how we deal with what we know, should 'correspond to our deepest values or moral commitments' (Calhoun 2011:132). Suffice it to say that the challenges of the 21st century escalated into multi-polar tensions between diverse and plural realities, in nature and in human practices.

Towards a public eco-theological framework

I draw on the insights of Harvie's (2019) public theology in search of an eco-practical theology. We are in dire need of revolutionary new connective practices of earth and human embodiment (Harvie 2019:512). The earth is, therefore, a critical interlocutor of how we should approach the ecological crisis (Harvie 2019:496). Modern science and technology advanced the instrumentalisation of the earth for socio-political and economic benefit (Harvie 2019:496; Rose 2023; Zoloth 2023). Public theology should therefore advance the reconfiguration of human practices by redressing hegemonic cultural, political, socio-economic realities and eco-theological challenges.

Public theology and natural sciences should function in an interdisciplinary way to rediscover the value of life anew (Harvie 2019:496). The problem is that public theology, modern science and technology are predominantly anthropocentric – human culture is the overriding focus and not the earth (Botman 2002:24; Harvie 2019:497). Furthermore, public theology failed to acknowledge and value earth as 'the more-than-human world' (Harvie 2019:497). Harvie (2019:497), consequently, argues that the notion of public(s) by David Tracey, Max Stackhouse and Sebastian Kim, should be viewed as human institutions, particularly when ecological and religious challenges are discussed. These anthropocentric publics should be reconceptualised within a broader eschatological reality. The earth offers new and generative possibilities to reconfigure human life in terms of the more-than-human world (Harvie 2019:497). Harvie's (2019:497) evolutionary embodied practices in relation to the earth, are thus based on an ontological grounding of all other publics.

The devastation of the ecology should be viewed in terms of systemic violence in racial, political, economic and ideological realities, according to Barreto as cited by Harvie (2019:498; Botman 2002:24; cf. Rose 2023; Zoloth 2023). Harvie (2019:498), however, cautions against Barreto's oversight of not addressing the ecological attributes of human sociality (Harvie 2019:498). He consequently proposes three publics to accentuate communal ontology, namely the earth as commons, diffractive approaches, connected flesh, based on Maurice Harvie (2019:498–499).

Firstly, the public refers to the earth as commons. Following Rasmussen's (2005) notion of the earth as a community, I prefer the terms 'community, institutions or corporations', and will use it interchangeably. Earth is a bioregional community that supports the lives of diverse species in an integrated, fixed-fluid ecosystem. Earth community nourishes all people and all living creatures (Harvie 2019:499). Human and religious communities support and enhance societies to be proactive and accountable, engendering 'creatiocentric consciousness' to the earth (Harvie 2019:499–500). It could redress the commodification or instrumentalisation of nature and human beings (Harvie 2019:500). The reciprocity between community and the earth can be viewed from a divine,[1] Christian or general religious perspective. Unfortunately, it fails to incorporate non-religious worldviews, and results in the commodification of community in terms of the power of corporations (Harvie 2019:501). Corporatisation threatens the embodied needs of diverse species in the earth's ecosystems (Harvie 2019:501). Beatrice Marovich, as cited by Harvie (2019:501), offers a solution to this predicament by calling for creaturely difference. Harvie (2019:501) integrates Karen Barad's diffractive approach to accentuate Marovich's notion of creaturely difference.

Secondly, the public of diffraction[2] focusses on the 'relational nature of difference', whereas the public of community deals with 'connectedness of living beings in the biotic community', according to Harvie (2019:502). Barad holds that the tappestry of difference creates the fibre of the world characteristic of an ontology of continuous change and contingecy in the world (Harvie 2019:502–503). According to Barad (in Harvie 2019:503) the reconfiguration of an anthropocentric hierarchical worldview is critical.

Drawing from Barad, Harvie aims to advance the project of theological reconceptualisation by transcending traditional religious, moral, or confessional boundaries. Public theology should therefore focus on 'creaturely life'. As such, it can be instrumental in crossing boundaries and exploring or revealing 'the porosity of the liminal spaces between beings' (Harvie 2019:503). Harvie (2019:503) maintains that 'diffractive publics do not negate connections, but the possibilities for these are left underdeveloped in their phenomenological and ontological capacities'. The value of connections in a diffractive scenario holds immense new possibilities if its phenomenological and ontological attributes can be identified, recognised, and applied in modern science and political realities. Attaining such an ideal prompts Harvie (2019:503) to develop a solution to resolve the tension between community and the dynamics of difference by integrating the notion of 'embodied flesh'.

Connected flesh as a public

Perceptual faith according to Michael Berman, as cited by Harvie (2019:504), resolves the gap in Harvie's (2019) ecological public theology. He holds that perceptual faith is a 'critical function of our embodied participation in the world' (Harvie 2019:504). Our perceptions are shaped by the ontological interaction between our bodies and our environment (Berman in Harvie 2019:504). We are recalled to the grassroots of our pre-objective experience, 'our existence as incarnate lived-bodies' (Berman in Harvie 2019:504): 'Human participation with the earth occurs by virtue of the co-emergence of our body with the flesh of the world' (Harvie 2019:504–505). Phenomenologically, the body and the environment intersect 'human life with animal life and the living earth' (Harvie 2019:505). Connected flesh as an integrative attribute enhances 'the living biosphere as an ontologically grounded public' (Harvie 2019:503–504). Phenomenological attributes of embodied perception become ontological existence in a tangible world (Harvie 2019:505). The 'flesh of the world' increases 'the body's interactive connectivity for opportunities of multiple modes of existence' (Harvie 2019:505). This is where the penny drops (Harvie 2019):

> Flesh is not anthropological, and hence an anthropocentric projection onto the world, but recognition that the connective tissues of our embodied selves meet wherein worlds are explored, critiqued, and generated between bodies. Here in this corporeal presence, perceptual faith maintains an ongoing interrogation in the conceptualisation of the primordial experience of evolutionary animal flesh, of which humanity is but one iteration. (p. 505)

The flesh, therefore, is not an anthropological attribute – it is simultaneously an objective phenomenal and ontological body. It creates new symbols, communicative actions and new relational possibilities 'with the more-than-human world' (Harvie 2019:508). Indigenous people's relational connection with the earth is not merely a commodity but is a sacred ancestral reality related to the whole of life (Harvie 2019:509).

Hence, environmental justice, according to Deborah McGregor, aims to secure the flourishing of all life (in Harvie 2019:509, 511). Human beings are not separate and independent from nature, are not superior to nature, and as a result, should not have dominion or control over nature. If the status quo remains, it could lead to an imminent and total discontinuity between human and non-human species (Kompridis in LaMothe 2022:41). How then do we move beyond an anthropocentric paradigm towards a public of connected flesh, ontologically grounded in the living biosphere?

1. Hart, as cited by Harvie (2019:499; Gen 9:9), holds that 'Earth is a natural "sacrament for humanity"'.

2. Harvie (2019:502) borrows this concept from Karen Barad. Her scientific methodology is unique in 'science studies which traverses the breath of religious studies, feminist philosophy, and quantum theory. She utilizes diffraction as an overarching metaphor for her work'.

A public of embodied existence

Van Huyssteen's (2010) postfoundational methodology, namely transversal rationality, could resolve the impasse of anthropocentrism to engender a connected flesh ontology within the living biosphere. His notion of the embodied self builds on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty in Vosloo (2021). Drawing from Harvie's (2019) three publics, I argue that Van Huyssteen's notion of boundary crossing in a diverse biodiverse should be integrated with the notion of perceptual faith and integrity in diverse anthropocentric, biodiverse contexts and our embodied selves. Transversal perceptual faith could prove invaluable to developing non-hierarchical realities by creating new ways of doing theology by crossing over to the social and natural sciences (Van Huyssteen 2010:145). Berman's concept of perceptual faith is a multilayered conversation with other sciences (in Harvie 2019:504). Embracing transversal rationality may also enhance our embeddedness in nature, other cultures and social settings as unavoidable living realities (Van Huyssteen 2010:143). Perceptual faith is deeply embedded in embodied actions, reaching transversally across diverse actions and forms on many levels (Van Huyssteen 2010:145). There 'is a convergence between the evolutionary emergence of *homo sapience* and Christian beliefs in the origin of the human creature' (Van Huyssteen 2010:146). Transversal perceptual faith challenges anthropocentrism and hegemony over creation (Van Huyssteen 2010:147). Our 'embodied existence confronts us with the realities of vulnerability, sin, tragedy, and affliction' (Van Huyssteen 2010:150). The historical plight of indigenous and marginalised communities is living proof of this (cf. Rose 2023; Zoloth 2023).

A case in point is the popular tourist destination in the Garden Route of South Africa, the collapse of an apartment building in George inflicted agony and the deaths of 24 labourers – 28 were still unaccountable at the time of writing this article. This horrific event exposes the indiscriminative, rapid and massive land developments with a devastating impact on the lives of local people, the environment and nature (The Herald 2024). Across the Western Cape, land and property swaps for wealthy whites denying poor, vulnerable and marginalised communities the right to life in secure housing and living conditions, are a reminder of forced removals during apartheid and a new form of economic apartheid (Daniels 2024), see Figure 1.

The Anthropocene age points to the interdependency of all life forms on a biodiverse earth. Therefore, a need to care for other species and the whole of the earth (LaMothe 2022: 11–12). The public theology of Harvie (2019) can inform an eco-practical theology methodology to raise a new awareness of the task of critical action, reflection, and building of new practices to redress the climate crisis in relation to the plight of millions in the world.

Public practical theology of life-care

Christian Parenti coined the term 'catastrophic convergence' to define the impact of political, economic and environmental disasters. In a sense, his notion of convergence is symptomatic of the need to redress the imminent catastrophe on earth and for humanity (LaMothe 2022:27):

> For millions of people, COVID-19 was the first intimation of a changed climate and a changed world. But for Black and Brown communities, and poor white rural communities, it was not unexpected that a catastrophe would affect them differently, for climate change has long affected the most vulnerable more profoundly. (Zoloth 2023:3)

Source: Photo taken by Gordon Dames on 08 May 2024 at the intersection of York and Victoria Street, George.

FIGURE 1: George building collapse: Stop suffering and corruption.

Our anthropocentric way of living necessitates a pastoral theology for the Anthropocene (LaMothe 2022). However, for marginalised communities, the Anthropocene was an existential reality long before modern science recognised the imminent environmental disaster (Zoloth 2023). For these communities, daily life remains a catastrophic reality of anthropocentric dominance over every possible natural and human resource instrumentalised to serve selfish interests. Botman (2002:30), therefore, calls for a new kind of Christian hope to redress the living conditions of the poor and marginalised in the global south. The well-being of these communities, such as the black church, is a core part of God's future. The black church, in this article, serves as an example of how the impact of the Anthropocene on marginalised communities within a global context, could be redressed in terms of a ministry of corporate care. Specifically in terms of the call from the Commission of Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches in 1978 that Christians should actively

demonstrate the hope they inherited from God. The church is a community of hope enacting and symbolising resistance against despair. It shares this hope for a new future and can embrace hope without fear (Botman 2004b:516–517). The church should pronounce a new religious horizon of hope. Nürnberger (2017:1) calls for a 'reconceptualization of Christian future expectations as human participation in God's vision of comprehensive optimal well-being in all aspects of life'. This hope for a flourishing future should be augmented with prophetic intent to raise new levels of awareness. Awareness defined as 'alternative consciousness', aims to create a new dynamic between the Creator, creation, the church and human beings, according to Walter Brueggeman as cited in Andrews (2002:45–46). The aim is twofold, namely to prophetically conscientise humanity of their existential realities inflicted by hegemonic forces, and to foster social accountability and envision a new future by changing that which the selfish interests of humans have inflicted upon the rest of humanity and the creation (Andrews 2002; Calhoun 2011).

No wonder that pastoral care in the black church is defined as a prophetic ministry and 'corporate care' because of slavery and the wounds of racism in America (Andrews 2002; Moschella & Butler 2020:12, 15). Practical theology in the black church is viewed from its prophetic intent to cultivate spiritual and social liberation (Andrews 2002). As a sustaining function, it encapsulates the ministry of the entire church to support suffering humans to overcome or endure unresolved circumstances (Moschella & Butler 2020:14).

God remains the ultimate source of life in a hostile environment (Moschella & Butler 2020:17–18): 'For the slave, God was immanently involved in all of life, and he was the ultimate source of life' (Moschella & Butler 2020:17). The black church is a critical community resource and a refuge to help sustain the lives of oppressed people in a 'depersonalised environment' (Andrews 2002:390; Moschella & Butler 2020:21). Communal and public care symbolised pastoral care to sustain and guide communities faced with brutal oppression (Moschella & Butler 2020:267). The black church provided life-generating survival and liberation for suffering people. God's enduring presence is deeply woven in the fibre of the black church's care for the well-being of all (Moschella & Butler 2020:268). The church should, therefore, be an alternative community by setting alternative practices to redress structural evil, violence, oppression and inequalities (Conradie 2009:49–50). The black church was and is a proactive space empowering the marginalised and dehumanised for living anew (Andrews 2002). I hold that the world can learn to emulate the agency of the black church to redress the environmental crisis.

Historically the black church in America embraced brutal suffering and oppression without fleeing from earth and its distress, drawing from Bonhoeffer as cited by Rasmussen (2005:303). We cannot continue being indifferent to the homeless, hungry and not see their deaths (Zoloth 2023:141). Human uniqueness and our capacity to envision the future should embrace the plight of the hopeless and vulnerable and not be regarded as superior to other living creatures (Nürnberger 2017).

It is only the suffering God that can help people in distress, posits Bonhoeffer as cited by Rasmussen (2005:303). The black church embodies the wounds of the suffering God based on the incarnation of Christ in and through the earth (Rasmussen 2005:303). This earthboundness refers to an embrace of earth and God (Rasmussen 2005:304). God affirmed earth in Jesus's death and resurrection – fully affirmed earth for its new life (Rasmussen 2005:304). We are, therefore, accountable and responsible for the distress of the earth (König 1985; Rasmussen 2005:305). However, corporations and organisations have replaced nature as a means of power and commodity (Rasmussen 2005:305). Western civilisation fragmented itself from nature by destroying both natural and human indigenous communities:

> [W]e live in a theo-political economy, an imperative moral economy, that is far more important than the marketplace which deceives and seduces and tells the enormous lie that the earth can be destroyed, its energy sucked off and burned for profit (Zoloth 2023:222–223). The arch of the moral universe is long but bends towards justice (Martin Luther King as cited in Zoloth 2023:183).

Community and life constitute humans as social beings (Rasmussen 2005:314): 'The affirmation of creation and human life was an absolute necessity for any formulation of Black theology' (Andrews 2002:42). God willed the freedom of all humanity and rejects human disorder (Andrews 2002:44). For '[Christ] does not lead people in a religious flight from this world but gives them back to the earth as loyal sons' (Bonhoeffer as cited by Rasmussen 2005:303).

LaMothe (2022:2–3, 5) maintains that the whole of human beings must offer care to and redress the suffering of human beings and other species: 'Climate change is the defining existential event of our age' (LaMothe 2022:2–3). How do we re-discern our being on earth?

Towards communities of prophetic imagination

As discussed aforementioned, public theology seeks to challenge environmental crises by 'reconfiguring humanity within … it' (Harvie 2019:498). Humanity is the problem, posits Zoloth (2023:12), we must base the moral choices of our behaviour on ontological decisions and not on anthropocentric selfish interests. Furthermore, the dominant focus on confessional principles has also stifled sociality as a fundamental attribute of public theology (Harvie 2019).

Bonhoeffer, as cited by Ebeling (2023), urges the Christian church to confront practices and institutions of dehumanisation. Engaging in appropriate, adaptable and applicable ethical discourse of how to live responsible lives imitating the selfless life of Jesus Christ. The voice of the church seems muted in the global world of humankind.

An anthesis to pastoral care in the black church is that many people today are failing to trust congregations to care for them. Churches fail to be trusted because of perfectionism, being inhospitable to suffering, and despising those on the margins of life (Verhey 2005:7). West holds that 'the culture of the wretched of the earth is deeply religious', as cited in Mendieta and VanAntwerpen (eds. 2011:10). The metaphysical moral disease of confessional dogmas in terms of environmental challenges could stifle 'creatiocentric consciousness' (Harvie 2019:498, 500). It necessitates prophetic discernment and judgement as critical perceptual faith in the world (Harvie 2019; Conradie 2009:41).

Churches are distinctive communities and ought to serve and honour God without restraints (Verhey 2005:38). Churches must be communities of discernment and communities of new memory to seek what should be done as well as why it should be done (Verhey 2005:38). Communal discernment is always that which is worthy of the story of Christian love. It calls for prophetic judgement to redress injustices at the core of the climate crisis (Conradie 2009:41). The Christian hope that the common good or public well-being creates, is 'love stretching itself into the future' (Volf 2011:55). Facing death and life is a task of communal discourse and discernment demanding all the resources in the church (Verhey 2005:84). God sides with threatened human and non-human lives by resisting the threats they encounter (Verhey 2005:101). Victory over death and suffering is God's victory – God's preferred future for his creation is the fullness of life (Verhey 2005:115): 'The Spirit is present in both the church and the world, evoking and forming the senses of dependence, gratitude, remorse, hope and responsibility' (Verhey 2005:506). Rasmussen (2005:15) consequently asks: 'What habits of heart and mind, and what type of policies and institutions are needed to secure sustainable communities if nature and earth are a complex community?' Therefore, ethical choices should intersect with political decisions to resist destructive practices on earth (Harvie 2019:508).

Moe-Lobeda, as cited by Conradie (2014:908), calls for a 'critical moral vision' to inform social analyse to disarm global economic hegemony at the heart of oppressive socio-economic realities and the destruction of the ecology. Based on Botman (2004b:513), I concur that 'the nature of true eschatological ethics is in living "as if the status quo is not"'.

The earth as a community

Rasmussen's (2005:10) analysis of the earth filled with abundant life but a prisoner, captures the core of the abyss of modern science, technology, economic wealth, to name a few, in the name of human advancement. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) exposed the fallibility of modern human advancement to its core. Furthermore, 'technological achievements robbed human beings of their ecology and the environment of its magic' (Botman 2002:24): '[*A*] conceptual break from modern progress and prosperity-faith, instrumental rationality, the Christian empire, Christendom, even a Christian European civilization', is called for to dismantle modern hegemony and the subjugation of others (Botman 2002:24). Humanity is in need of a radical conversion to care for the earth. Here Rasmussen speaks prophetically against the church's default position in terms of dogmas and practices for its own selfish and self-serving agendas (Harvie 2019; cf. Rose 2023). The church ought to sound its creative voice inherent to its God-given calling to embrace the earth's cause (Rasmussen 2005:10–11). Christianity is based on the tradition of Judaism that holds the tension between creation and redemption as matters of earth (cf. Zoloth 2023). Christianity possesses a radically incarnational faith – 'the earthly incarnation of God' in and through Jesus Christ (Rasmussen 2005:11). Following Rasmussen (2005), I argue for a Christo-eco-praxis to advance the redemption of humanity, creation, and the flourishing of life as a whole. Religious fraternities should proactively formulate, shape and practice public faith. The aim is to transform the earth and fight injustices and the disintegration and destruction of creation (Rasmussen 2005:12). The appeal of Rasmussen (2005:14) that the church should become 'genuine earth faith' may sound untheological or even heretical for the institutionalised church. It could, however, help to sensitise the church to deal with the environmental crisis. Berman's notion of conceptual faith is thus helpful (in Harvie 2019:504). Because the church needs transformation through the earth in terms of its distress (Rasmussen 2005:14). Otherwise, the earthly incarnation of God and Christ's redemption will be void of the *missio Dei* – the redemption and recreation of creation. Botman (2004b:513), however, cautions us to see beyond the horizon of creation by embracing the fullness of a new creation. Could it be that he discarded the ideal of an imminent recreation of planet earth?

Towards an eco-practical theology

Rasmussen (2005:15) claims that the notion of the earth as a community is a scientific discovery of the 21st century. However, indigenous nations were always conscious of this reality (cf. Harvie 2019; Zoloth 2023). Earth is a community of life – a life-giving seed (cf. Harvie 2019; Rasmussen 2005:15), and not a reality of death (Moltmann 2019). The meaning of '*oikos* an ancient vision of earth as a single public household', should provide us with a sense of the whole or fullness of life beyond divisions and destruction (Rasmussen 2005:19). Nature and earth comprise a single community, a public of commons (Harvie 2019), breathing and sustaining life together. 'Earth faith and earth community' are 'humanity's next journey', according to Rasmussen (2005:19). If viewed from a Christo-eco-praxis, life has always been an integrated whole in and through the earthly incarnation of God.

However, Moltmann (2019:3–5) defines the current 'culture of life' as danger and death because of a radical Islamic philosophy of death. The imminent threat of a nuclear third world war increases the prospects of a violent end to our existence. 'Life is no longer loved', according to Albert Schweitzer as cited by Moltmann (2019:7). The devastating

impact of modern industrialisation disrupted the earth's equilibrium. We face 'a universal ecological death of all forms of life' (Moltmann 2019:7). Following Albert Schweitzer, as cited by Moltmann (2019:11), we are in dire need of freedom from modern domination over nature, for a 'reverence for life'. What nature and human beings require are an authentic community grounded in solidarity and social justice (Moltmann 2019:10; cf. Rose 2023; Zoloth 2023).

Summarising the discussion thus far, respect for life calls for biocentrism beyond anthropocentrism. Following Rose (2023), we must strive to 'end the world', and dismantle the hegemony in the entire human stratification to advance a preferred ecological future (cf. Harvie 2019; Moltmann 2019:11–12, 15). A new biocentric paradigm of life should be characteristic of diverse human cultures and a creation filled with hope and flourishing for a life-filled-future (Moltmann 2019:15). We should regain the ability to hope for a new humanity and restored earth by eradicating life-threatening diseases and poverty; searching for the embodiment of just social cohesion; the strenthening of family systems and the advancement of global peace and order (Botman 2004b:514). Afro-pessimism, for instance, is caused by despair, which necessitates a prophetic imagination to envision a new horizon, the horizon of hope (Botman 2002:23).

Attaining these ideals calls for a new eco-practical theology to transform and replace modern theology (cf. Rose 2023; Zoloth 2023). Modern theology was and is instrumental in developing 'the devastating interpretation and practices of God without the world and the world without God as a precursor for human domination' (Moltmann 2019:16). Eco-practical theology could advance the indicative and imperative that 'the earth cares for us and creates the conditions for human life and flourishing with a lasting social justice framework' (Moltmann 2019:16). Human beings form part of a greater community of life, of which nature is an integral part: 'Human beings are *imago mundi* before they are *imago Dei* – we are but a microcosm of all life' (Moltmann 2019:19; cf. Rasmussen 2005): 'God's image in creation determined human meaning and worth. God's creation of human freedom determined God's desire for the ultimate power behind faith in God as Creator' (Andrews 2002:44).

Creation is, therefore, a divine cosmos, in Aristotle's view, the 'soul of the world' (Moltmann 2019:20). This is a profound ecological worldview that creation is in God and God is in creation (Moltmann 2019:22–23): 'Earth is the mother of human beings, the womb of an earthly community with an ecological future for human beings and nature in God' (Moltmann 2019:30). The views of Botman (2002), Conradie (2014), Harvie (2019), Rasmussen (2005), Wimberley in Moschella and Butler (2020) and Verhey (2005), echo the proactive presence and mission of God in creation.

What if we fail, yet again, to build a new eco-theology? What if we fail to care for nature and vulnerable human communities? König (1985) offers a solution to these questions. Drawing from the various perspectives in our discussion so far, I hold that the bipolar tension between the Anthropocene age offers possibilities in and through the three publics of Harvie (2019), namely community, diffractive and embodied flesh, by grounding human and the more-than-human-life in the eschatological embodied flesh of Christ.

Christian eschatology for a new ontological ecology

Botman (2002:26) calls for the 'remaking of the Christian hope by basing it anew on the new acts that God is doing in the world today' (cf. Heitink 1979). He posits that this eschatological hope is foundational to the triune God for God is actively engaged in the world. König (1985), on his part, holds that Christ is the beginning and end of creation. Botman (2002:26), however, argues that the eschatological hope does not start with Jesus. König maintains that God brought the universe into unity in Christ (Eph 1:10; König 1985:29–30). The entire creation centres on Christ and cannot fail (König 1985:32–33). Without Christ, the end of creation will be futile, for the beginning and end of creation is a person – Jesus Christ (König 1985:37). Thus, the entire history of Jesus Christ is based on Christian eschatology. All things and the last things, *ta eschata* culminate in Jesus as 'the last', *eschatos* (König 1985:7). He is the *eschatos* because his whole history should be viewed from an eschatological perspective. He is both the eschatos and the telos, the end and purpose of creation (König 1985:51). Christian eschatology points to Jesus's creation purpose and his mission to realise this purpose throughout his entire eschatological history (König 1985:57). God's mission centres ultimately on the well-being of creation (Conradie 2010:394).

Barth, as cited by König (1985:65–66) posits that creation is grace – undeserved grace. So, we may ask, what about Moltmann's (2019) notion of a culture of death in some religious circles? The cross of Christ signals that the eschaton or end-purpose has been realised *for* us, *in* us and yet to be fulfilled *with* us. We are destined to become active in the end purpose of creation as part of God's preferred future (König 1985:93). Christian eschatology points to Christ's reconciliation with human beings and the entire universe (Col 1:20). The whole of humanity has a cosmic element of Christian eschatology (König 1985:94, 244). Restorative justice, for instance, should encapsulate a vision of and mission to realise the future (Botman 2004a:326). Christian eschatology does not point to a temporal end but the ultimate end as a person, and a way, he is the end and the end-purpose in how he realised it *for* creation, *in creation* and eventually *with* creation in terms of his salvation historical eschatology (König 1985:111, 121). This is the depth of the purpose of God's creation – that God wants to and has indeed realised this purpose with his entire creation (König 1985:244). God's purpose with creation has been realised through Christ *for* us and for the whole of creation (König 1985:122, 253). God will realise his creation purpose with creation by being our God *for* creation, *in* communion *with* creation so that the whole of creation can share in his glory (I Cor 13:12) (König 1985:271).

Following Botman (2002), Conradie (2010), Harvie (2019), Rasmussen (2005), Moltmann (2019) and König (1985), among others, we can concur that God is realising his creation purpose by being *connected* with nature *for* all living beings and by being our God *in* the biosphere despite the *relational nature of difference* by reaching his preferred future *with* the whole of nature as *connected flesh* (Harvie 2019; König 1985).

Conclusion

I maintain that eco-practical theology based on the three publics of Harvie (2019), from the perspective of Christian eschatology, could prove indispensible for a new sense of hope and future on earth.

The different theological perspectives demonstrate a measure of convergence regarding the irreplaceability of the earth as an embodied flesh community and the minuscule role of, yet divine responsibility of human beings to care for the well-being of the earth and vulnerable humans. God realises his purpose with nature by being connected *with* nature for all living beings and by being our God *in* the biosphere despite the relational nature of difference – by reaching his preferred future *with* the whole of nature as connected flesh (Harvie 2019; König 1985). The virtue of life care is indispensable for the flourishing of the biosphere (Harvie 2019; Moltmann 2019). Modern theology distorted the role of humans as rulers over the earth with a devastating dominion over all life forms on earth. Human culture, particularly anthropocentrism, should be reconfigured to redress the devastating environmental crisis. Social and ecological justice is non-negotiable indicative and imperative. They are embodied in and through human flesh, the flesh of nature and ultimately the flesh of Christ. The whole of humanity, creation, death and life are subjected to a Christian eschatological ontology of God's preferred future for earth and human beings. The bipolar tension in how we construct, what we know and how we execute that which we know in terms of the climate crisis, can only be resolved in and through Christian eschatology. The biocentric public transcends an anthropocentric public. We are in dire need of a new eco-practical theology for the future, free from the dominance of the Anthropocene, because creation is de facto theatrum gloriae Dei (Heitink 1979:19, 21).

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

G.E.D. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, G.E.D.

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