10 Theology in the Anthropocene – and beyond?*

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Ever since the Stratigraphy Commission of the Geological Society of London in 2008 made a case for incorporating the Anthropocene into the geological time scale, the debate about the understanding of the Anthropocene has made massive waves.¹ The notion of “Anthropocene” implies a shift from the Holocene to a new epoch in the earth’s history, where human impacts since the so-called Industrial Revolution in the 18th century have increased on such a scale that “The human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system” [Fig. 1].² Among many other pieces of evidence, such as accelerating rates of species invasion and extinction, [Fig. 2] increasing sea level, and human disturbance of the climate system, [Fig. 3] the traces of human activities, such as nuclear waste, plastic waste, and soot, on planet earth have increased on a significant scale.

While scientists have enthusiastically embraced the suggestion, which, it should be noted, was not developed by geologists, but by self-critically aware geengineers and chemists, others have criticised the implicit anthropocentrism and the practice of human eco-management as an almost God-and-nature-given imperative.⁴

How is religion, in general, and Christian theology, in particular, affected by this discourse? A hint lies in my title’s “in”: religion and theology cannot simply relate *to* the Anthropocene and its discourse, but are already affected by it as faith unfolds as a practical and ideological human activity that in itself, for good and bad, affects the environment and history of the earth. Theology, and religion (as we showed earlier⁵), necessarily takes place today *in* the Anthropocene. Liberating theology needs to reinvent itself as a critical creation theology *within*, and as I will envision, also *beyond* the Anthropocene. One of the significant contexts for doing theology today is the ongoing anthropogenic change of the planet’s atmosphere and life worlds.

In the following, I will, to begin with, discuss some critical arguments against the triumphalist interpretation of the Anthropocene. As a second step, I will try to formulate the central challenge within the discourse – for faith communities as well as for other agents – and search for antidotes.

Figure 10.1 Key markers of anthropogenic change

Source: Waters et al., Figure 1

Finally, theological skills will be explored, in order to widen our vision from the past and present to a future beyond the Anthropocene. In this way it will move toward a contextual theopolitics of the earth experienced as the Ecocene.

Figure 10.2 Vertebrate species extinction

Source: Ceballos et al.³

Triumphalist eco-management or eco-justice? the ambivalence of the Anthropocene narrative

After some initial hopeful optimism about the consensus that humans today are impacting on all kinds of habitats on the “Earth, our home”,⁶ my feelings have transmuted into an increasing ambivalence towards what now seems to function as a homogenising concept and a problematically generalising screen for projection.⁷ The normative ambitions of the Anthropocene narrative remain ambivalent.⁸ The notion of Anthropocene appears as a Janus-faced character.⁹

Three critical points should be emphasised.

First, will the insight into the all-embracing impact of humans lead to a new humility towards both human and other life forms, *or* will it fertilise a new triumphalist self-understanding of humankind and a utilitarian agenda with regard to human technocratic and economic management? Even if the introduction of the term, fortunately enough, has rather followed the humble path, one can trace among earth system scholars a certain degree of a self-aggrandising and, so to speak, socio-engineering attitude to the human/cultural/social/spiritual spheres of life. The narrative about

Figure 10.3 Change in temperature and precipitation

Source: IPCC Climate Change 2014, *Synthesis Report*, Fifth Assessment Report, http://ar5-syr.ipcc.ch/ipcc/sites/default/files/AR5_SYR_Figure_SPM.7.png, 16 November 2017

the Anthropocene does not, to put it plainly, produce any antidotes against anthropocentric superiority and absolutism.

While the environmental humanities, to which ecotheology and the studies of religion and the environment also belong, reflect on nature as a source of gifts and commons of life,¹⁰ regarding the human as an integral part of nature, earth system analysis often, even if not in general,¹¹ operates with a poor reductionist understanding of the human and social, which is designed in sharp contrast to its highly sophisticated model of complexity with regard to natural processes. While religions compress the narrative into the language of “respect towards”, “wisdom about” and “compassion and wonder within” nature, science continues to take an external, somehow metaphysical position from which to describe nature. The fatal doctrine of nature as (a market [?] for) “ecosystem services”, which is popular in economics and some earth sciences, builds furthermore on the illusion that all life exists mainly for the sake of humans. But is the sky really made for us? [Fig. 4]

A second criticism regards the lack of power analysis in the narrative. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg rightly accuse the narrative of neglecting

Figure 10.4 Clouds over Kattegatt

Source: photo by author, October 2017

the uneven distribution of wealth as a condition for the very existence of modern, fossil-fuel technology, and of ignoring the fact that humans have caused global warming over the course of their long history.¹² Is Anthropocene thinking simply extending the natural scientists' worldviews to society?

Humans *in general*, in my view, do not exist; they always live and act in particular, in concrete contexts. Given the fact that the majority of the planet's poor are suffering from the violence of ongoing climatic change caused by a minority of countries that have become rich at the expense of others, both human and non-human, one must ask if the Anthropocene narrative can include the necessary reflection on environmental and climate justice.¹³ The naturalness of a consensus about the human impact in general tends to obscure the violation of justice, in the relational web of nature as well as in the asymmetry of world society.

My third critical point focuses on the somewhat apocalyptic tone of the Anthropocene narrative. Have we really reached the end? Is the whole of the planet's future from modernity onwards at the mercy of the humans now and hereafter? Or might there be a new *-cene* [Greek *cene* = recent, new] after the Anthropocene, and might there be other forces that affect our common future and our common earth?

Questions like these seem impossible to ask within the current narrative. Theologically, we must therefore state that it breaks with an essential understanding of eschatology. From a religious perspective, the future of the Creation must always remain open, for the Creator and for Creation's

own power of evolution. Time, as well as space and place, cannot simply be confined by humans in the cage of technical models. However, much computer monitoring is done in empirical scenarios; it is the bodily awareness and perception of our environment that remains significant for what we feed into the computers.¹⁴

Life as a gift cannot simply be turned into a scientific scenario, and it can definitely not be turned into a commodity to be managed and exchanged along the well-known paths of fetishising capitalism. The method of fetishising and commodifying all that exists has certainly proven successful in the history of capitalist forms of exchange ever since antiquity, but the so-called price is destruction, injustice, violence, and a movement of the planet towards an “un-inhabitable” earth for most creatures.¹⁵

The narrative of the Anthropocene therefore leads to a radically new thinking about the human condition of being alive. And it demands not only a new narrative but also a new understanding of visibility, as the production of images now moves into the centre of our understanding of the world and ourselves within it.¹⁶

From the perspective of the Abrahamic religions, with their belief in the world as a creation of the One, the challenge is deeply painful. How can one believe in a good Creator while his/her own creatures threaten the earth as a habitable place to live? “Is God angry?”¹⁷ at the humans, or does He/She still love them all and the poor most of all? How can one continue to believe in a good creation, and envision a *creatio continua* and *creatio futura*, the

Figure 10.5 J. M. W. Turner, *The Deluge*, 1805, oil paint on canvas, 142.9 × 235.6 cm

Source: Tate Britain, London, public domain: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turner-deluge.jpg>, accessed 16 October 2019

coming world, in such a situation? What will happen after the deluge, so masterly depicted by Turner [Fig. 5]?¹⁸ How is the image of God connected to the (scientifically designed) images of the world?

Delineating the spiritual pain so sharply should sufficiently convince us not simply to regard the anthropogenic impact on the earth as a question of environmental ethics, but to become aware that being alive in the Anthropocene implies a radically new challenge to reconstruct one's identity, world-view, and image of God. No more, no less.

Antidotes

My critical questions for the Anthropocene narrative should not be misunderstood. There is, of course, substantial value in a scientific consensus about the depth and scope of the human significance for the further course of the planet. Without such a general consensus, environmentalism can rarely develop its transformative strength. It is further important to acknowledge the variety and multivalence of the Anthropocene discourse.¹⁹ My point, nevertheless, is that the narrowness of some dominant voices in the present narrative must be overcome, and that faith communities and the environmental humanities seem to have a central role herein.

Among others, I can imagine four antidotes to be used in order to bridge the abyss of the narrative's "lack of power, history and ethics".²⁰

History and remembrance

Franz Mauelshagen and Dipesh Chakrabarty rightly state that the Anthropocene narrative affects our understanding of history in general.²¹ Once more, it reveals the clash between the cultures of science and the humanities in a reification of the past and future.

Historically, the idea of an overarching impact of humanity on the earth is not new at all. Vladimir Vernadsky coined in 1938 the notion of "noosphere", inspired by Teilhard de Chardin. Before him, Catholic geologist Antonio Stoppani argued in 1873 for a new geological period. Alexander von Humboldt's understanding of nature as a painting, *Naturgemälde*, and the earth's surface as a living face offers a further early holistic view of the earth affected by the human imprint [Fig. 6].²² While these early thinkers were able to integrate spiritual, human, and cultural dimensions into their fairly holistic approaches, contemporary earth scientists instead operate with quite a poor understanding of the human.²³

My first antidote, therefore, is to plead for a more complex historical understanding of the interaction of socio-cultural and natural processes, as it has been developed recently in the new discipline of climate history. In particular, the discourse about memory and remembrance offers here a much deeper understanding of the dynamics and diversity of continuities and changes in history.²⁴ Climatic change offers in such a view a radically

Figure 10.6 Friedrich Georg Weitsch, *Humboldt and Aime Bonpland in the valley of Tapia on the foot of the volcano Chimborazo*, 1810, oil on canvas, 100 × 71 cm

Source: Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin; public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Humboldt-Bonpland_Chimborazo.jpg, accessed 16 October 2019

new *Erinnerungsraum* (space of remembrance).²⁵ The history of religions should also necessarily be included herein, as human ecology is intimately interconnected with religious practices, values, and worldviews. Images of the sacred impact directly on human thinking of and acting with and in nature. Secularist modern and late modern environmental practices are also driven by doctrinal forces, which again one can analyse by applying methods from cultural and religious studies.

Aesthetic wisdom

Another antidote regards the lack of self-critical thinking with regard to ethics. Much has been said and written about environmental ethics in the last 50 years, although unfortunately, not much has been applied in environmental politics. Here I would only like to point to one contribution from epistemology – the distinction between knowledge and wisdom.

Following Nicholas Maxwell,²⁶ science, as well as the humanities, is producing knowledge that is not simply the agglomeration of information into

a computer model, but a qualitative synthetic process of bringing together different kinds of observations and reflections. But how should one apply knowledge? And how should one select the preferable among the many insights?

Following Maxwell, wisdom is the art of reflecting on how one should use knowledge. Wisdom includes rational reflections and moralities, and it also integrates worldviews and values that can be anchored in a religious and/or cultural context. With regard to nature, wisdom and wonder are deeply interconnected.²⁷

According to Tim Ingold, it is the perception of our environment and the skills to become aware of what it means to be alive that are necessary to achieve meaningful negotiations about what we should or should not do. Liberation theology has, in a similar way, argued that seeing the poor represents a necessary presupposition for acting and thinking. The well-known circle “*Seeing-Thinking-Acting . . . and Seeing again*” has served as a central method for both pastoral and academic contextual theology, but it is in my view the third bridge, from “*Acting*” to “*Seeing (anew)*”, that has received far too little attention. Applied to the Anthropocene discourse, far more wisdom is therefore needed in evaluating the empirical insights of scientists, and a stronger aesthetic dimension is needed in perceiving and becoming aware of the suffering of the victims, both in nature and society – the “poor creatures”, so to speak.²⁸

Complexity of the whole

A third antidote regards complexity and holism. Certainly, the environmental sciences and especially climatology, which is a driving force within the Anthropocene narrative, interconnect a large variety of different empirical data, methods, and theories. Earth systems analysis represents in itself an enormous success of transdisciplinary research, and its results are impressively differentiated and clear.²⁹ Even if empirical observations are turned into artificial, human-made, computer simulations that are limited by engineering practices and thinking, one can without doubt rely on the conclusions, as these are constantly empirically reviewed and verified with regard to the ongoing process of change.

Nevertheless, human beings, local and regional populations, sociohistorical developments, and unexpected so-called irrational behaviours are not included to a satisfactory degree in the same complex and differentiated way as the scientists’ investigation of the atmosphere. Although climatology explicitly focuses on the anthropogenic impact, it seems to be fairly ignorant about the complexity of its cause, that is, the human, cultural, historical, and spiritual dimension of this impact.

In brief, the Anthropocene narrative deals with human impacts – but unfortunately, not much with humans. The feedback impacts of climatic change on human responses are not included in the scenarios, nor is the

complex diversity of human behaviour with regard to response to change adequately monitored. In the last IPCC reports, some ethical aspects have just started to be included, mainly due to the commitment of the economist Ottmar Edenhofer and others.³⁰

Furthermore, the concept of change in climate impact science seems philosophically to build on a rather limited and narrow understanding. Change is (as one can learn from Kandinsky's rhythmic composition) never simply a transfer from one state to another, but a multifaceted, hard-to-predict movement of variation – but that is another discussion (which one could approach, e.g. from becoming aware of the flux of weather with and beyond modern meteorology).³¹ Kandinsky's painting [Fig. 7] provides an intriguingly compound expression of motion, where colours are sounding with and against each other, and where shapes and surfaces are transmuting and metamorphosing in a rhythm of flows, standstills, and interactions: an excellent contrast to the streamlined simplifying concepts of change in scientific and media debates about climatic change.

Social psychologist Harald Welzer has rightly recently criticised environmental organisations and the committed political green parties for a fragmentation of the complex interconnectedness of environmental processes. Environmentalist politicians often operate in what he calls a “reductive culture”,³² with a kind of problematic illusion of the technocratic doability of

Figure 10.7 Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913, oil on canvas, 200 × 300 cm

Source: The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vassily_Kandinsky,_1913_-_Composition_7.jpg, accessed 16 October 2019

everything, and pretend that there are easy solutions. Let us reduce the number of cars; let us eat less meat, increase solar energy, etc. Of course, we need not only an energy turn, but also a mobility turn, a food production turn, an urban planning turn, etc. But as long as political agendas of the day only focus on selected issues, they will never achieve the cultural revolution that is needed to avoid the earth turning into an uninhabitable place. For many regions, this turn is already in full swing, and climate and environmental conflicts and migration waves are accelerating. The call for repentance should therefore not be split up, but remain unified and comprehensive.

Conversion

To use a classic word from the Christian tradition to summarise Welzer's conclusion, what we need is conversion. Biblical Greek *metanoia* aims at the conversion of the mind, but it certainly also includes the conversion of the eye, the body, and the social modes of existence.

Especially in the Christian tradition, eschatology contributes to this ongoing social communication of imagined futures with a specific capacity to act: repentance and conversion. Both seem, if one follows the biblical sources, to have their place at the beginning of a believer's life in the eyes of God, as well as needing to be practised continuously in daily life, as everyday conversion. Leonard Cohen's lyrics can provoke us with this constant challenge: "When they said 'repent repent' / I wonder what they meant".³³

Reading the Gospels, the act of conversion is directly connected to a specific quality of time, in the present time of the early Christian believers, that is, the *kairos*, a time of challenge and conversion, connected to the cruelties and life-threatening social processes of the Empire. Matthew's "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2, NIV) is directly located in Mark's identification of the present time as *kairos*, a specifically challenging time of crisis as well as of future-shaping decision: "The time (*kairos*) has come" (Mark 1:15, NIV). The call to repentance is anchored in the Jewish faith, where it was central in the Hebrew Bible and especially in the prophetic tradition. Repentance was here anything but an individual affair – it was a prophetic call for the whole people, and a clear resistance to the fabrication of life- and faith-threatening idols.

A fourth antidote might be circumscribed as spiritual. Some theologians and representatives of faith traditions are arguing that religion in general offers salvation and solutions to problems, and that religious faith is necessary for transforming this world for the better. I am rather sceptical, as religions represent human practices – no more, no less – that can function constructively as well as destructively. Faith carries the same pros and cons as all other human practices, such as politics, culture, and economics, and can therefore be regarded neither as absolutely good nor for that matter absolutely bad (as many secularist voices like to preach). Life-enhancing liberating and pathological life-threatening forces, rather, can walk hand in

hand. In the tradition of Reformation theology, 500 years later, one can certainly wonder what it means in the context of the environmental challenge to be both a sinner and justified: *simul iustus et peccator*. Can Christian sin-talk be of any value herein, and how should one apply it as a force for conversion and liberation?³⁴

Nevertheless, faith is, due to its specific skills, highly fruitful for overcoming the Anthropocene narrative's danger of turning into one more imperialistic grand narrative of the universe.³⁵ "Faith" offers, in my view, a better technical term than "religion" or "spirituality", as it does not pretend that religion is a clearly separated and isolated social subsystem, or that there is a separation of the spiritual from the bodily being alive. Faith in the biblical sense implies vision, belief, hope, trust, and truthfulness, and it manifests as a skill to relate and communicate. It departs from the existence of the sacred, whether that be a God, spirits, or an inspirited nature. What we regard as sacred impacts on our feelings, perception, thoughts, and acts.

Much could be said about the diverse contributions of faith communities and spiritual wisdom with regard to the environmental challenge, and here I will only refer to some recently published standard works, such as Ernst Conradie, Willis Jenkins, John Hart, Laura Hobgood, and Whitney Bauman, and our Forum's³⁶ volume on "Religion in the Anthropocene".³⁷ The new transdisciplinary research field of the environmental humanities is also producing a wide range of insights.

Different theological approaches to the debate about the Anthropocene are emerging at present. While some regard the Anthropocene as "a grammatised *context*" with high relevance for doing public theology,³⁸ others are emphasising the ethical dimension. Eschatology offers, without doubt, certain tools for encountering the previously discussed lackings of the narrative. While Marion Grau, for example, develops a petro-eschatology to overcome the uninhibited use of fossil energy, I have designed a spatial eschatology whereby the encounter with the life-giving Spirit in the topographies of social and environmental suffering moves into the spotlight.³⁹ Assisted by such a spatial eschatology, one can also overcome the narrow and apocalyptic timeline of the Anthropocene narrative, and envision the Ecocene beyond the Anthropocene, or better the Ecocene that is growing within the Anthropocene.

Another shared future: towards the Ecocene

My strongest objection to the Anthropocene narrative lies in the question of how we imagine what we might meet *beyond* the Anthropocene. Is there space to imagine a new geological era beyond the Anthropocene? Maybe the "Ecocene", where human and other life forms cohabit on earth in fully just and peaceful entanglements?⁴⁰ Or rather an era of apocalypse where humans eradicate themselves from the planet, followed by an era of new genesis

where evolution searches for new paths without human intervention? Or a “post-technocene” where the fetishisation of money and machines has been overcome and technical spaces have turned into lived spaces?⁴¹

Is there any thought about the future in the narrative of the Anthropocene, or rather a total absence of utopia? While religions always operate more or less strongly with images of the future, and some explicitly develop so-called eschatologies, the narrative of the Anthropocene, as far as it is negotiated at present in the Anthropocene Working Group, seems to lack not only self-critical skills with regard to power, history, and ethics, but also the skill to imagine a future beyond the present. How could it thereby make politically evident its social and environmental relevance?

In my view, the notion of Ecocene offers the most constructive term for a synthetic vision of an open shared future.⁴² While terms like “capitalocene” or “post-technocene” operate with a limited focus, the notion of Ecocene can include entangled dimensions and envision an epoch in which the collective wisdom and interactions of all living beings in one common earth system are at the core.

The term is in the air, so to speak, and has most recently entered the discourse not so much in science but in other spheres such as architecture, design theory, and theology. It refers to a geological period beyond the Anthropocene, or rather a slow transformation from the one into the other, where the whole of the ecological sphere embraces and integrates the human. Design theorist Rachel Armstrong states that “there is no advantage to us to bring the Anthropocene into the future. . . . The myth of the Anthropocene does not help us . . . we must re-imagine our world and enable the Ecocene”.⁴³

For biologist Robert Steiner, it is “inevitable that the current Anthropocene era will evolve into an ecologically sustainable era – which can be called the ‘Ecocene’. The current trajectory of environmental and social decline cannot continue much longer”.⁴⁴ Consequently, he focuses on the question of what comes beyond, as

indeed, the Anthropocene will be gone in the blink of geologic time. The real question is: what will be left of the biosphere at the dawn of the Ecocene, e.g. what species, including *Homo sapiens*, will survive the Anthropocene evolutionary bottleneck?⁴⁵

As we have seen, the contemporary discussion about the Anthropocene suffers from a fatal lack of historical consciousness and a lack of including the future, or better different futures, in its narrative. While scientists at present mainly debate about the beginning of the so-called Great Transformation, and its main reasons and driving forces, their discussion of the future remains quite general. While some imagine it as an apocalypse and cosmic disaster, others regard it as a promising new arena for socio-engineering. The challenge in contrast is not to fall into either of these gaps,

but to imagine and negotiate our shared future,⁴⁶ a just and sustainable future that can be shared equally by all creatures.

It is probably this lack of a qualified reflection on potential sustainable and unsustainable futures that accelerates the triumphalist danger of celebrating this new period as a new period of human geo-management. This lack also seems to be part of a wider cultural shift whereby our ways of imaging the future (and the past) are undergoing a radical shift in the modern time regime.⁴⁷

Such an interpretation immediately produces a deep conflict with faith, as the future in the Christian tradition must remain always open for the Creator and Liberator to act in. According to Moltmann, God encounters His/Her creation from the future, and I would add also from the past. Time and history, as well as space and place, always remain transparent for the Triune.

The Christian creed summarises this belief in its words about the new world (aeon) to come, and this aeon can scarcely refer to today's Anthropocene, a time of human mismanagement and an uninhabitable place for humans to live in as God's images.

While apocalyptic thinking imagines the end as a future of chaos and disaster, and manipulates and terrifies its audience, eschatology operates with an integrated present and future dimension. It is not simply the interconnection of the now and then, but also develops, as Vitor Westhelle and I have recently shown, as a spatial theory. The placial encounter with the God of the Here and There and the God of the Now and Then transforms the places in need of liberation. Climatic change represents such a place as it makes it necessary to encounter the life-giving Triune Spirit who takes place both now and then, and both here and there. Faith needs to be reconstructed, faith in the Spirit hovering over the vibrating waters of chaos in the beginning and the Spirit as the Giver of Life and as the source of the new creation to come.

Applying such a spatial and liberative eschatology to the narrative of the Anthropocene, it is impossible to imagine the future as a simple age of the humans. "Eschatology as imagining the end"⁴⁸ must necessarily stretch beyond the life-threatening anthropogenic impact that the rich nations have executed in the great transformation. Hope needs to flourish so that another age might appear.

In my view, such a vision of the Ecocene fits perfectly with the biblical vision of a *creatio continua* that flows into a *creatio futura*; that is, the (ongoing) creation of the new heavens and new earth. Biblical imaginaries for such an Ecocene are many: the heavenly Jerusalem as a truly eco-urban life sphere, peaceful pastoral grazing of wild and other animals in the meadows, the pastoral vision of God as good shepherd and the people and creatures as a herd in a harmonious ecology, or the thanksgiving ritual after the flood and climate change disasters when the bow in the sky turns from a symbol of war to a colourful sign of peace between all created beings.

Ethically, theologians have argued from such a vision for a future-oriented human ethics of responsibility, following Dietrich Bonhoeffer.⁴⁹ Personally, I would prefer a discourse ethic model to a virtue or responsibility model, but that could be worked out later.⁵⁰

In short, it is the vision of another period beyond the Anthropocene that allows a deepening and widening of the ambiguous Anthropocene narrative and a transformation into another period when humans are no longer masters and rulers of Creation, but subjects of Creation, no longer shepherds but sheep in a flock, no longer alleged givers but true receivers of life.

To sum up, one of many substantial critical and constructive contributions to transforming the narrative of the Anthropocene is to nurture hope and to establish practices that manifest this hope for the Ecocene. It envisions earth as a home where justice, synergy, and peace can flourish, a world such as in Giovanni Bellini's Renaissance paintings [Fig. 8 and 9] that embraces most of the movements in God's history of salvation: the earth as a home where the life-giving Spirit is taking place.

Figure 10.8 Giovanni Bellini, *Saint Jerome Reading in the Wilderness* (detail), 1505, oil

Source: public domain; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giovanni_Bellini_St_Jerome_Reading_in_the_Countryside.jpg, accessed 16 October 2019

Figure 10.9 Giovanni Bellini, *Sacred Allegory*, circa 1490, oil

Source: public domain; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sacred_Allegory_by_Giovanni_Bellini.jpg, accessed 16 October 2019

God amidst popular problems

Finally, as this text was originally written for the 25th birthday celebrations of the Swedish history of contextual theology, I would like to conclude with a short gift in the form of a new definition of contextual theology. Alluding to John B. Cobb Jr., theology is reflecting on what matters for Christians,⁵¹ and alluding to Leonard Cohen, popular problems are what we all commonly struggle with: the problems of the people.⁵² Contextual theology therefore is simply to reflect encountering the Triune God in the midst of what matters among people's popular problems (sic!). Following Dietrich Bonhoeffer, God is not found where the church is, but the church must move to the places where God acts; the church is only church in its "being-for-others".⁵³ Lived spaces of anthropogenic climate change are such places.

Notes

- * This text offers a revised version of my keynote address at the conference "Liberating Theology – Institute of Contextual Theology in Lund 25 years", Lund, November 24, 2017. It also underlies a more extensive elaboration of the entanglement of Anthropocenic and atmospheric thinking in my monograph Sigurd Bergmann, *Weather, Religion, and Climate Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), Chapter 8.

- 1 For the present state of the debate and the understanding of “the Anthropocene”, see Colin N. Waters, Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin Summerhayes, Anthony D. Barnosky, Clément Poirier, Agnieszka Gałuszka, Alejandro Cearreta, Matt Edgeworth, Erle C. Ellis, Michael Ellis, Catherine Jeandel, Reinhold Leinfelder, J. R. McNeill, Daniel deB. Richter, Will Steffen, James Syvitski, Davor Vidas, Michael Wagreich, Mark Williams, An Zhisheng, Jacques Grinevald, Eric Odada, Naomi Oreskes, and Alexander P. Wolfe, “The Anthropocene is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene,” *Science* 351 (2016): aad2622, doi:10.1126/science.aad2622.
- 2 Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* 369 (2011): 842–67, 842, doi:10.1098/rsta.2010.0327.
- 3 Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich, Anthony D. Barnosky, Andrés García, Robert M. Pringle, and Todd M. Palmer, “Accelerated Modern Human-Induced Species Losses: Entering the Sixth Mass Extinction,” *Science Advances* 1, no. 5 (June 19, 2015): e1400253, doi:10.1126/sciadv.1400253.
- 4 Cf. Bonneuil’s description of four different Anthropocene narratives at work at present and Pearson’s emphasis on moving the discourse from the age’s beginning to the “possibility of endings” (9), from the apocalyptic to the eschatological. Christophe Bonneuil, “The Geological Turn: Narratives of the Anthropocene,” in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, eds. Clive Hamilton, François Gemenne, and Christophe Bonneuil (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 18–23. Clive Pearson, “Is It Too Late? Doing Theology in the Anthropocene,” public lecture at the University of Otago, December 17, 2015, accessed November 19, 2017, www.otago.ac.nz/ctpi/otago419801.pdf.
- 5 Celia E. Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, and Markus Vogt, eds., *Religion in the Anthropocene* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock/Cascade, 2017).
- 6 Earth Charter Commission 2000, *The Earth Charter*, www.earthcharterinaction.org, May 25, 2015.
- 7 For a more detailed discussion of the criticism, see Sigurd Bergmann, “Is There a Future in the Age of Humans? A Critical Eye on the Narrative of the Anthropocene,” Consortium for the Study of Religion, Ethics, and Society Forum, Spring 2016, Indiana University, accessed November 19, 2017, www.iu.edu/~csres/csres_archive_14Dec2016/www/forum.php#Bergmann.
- 8 Celia E. Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, and Markus Vogt, “The Future of Religion in the Anthropocene Era,” in *Religion in the Anthropocene*, eds. Deane-Drummond et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock/Cascade, 2017), 1–15, 14.
- 9 Sverker Sörlin, *Antropocen: En essä om människans tidsålder* (Stockholm: Weyler 2017), 209.
- 10 For a detailed theological discussion of the “commons”, see Catherine Keller, Elias Ortega-Aponte, and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, eds., *Common Goods: Economy, Ecology, and Political Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 11 An increasing number of earth scientists, however, seem to be becoming aware of this, and some are engaging in more holistic approaches; see for example the LOOPS activity, www.pik-potsdam.de/research/projects/activities/copan/loops, and its Special Issue, www.earth-syst-dynam.net/special_issue18.html, November 27, 2019. For a reflection on “deeper human dimensions”, including religious ones, see Dieter Gerten et al.’s thought-provoking and forward-looking argument: Dieter Gerten, Martin Schönfeld, and Bernhard Schauburger, “On Deeper Human Dimensions in Earth System Analysis and Modelling,” *Earth System Dynamics* 9 (2018): 849–63, <https://doi.org/10.5194/esd-9-849-2018>.

- 12 Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 62–69, 64.
- 13 For a theological exploration of social and environmental justice, see Rasmussen's elaboration of "creation justice". Larry L. Rasmussen, "From Social Justice to Creation Justice in the Anthropocene," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, ed. John Hart (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 239–55.
- 14 Cf. Karolina Sobecka, "The Atmospheric Turn," in *Arts and Religion Responding to the Environment: Exploring Nature's Texture*, eds. Sigurd Bergmann and Forrest Clingerman (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2018), 43–58.
- 15 Cf. the widely distributed and debated article by David Wallace-Wells, "The Uninhabitable Earth: Famine, Economic Collapse, a Sun That Cooks Us: What Climate Change Could Wreak – Sooner Than You Think," *New York Magazine*, July 9, 2017, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>.
- 16 Irmgard Emmelhainz, "Images Do Not Show: The Desire to See in the Anthropocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 131–42.
- 17 Rolita Machila, "Why Are Earth and God Angry?" *Thinking It Over* 20 (August 2008), pamphlet published by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTS-Thinking-20.pdf.
- 18 For a detailed interpretation of this and other works of Turner, see the chapter "Inventing Weather: Conveying the Mysteries of Alteration in J. M. W. Turner's Painting" in Bergmann, *Weather, Religion, and Climate Change*.
- 19 Maria Antonaccio, "De-moralizing and Re-moralizing the Anthropocene," in *Religion in the Anthropocene*, eds. Deane-Drummond et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock/Cascade, 2017), 121–37, 128.
- 20 Celia E. Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, and Markus Vogt, "The Future of Religion in the Anthropocene Era," in *Religion in the Anthropocene*, eds. Deane-Drummond et al., 1–15, 2.
- 21 Franz Mauelshagen, "Redefining Historical Climatology in the Anthropocene," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 2 (2014): 171–204, 172. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Verändert der Klimawandel die Geschichtsschreibung?" *Transit. Europäische Revue* 41 (2011): 143–63.
- 22 Cf. Sigurd Bergmann, "Religion at Work within Climatic Change: Eight Perceptions about Its Where and How," in *Religion in the Anthropocene*, eds. Deane-Drummond et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock/Cascade, 2017), 67–84.
- 23 Cf. for example the excellently differentiated analysis of the human signature on earth's history by Waters et al., where "humans" and "humanity" throughout the whole investigation are simply treated in the singular and in general, probably due to the interest in geology and earth system analysis and the fact that the methods used are exclusively for large-scale exploration.
- 24 Cf. Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München: C. H. Beck, 1999); Jan Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis: Zehn Studien* (München: Beck, 2000/2006); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory) (1989): 7–24.
- 25 One might therefore construct a new analytical method for exploring trans-disciplinarily – with combined methods from climate impact science, geography, and environmental humanities – what I have called the "lived spaces of climatic change", that is, the specifically changing environments where processes

- of anthropogenic external impacts and local human adaptations, which again produce new kinds of impacts, can be studied in one common “Funktionskreis”. S. Bergmann, “Religion in Climatic Change” (unpublished application to the ERC, March 2011).
- 26 Nicholas Maxwell, *From Knowledge to Wisdom: A Revolution in the Aims and Methods of Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); Nicholas Maxwell, “Can Scientific Method Help Us Create a Wiser World?” in *Practical Wisdom in the Age of Technology: Insights, Issues and Questions for a New Millennium*, eds. N. Dalal, A. Intezari, and M. Heitz (London: Gower, 2016), 147–61.
 - 27 Cf. Celia E. Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom: Conversations in Science, Spirituality and Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006).
 - 28 On “the poor among other creatures” (*die armen Naturen*), see Sigurd Bergmann, *Geist, der Natur befreit: Die trinitarische Kosmologie Gregors von Nazianz im Horizont einer ökologischen Theologie der Befreiung* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1995), 20 (Russian edition, Arkhangelsk, 1999; revised English edition *Creation Set Free: The Spirit as Liberator of Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 2).
 - 29 Cf. <http://ipcc.ch/>, accessed February 19, 2020.
 - 30 Cf. Ottmar Edenhofer and Michael Jakob, *Klimapolitik: Ziele, Konflikte, Lösungen* (München: C. H. Beck, 2017), 118–23.
 - 31 Cf. Bergmann, *Weather, Religion, and Climate Change*.
 - 32 Harald Welzer, *Selbst Denken: Eine Anleitung zum Widerstand*, 7th ed. (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2016), 133.
 - 33 Leonard Cohen, *The Future*, Columbia 472498 2, 1992, compact disc.
 - 34 For a deeper exploration of such questions, see Ernst M. Conradie, *Redeeming Sin? Social Diagnostics amid Ecological Destruction* (London: Lexington Books, 2017).
 - 35 The Anthropocene narrative might also offer an analogy to some of the negative dimensions of the so-called New Cosmology and (grand) Story of the Universe as it has been critically investigated. Cf. Lisa H. Sideris, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).
 - 36 www.religion-environment.com/, accessed February 19, 2020.
 - 37 Ernst Conradie, S. Bergmann, C. E. Deane-Drummond, and D. Edwards, eds., *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); John Hart, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017); Laura Hobgood and Whitney Bauman, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Nature* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).
 - 38 Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, “Doing Public Theology in the Anthropocene Towards Life-Creating Theology,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 3 (July 2015): a1443, doi:10.4102/ve.v36i3.1443. While Meylahn pleads for us “to seek God in the text, or rather as part of the grammatisation” (italics in original) and to do contextual theology about God in the Anthropocene (rather than about a God beyond), my approach here implies both doing this and encountering God in the not-yet-seen future and space beyond the age of the humans.
 - 39 Marion Grau, “The Revelations of Global Climate Change: A Petro-Theology,” in *Eschatology as Imagining the End: Faith between Hope and Despair*, ed. Sigurd Bergmann (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).
 - 40 The notion of “Ecocene” might enhance positive visions of the future and include entangled dimensions, envisioning “an epoch in which not one single

- species determines the future of the Earth but the collective wisdom and interactions of all species and the bio- and geophysical world". Arjen E. J. Wals, Joseph Weakland, and Peter Blaze Corcoran, "Preparing for the Ecocene: Envisioning Futures for Environmental and Sustainability Education," *Japanese Journal of Environmental Education* 26, no. 4 (2017): 71–76, 72.
- 41 For the notion of "technocene", see Alf Hornborg, "The Political Ecology of the Technocene: Uncovering Ecologically Unequal Exchange in the World-System," in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, eds. C. Hamilton, C. Bonneuil, and F. Gemenne (London: Routledge, 2015), 57–69. For the notion of "technical space", see Sigurd Bergmann and Tore Sager, eds., *The Ethics of Mobilities: Rethinking Place, Exclusion, Freedom and Environment* (London: Routledge, 2008).
- 42 For a more extensive discussion of the Ecocene concept, I refer to my final chapter "Atmosphere and Anthropocene" in Bergmann, *Weather, Religion, and Climate Change*. Cf. also Keller, who has recently started to reflect on the Ecocene as "a time of agonized attention to the interdependence of humans with the planetary plenum of nonhumans". Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 161.
- 43 Rachel Armstrong, "Architecture for the Ecocene," *Architecture Ukraine*, July 31, 2015, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://architectureukraine.org/rachel-armstrong-architecture-for-the-ecocene/>. Cf. Joanna Boehnert, *Design, Ecology, Politics: Towards the Ecocene* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018). Cf. Joanna Boehnert, "Naming the Epoch: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Ecocene," *EcoLabs: Design, Ecology, Politics* blog, May 22, 2016, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://ecolabsblog.com/2016/05/22/naming-the-epoch-anthropocene-capitalocene-ecocene/>.
- 44 Robert Steiner, "From Anthropocene To Ecocene By 2050?" *Huffington Post*, October 23, 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/from-anthropocene-to-ecocene-by-2050_us_59e7b66ce4b0e60c4aa3678c.
- 45 Ibid. Thomas Berry had earlier coined the term *ecozoic era* to overcome anthropocentrism, but the notion of an Ecocene includes not only living beings, but all planetary forms.
- 46 On the significance of "shared future" in the context of "making oneself at home in the future", see Scott and Rodwell in their introductory chapter "Dialogues of Place and Belonging," in *At Home in the Future: Place and Belonging in a Changing Europe*, eds. John Rodwell and Peter Manley Scott, *Studies in Religion and the Environment* 11 (Berlin: LIT 2016), 9.
- 47 Aleida Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne* (München: Hanser, 2013), 247.
- 48 Cf. Bergmann, ed., *Eschatology as Imagining the End*.
- 49 Robert Vosloo, "Time Out of Joint and Future-Oriented Memory: Engaging Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Search for a Way to Deal Responsibly with the Ghosts of the Past," *Religions* 8, no. 3 (2017): 42, doi:10.3390/rel8030042.
- 50 For an environmental ethic in the frame of discourse ethics see Konrad Ott, *Umweltethik zur Einführung*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Junius, 2014); and for a differentiated theological approach to such an environmental discourse ethics, see Christof Hardmeier and Konrad Ott, *Naturethik und biblische Schöpfungserzählung: Ein diskurstheoretischer und narrativ-hermeneutischer Brückenschlag [Nature Ethics and Biblical Creation Story: Bridging the Gap through Discourse Theory and Narrative Hermeneutics]* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2015). For a discussion of the pros and cons in an environmental ethics of responsibility vs. an ecological discourse ethics, see Sigurd Bergmann, "Diskursiv bioetik – für

offrens skull,” in *Miljöetik – för ett samhälle på människans och naturens villkor*, eds. Uno Svedin and Anne-Marie Thunberg (FRN Rapport 94:2) (Stockholm: Miljödepartementet/Forskningsrådsnämnden, 1994), 68–89 [“Diskursive Bioetik – um der Opfer willen,” in S. Bergmann, *Geist, der lebendig macht: Lavierungen zur ökologischen Befreiungstheologie* (Frankfurt/M.: IKO, 1997)]. An environmental discourse ethics and an ethics of responsibility need not, of course, contradict each other; both could be connected in a statement that might follow Haber, Held and Vogt’s plea for a new culture of responsibility (“eine neue Kultur der Verantwortung,” p. 13) that necessarily includes the qualities of a non-violent dialogue as suggested in discourse ethics. Wolfgang Haber, Martin Held, and Markus Vogt, eds., *Die Welt im Anthropozän: Erkundungen im Spannungsfeld zwischen Ökologie und Humanität* (München: oekom, 2016).

- 51 Cobb describes theology as “Christian reflection over important matters”. John B. Cobb, Jr., “The Role of Theology of Nature in the Church,” in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, eds. Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 261–72, 262.
- 52 Leonard Cohen launched the album *Popular Problems* on his 70th birthday. Leonard Cohen, *Popular Problems*, Columbia 88875014292, 2014.
- 53 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Die Kirche ist nur Kirche, wenn sie für andere da ist,” in *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, eds. Christian Gremmels et al., DBW, vol. 8 (München: Random House, 2011), 560.