11 Theology of “eco-anxiety” as liberating contextual theology

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Introduction

I have an ever-worsening anxiety and terror of all this, the full destruction which seems inevitable. I am paralysed. What can I say to my child, when I have to? She's so small, she doesn't yet know anything about this, but it feels like the end can be so near that she will still be small when all this breaks down. And how will it happen, how fast? How long do I have to wait for the end after the moment when nobody can escape the facts? It feels so strange to live through these days which have been camouflaged to look like normal, when there is nothing which one could expect – except that there would come as many camouflaged days as possible.

– a Finnish person who suffers from eco-anxiety,
translation by the author¹

In a 2012 volume on *Religion and Climate Change*, the editors Dieter Ger-ten and Sigurd Bergmann stated,

How people can cope with large-scale suffering and, ultimately, death as a consequence of climate change (due to short-term extreme events such as floods and gradual processes such as rising sea levels or repeated droughts) is a largely unexplored domain of research.²

In the 2010s, these impacts, vulnerabilities, and methods of coping – both adaptive and maladaptive – have been studied in psychological and psycho-social research.³ A major part of the psychological impact is “eco-anxiety”: distress, worry, fears, and anxieties generated by the changing ecological conditions and the inadequacy of human reactions in mitigation and adaptation.⁴

Eco-anxiety has been defined as “a chronic fear of environmental doom”⁵ or “the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse”.⁶ On my reading, the term can be used with two interlinked meanings. First, it can refer generally to difficult emotions and mental states related to the environmental crisis; second, it can be used

to refer to more specific anxiety states. Most scholars use the term in the first sense. Many different emotions, if they become repressed, can cause anxiety-like symptoms. I use here the terms “difficult emotions” and “dark emotions” instead of “negative emotions” because in industrialised societies there are problems related to over-emphasising the value of “positive” emotions at the expense of the “negative” ones.⁷ In fact, this problematic often worsens eco-anxiety, because grief and anxiety are simply labelled as negative and not socially supported.

As I will discuss in more depth following, eco-anxiety is related both to practical situations and to deep existential questions. The character of eco-anxiety as existential anxiety makes it very closely tied to deep spiritual, religious, and theological questions. People face troubling questions about the meaning of life on a planet whose ecosystems seem to be heading for one disaster after another. The ancient, disturbing, and elementary questions related to death and finitude are close at hand, but they are often repressed or escaped from. In industrialised countries, people feel difficult feelings of guilt and even shame because of the ways in which their lifestyle and their societies are contributing to the damage done. Many people feel sorrow because of the many losses involved: for humans, for other animals, for places and ecosystems. The nature of ecological grief as disenfranchised grief often makes eco-anxiety worse.

As the quote at the beginning of the chapter shows, people can have devastating feelings of anxiety, alienation, and despair. This is why alleviation of eco-anxiety can be profoundly liberating. There is always a danger that this alleviation will become the kind of therapy which does not help to alleviate social and ecological problems, but this is a danger that can be avoided. And on the other hand, any action against ecological damage or any growth in resilience is very difficult if people are struck down by depression and anxiety. There is a profound need to practise ways of living with anxiety and ambivalence, so that hope and resilience can be strengthened. The mission of liberating people from paralysing eco-anxiety aims to increase psychological wellbeing and resilience, but this also results in providing more resources for empowerment and socio-ethical action.

In this chapter, I construct a model of theology of eco-anxiety as contextual theology done by people who are affected by the anguish related to the environmental crisis and by those people who want to help them, out of compassion or a sense of duty. There can be various forms of theologies of eco-anxiety; I will focus especially on one, Finland-based, form of it. The Finnish version, in whose development I have personally strongly taken part, is in several ways quite extensive compared to many other countries and contexts at the moment. However, I think it highly likely that more forms of theology of eco-anxiety will be generated in the near future. It is my hope that the Finnish version might offer some resources for creative theological work for others, if and when they wish to develop their own versions of such contextual theology.

There are several levels of contexts here. A wider “context” for theologies of eco-anxiety, as well as for ecotheologies in general, is the global environmental crisis with all its local implications. I write “context” here in quotation marks, since this is a rather special context: it touches practically everyone in the world. Ecosystems around the world have been damaged, many of the so-called planetary boundaries are either exceeded or in danger of being exceeded, and climate change is causing unstable weather worldwide.⁸

However, even though the ecological crisis in some way touches everyone, at the present moment there are vast differences in the levels of impact and vulnerability that people face. Often the poorest people suffer the most from the ecological crisis because they do not have as many resources to react to the problems or try to prevent them. There are vast structural injustices in relation to the ecological crisis and climate change, against which there are growing movements of “eco-justice” and climate justice.⁹

The poorest and the most vulnerable also suffer most heavily from the psychological impacts of environmental problems – including eco-anxiety. Thus, the struggle for eco-justice and climate justice is also a struggle for more psychic and psychosocial resilience. The task of liberation has both physical and psychological aspects: people should be liberated from both oppressive social structures and oppressive forms of eco-anxiety.

In this chapter, I discuss eco-anxiety first and foremost as related to those people who do not yet suffer heavily from the physical impacts of environmental problems. There is deep anxiety among those who do, but their situation is somewhat different. For example, despite certain similarities, it is a different matter to leave your homeland as a climate refugee and to experience psychological turmoil in a European country because of climate change.

I am myself a European and my proposal for a theology of eco-anxiety is related to people close to me: this is one strand of explicit contextual theology, done by a certain group of people in a certain context. In this chapter, I will give an introduction to the phenomenon of eco-anxiety and discuss various proposals that have been made in relation to it worldwide, but the final and constructive part of my text is directed most of all to people in industrialised countries. To give one example: there is ecological grief in both of these general contexts – those who already suffer more and those who as yet suffer less – but the grief is more intense in the first case and more complicated or vague in the second case. Grief rituals and public recognition help in both cases, but the nature of the rituals is different, because the grief itself is of a somewhat different form.

The structure of the chapter runs as follows. First, I will provide an introduction to the phenomenon of eco-anxiety and the ways in which it can be alleviated. This is closely related to questions of hope and meaningfulness. Second, I will discuss key proposals and initiatives which have been made to deal with eco-anxiety. The work of the Buddhist activist and scholar Joanna

Macy is of special note here, but I will also discuss perspectives from Christian theologies. Third, I will present my own constructive account of what a contextual theology of eco-anxiety can be like, drawing from my experiences in conducting such a praxis in Finland.

Eco-anxiety, meaningfulness, and hope

Eco-anxiety, denial, and social tensions

Eco-anxiety is anxiety which is generated in a significant manner by the ecological crisis. It is often intertwined with other anxieties and life issues, which sometimes makes it difficult to separate eco-anxiety from other anxieties. For example, a major part of eco-anxiety is so-called climate anxiety, anxiety due to climate change.¹⁰ And since climate change affects practically everything, there is an element of climate anxiety in many ordinary anxieties. I will mention two common examples from the Nordic countries. First, many people are hesitant about which profession they should pursue, if climate change is going to change societies in a radical way in the future. Second, many young people feel anxiety about the idea of trying to have children, since the fears related to future are so strong. In both of these cases, there are other factors which also have a role, but still the ecological crisis is having a clear effect.¹¹

Eco-anxiety as a term surfaced around the year 2008 in several media stories. Prominent users and developers of the term have been the Australian scholar and activist Glenn Albrecht, who has invented several names for “earth emotions”,¹² and social psychologists.¹³ Cossman provides a short history of the use of the term before 2013 and discusses the ways in which participatory social and environmental action can at the same time be a form of “anxiety governance”.¹⁴

Since a landmark 2017 report¹⁵ about the mental health impacts of climate change, there has been growing public discussion about eco-anxiety.¹⁶ The raising of global consciousness about the ecological crisis and climate change has inevitably had an effect on the fact that more and more people feel a certain connection with the terms eco-anxiety and climate anxiety.

However, the discourses are very different in various parts of the world and in various parts of societies. In some countries, such as Sweden and Finland, there has been much public discussion about these anxieties, especially since certain extreme weather events in 2018 and the ensuing publication of the alarming climate change report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in October the same year.¹⁷ In some other countries, there is not yet much public discussion about these dimensions, or the discussion is strongly characterised by conflicts and tensions. Such is the case, for example, in Australia, where the physical and mental impacts of climate change are already severe. In the Australian discussion, there is both strong

climate change denial (or disavowal) and pioneering initiatives to recognise and alleviate eco-anxiety.¹⁸

The psychosocial dynamics related to denial and distancing are closely tied to the phenomenon of eco-anxiety. The massive ecological crisis is by its nature anxiety-provoking. Understandably but tragically, people wish to avoid such disturbing thoughts and emotions. Denial and distancing are psychological ways to keep the menacing ecological crisis further away. Denial has many forms, of which literal denial, such as strong climate change denialism, is only one part. Disavowal is much more common and probably more dangerous, since it allows people to partly admit the problem and still carry on business as usual.¹⁹ Denial and distancing can be called “maladaptive coping” or defences, depending on which psychological theories one draws from.²⁰ It has been noted that there are socially organised mechanisms of denial in relation to the ecological crisis, which often makes it difficult to breach the silence around these issues.²¹ The result can be a vicious circle whereby (partly repressed) anxiety breeds silence and silence breeds more anxiety.

The symptoms of eco-anxiety include restlessness, deep despair and depression, and psychosomatic symptoms such as sleep disturbance.²² Anxiety can lead to “eco-paralysis”,²³ a frozen state when action becomes stalled. At its worst, eco-anxiety can lead to destructive behaviour.²⁴ However, it should be emphasised that eco-anxiety is primarily a sensitive reaction to the troubling state of the planet’s ecosystems. If the symptoms are severe and if eco-anxiety is not recognised, it can be a serious problem, but basically, eco-anxiety is a healthy reaction which tells of the need to adapt and mitigate.²⁵ This message is especially important because those who feel eco-anxiety, such as young people, are often ridiculed by those who practise cynicism or denial (such as many of the so-called climate sceptics).²⁶ As a result, many people who feel eco-anxiety have often felt that they have somehow failed if they cannot stand the condition of the world. This is oppression and must be challenged.

Eco-anxiety as both existential anxiety and practical anxiety

I propose that eco-anxiety can be best understood by characterising it both as existential anxiety and as related to practical situations. Anxiety scholar and philosopher Charlie Kurth recently (2018) proposed a model of anxiety as a biocognitive emotion. Kurth emphasises that anxiety is often a very useful emotion: it helps individuals to recognise that a certain situation needs attention, and it generates vigilance which helps them to perform well in that situation. Kurth divides anxiety into three types: “environmental anxiety”, “punishment anxiety”, and “practical anxiety”. He does not discuss ecological problems, per se: his “environmental anxiety” means anxiety about any perceived potential physical danger.²⁷ However, there are ecological

situations of this kind, for example, when the potential danger comes from a direct ecological problem such as a toxic spill.

In fact, all three types of anxiety as categorised by Kurth can be applied in the context of ecological problems and eco-anxiety. Punishment anxiety is related to “the possibility of receiving negative evaluations or sanctions from others”, while practical anxiety is “anxiety about the correct or appropriate thing to do”.²⁸ Eco-anxiety has a social dimension: many people feel anxiety about their practical choices as regards environmental issues. They fear embarrassment in front of others if they behave against the social rules of their group or of the wider community. Sociologists and other scholars have studied the social dimensions of environmental behaviour,²⁹ but more work is needed in order to integrate the depth of eco-anxiety dynamics into these studies. In different situations, both guilt and pride can motivate people into sustainable action.

Kurth’s term “practical anxiety” can be used to capture the practical, and ethically and psychologically necessary, dimension of eco-anxiety. As an emotion, anxiety guides people to act in more constructive ways. The problem is not anxiety itself, but the cases when there is too much or too little anxiety.

Kurth discusses existential anxiety only briefly, but I regard it as essential to eco-anxiety. Philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich’s model of existential anxiety can be applied into eco-anxiety:

- 1 Anxiety about fate and death.
- 2 Anxiety about emptiness and meaninglessness.
- 3 Anxiety about guilt and condemnation.³⁰

In small-group work within a therapeutic and safe setting, it has been noted that environmentally worried people bring up “existential fears about impermanence, death and non-existence”.³¹ I have noticed this also in my own work as a leader of workshops which provide a safe space for sharing deep thoughts and emotions related to the ecological crisis. The strong feelings of guilt have been noted in many studies; shame has been much less studied and further research on “eco-shame” would be very important, since there are strong hints of its significant existence.³² The concerns about the significance or meaning of life, on the one hand, are deep existential questions on their own, but on the other hand, they are also closely linked with some often-discussed problems related to environmental behaviour. Individuals often believe that their actions do not have any significance in the face of global environmental problems. It is easy to feel powerless, helpless, and insignificant.³³

Tillich thought that death anxiety is a kind of basic anxiety which has connections to all other anxieties.³⁴ All human life, all creature life, takes place within the limits of mortality. The connections between death anxiety and eco-anxiety have been less studied, but the so-called Terror Management

Theory has been applied to this point. It has been shown that the ecological crisis often reminds people of death or the possibility of death, which can cause people to utilise primitive defences against such messages and situations.³⁵ Because of this, "education in mortality", or death education, can be a profound way to help people to face the ecological crisis. Scholars of environmental education have only recently started to probe this important question.³⁶ As I will discuss following, this is an area in which the religious communities, with their long experience of encountering mortality, have many possibilities.

Closely related to eco-anxiety is ecological grief: sorrow because of losses related to ecological problems. Ecological grief, sometimes called environmental grief, has recently become a field of study of its own.³⁷ Unprocessed grief often transforms into anxiety. Thus, in order to enable people to live with eco-anxiety without being overcome by its negative effects, there have to be opportunities and resources for encountering (ecological) grief. This is yet another area where religious communities have long-term general experience, which now needs to be explicitly adapted into ways of dealing with eco-anxiety and ecological grief.³⁸ As Clinebell has already observed, mourning practices connected to natural environments and ecological themes help with both eco-anxiety and general death anxiety.³⁹

Empowerment, meaning-making and hope

Many people have felt that it is more efficient to approach issues through positivity and by emphasising things other than difficult emotions and anxiety. Would it not be better to be more positive and to stress that the problems can be solved? This debate between optimism and "doom-saying" has been underway for a long time in environmental communication and philosophy.⁴⁰

On one hand, I agree on the importance of empowerment and a sense of efficacy, but on the other hand, I strongly emphasise the need to encounter dark and difficult emotions. People have them already: we cannot avoid anxiety simply by ignoring its existence. Silence about difficult emotions causes much distress for many people.⁴¹ Therefore, the way forward towards more empowerment and efficacy goes through the terrain of the dark emotions. Emotions are part of life and while there can be movement from, for example, (ecological) trauma to posttraumatic growth, the challenge of living with dark emotions is lifelong. It is possible to move forward from paralysing eco-anxiety, but at least milder forms of eco-anxiety will continue to manifest themselves.⁴²

This is even more evident because the ecological problems seem to grow rapidly. There is careful scholarly work which shows the tendencies among many scientists, not to mention politicians, to underestimate the risks related to climate change and other ecological problems.⁴³ The current scientific evidence from around the world shows that climate change is proceeding

much more rapidly than had been presumed. Thus, at the moment, it seems highly likely that there will be a growing need to be able to deal with anxiety produced by ecological and social circumstances which are getting more difficult.

What is required can be called meaning-making: the ability to maintain resilience and a sense of meaning in difficult circumstances. This is closely related to hope. Among the many different conceptions of hope, I, along many other environmentalists, emphasise the need for “resolute hope”, which is differentiated from pure optimism.⁴⁴ Hope which is linked with meaningfulness, even though we cannot know if there will be success, can sustain us even in dark times. This kind of hope has been called “authentic hope” or “radical hope”.⁴⁵

The psychologist and environmental education scholar Maria Ojala has done a great deal of research on climate change attitudes and emotions, especially among young people. She distinguishes between “false hope”, which means wishful thinking, and “constructive hope”, which is more realistic and is linked to personal participation in adaptation and mitigation. Ojala advocates “meaning-focused coping”, a combination of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, whereby the key point is to maintain a sense of meaning.⁴⁶ I agree with Ojala and emphasise the need for existential hope; many people have pursued this through Victor Frankl’s approach of meaning-making.⁴⁷

Thus, there are two imperatives: there must be enough ways to encounter dark emotions and enough opportunities for action. Both are related to meaning-making and hope. Resilience, the ability to survive sufficiently intact through changes, includes the dimensions of emotional resilience⁴⁸ and existential resilience.⁴⁹

Previous theology and spirituality related to eco-anxiety

Before describing and delineating my own constructive approach to a liberating contextual theology of eco-anxiety, I will first give an introduction to certain existing resources for such a theology and spirituality.

Ecotheology and eco-anxiety

Christian environmental theology, comprising both thought and action, is often called ecotheology (or ecological theology). A wider ecotheological movement was generated gradually from 1970 onwards, but in my earlier studies, I have shown that in the first half of the 20th century there were already significant, albeit often scattered, forms of Christian ecotheology.⁵⁰

There has been much ecotheology which has been explicitly contextual. Ecumenical ecotheology in general has been much influenced by some famous (explicitly) contextual theologies, such as theologies of liberation from South America. While there have been scattered discussions about

dealing with difficult emotions related to the suffering of creation, overall the themes of eco-anxiety and ecological grief have received surprisingly little attention in ecotheological writing or in studies about religion and ecology.⁵¹ Psychology has not featured as a major discussion partner in eco-theology, with the few exceptions that I will discuss following.

Regarding existential anxiety, the so-called "existential theologians" (theologians who apply existential philosophy and related themes; historically, for example, Rudolph Bultmann) would be, in principle, well-equipped to discuss eco-anxiety as existential anxiety, but to my knowledge this has not yet happened to any great extent. One of the reasons, besides general socially constructed silence about eco-anxiety, is the fact that many existential theologians have not had much in the way of ecological sensibilities. However, there are exceptions, starting with Paul Tillich. Although this is not well known, Tillich discussed environmental concerns to a significant extent, and he even ventured to ponder on shame and environmental problems.⁵²

Joanna Macy

The single most important pioneer in developing psychosocial and spiritual tools for dealing with eco-anxiety has been Joanna Macy. Macy is a writer, scholar, activist, and spiritual leader, who has worked on several continents. Originally Christian, Macy later became a Buddhist, and she links both systems theory and Buddhism into her Deep Ecology⁵³-oriented thought. However, there is a certain openness towards various spiritualities and religions in her thought, such as the poetic and sometimes radical Christian theology of Rainer Maria Rilke and indigenous spiritualities.⁵⁴

Macy's approach bears strong similarities to the so-called Creation Spirituality-style ecotheology (for example, Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme), which has an elementary emphasis on interconnectedness and what Willis Jenkins calls ecological subjectivity.⁵⁵ The sacred is encountered amidst natural life in all its variety.

The threat of nuclear pollution became a key interest for Macy in the 1970s and 1980s, and in 1983 she published a book called *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*.⁵⁶ "Nuclear anxiety" and eco-anxiety do have much in common.⁵⁷ The work that Macy and her colleagues did in producing ways to encounter difficult emotions, such as despair, took seed in many countries and later developed into forms which explicitly dealt with other ecological concerns as well. Originally, this work was explicitly linked to Deep Ecology, but later it was named "The Work that Reconnects". An extensive manual on leading workshops and sessions was published, websites were created, and education for facilitators was provided.⁵⁸

The influence and impact of Macy's work has been enormous. Her ideas about the need to face what she calls "our pain for the world" are found, in one way or another, in the background of nearly all later forms of materials

and activities which have been designed to deal with difficult emotions related to the ecological crisis.⁵⁹

Key words related to difficult emotions in these materials were grief, despair, and pain; not exactly anxiety, but in substance, Macy's work deals extensively with what others call anxiety. The dark emotions that Macy confronts are exactly those which easily cause anxiety if they are not encountered and "held" in a safe space. The model developed by Macy has four stages, which can be repeated over and over:

- 1 Coming from gratitude.
- 2 Honouring our pain for the world.
- 3 Seeing with new eyes.
- 4 Going forth.⁶⁰

In Macy's model, there is encouragement to action, but this is closely tied to the emotion-processing activities. Macy highlights the importance of "holding actions" which try to prevent damage to ecosystems through non-violent resistance which is strengthened by a spiritual connection to the universe.⁶¹

Christian resources

An early pioneer in applying insights from Macy and other ecopsychologists was Howard Clinebell (1922–2005), an influential pioneer of pastoral psychology. In his later years, Clinebell published a book called *Ecotherapy*, which is a comprehensive account of the psychological tasks for ecotheology. This very creative book, which also includes discussion about "ecological angst",⁶² was ahead of its time and is unfortunately not very widely known. It includes a lot of material and many exercises which are still most relevant, and I warmly recommend this book. Its major focus is on the need for healing, but the dimension of environmental action is also included.

Another Christian writer who has ventured deep into the existential dimension of the ecological crisis is the Scottish activist and writer Alistair McIntosh. His book *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope, and the Human Condition* probes deep into the psychosocial aspects of the era of climate change. McIntosh does not use the term eco-anxiety, but he discusses numerous themes which are related to it, such as despair, guilt, and the need to find forgiveness.⁶³ Robert C. Saler has developed certain similar themes in his articles.⁶⁴

Two writers who have addressed ecological grief (without using this exact term) from Christian perspectives are Douglas Christie and Steven Chase. Christie provides a book-length discussion of contemplative practice in the era of ecological crisis, drawing from patristic theology and environmental transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau. Christie offers resources for ecological grief and death education.⁶⁵ Chase has written a two-part

book entitled *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, creatively combining traditional Christian spiritual practices with ecological themes. His books include exercises for writing ecological lamentations, as well as songs of gratitude for what still remains.⁶⁶

From among social theologians, I mention Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's book *Resisting Structural Evil*. The main focus of the book is on ethical action and on the need to see the structural, systemic nature of the problems, but the dimension of emotions and healing is also present, especially as regards grief and guilt.⁶⁷ Among pastoral theologians, Ryan LaMothe has called for more emphasis on “ecological trauma” and the ways in which the ecological crisis affects the whole discipline.⁶⁸

There are evidently other important authors who have written on related themes. I believe that much good would come from a project which would apply the wisdom generated in various (explicitly) contextual theologies to theology of eco-anxiety. For example, there might be rituals and small-group work in theologies of liberation which touch upon eco-anxiety and ecological grief; there simply is no common international field yet in which information about such resources could be shared. It should be remembered that this is at the same time anxiety and grief related to both humans and other life forms.

A constructive theology of eco-anxiety

Theology of eco-anxiety is liberating in several ways. People, even in the industrialised countries, are in many ways oppressed by the current global economic and political system: it is generating damage to both ecosystems and people, and this damage includes psychological impacts. Dealing with eco-anxiety through both action and emotional work can be profoundly liberating. In addition, there are several groups of people who are especially burdened by eco-anxiety, such as young people⁶⁹ and environmentalists. Environmentalists have extensive exposure to eco-anxiety and ecological grief, but often very little opportunity to share difficult emotions.⁷⁰

Explicit contextual theology of eco-anxiety is on the rise in several countries. There have been scattered activities relating to it in the United States. In Spring 2019, for example, the GreenChristian organisation in the United Kingdom organised activities for encountering eco-anxiety and ecological grief,⁷¹ and there was a session in Australia about “Climate Pastoral Care”.⁷² I earlier developed a model of eco-anxiety as a pastoral challenge, based on ecumenical and Lutheran theology.⁷³

Internationally, in the new environmental movement called Extinction Rebellion, there has been from the start a focus on dealing with the emotions as well. One of the principles and values of the organisation is that “we avoid blaming and shaming: We live in a toxic system, but no one individual is to blame”.⁷⁴ In addition to civil disobedience activities, sessions have been organised where people can share difficult emotions. Many

Christians have participated in Extinction Rebellion activities and the support for the movement by the former Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams has been noted.⁷⁵ Personally, I have led workshops on emotional work relating to eco-anxiety for Extinction Rebellion Finland.⁷⁶

Finnish theology of eco-anxiety

As I mentioned in the introduction, I focus in this chapter on the context of industrialised countries, on people who are not the poorest and the most marginalised, and especially in the Finnish context. In what follows, I will describe the Finnish movement related to eco-anxiety, hope, and theology, and I will provide an agenda for a theology of eco-anxiety. However, I wish to emphasise that there is a need for other takes on theology of eco-anxiety, written and practised by people from various contexts. For example, there is profound climate anxiety in the Pacific Islands where the sea level is rising, but I am not the right person to write about that.

A liberating contextual theology of eco-anxiety recognises the need to encounter dark emotions, and dares to hope and act at the same time. It is built on “authentic”, “realistic”, or “radical” hope: hope which is not optimism, but finds life meaningful even in dire circumstances. My proposal for such a theology has been partly influenced by ecumenical ecotheology, which has its own roots in various explicitly contextual theologies, and by the so-called “realist theologians” from the mid-20th century, such as Daniel Day Williams, the Niebuhr brothers, and Joseph Sittler.⁷⁷

During recent years, I have witnessed the birth of a vague but notable movement in Finland which has practised an explicit contextual theology of eco-anxiety and hope. The leading figures have been few, a handful of people, but the message has spread widely and many people have joined in organising various activities. This has been a people’s movement, although I have spent a lot of energy on leading and developing it. Sometimes this movement has operated in the frames of openly Christian theology, sometimes in a manner more like “secular theology”: theology-based reflections and activities, which have been offered without an explicit Christian frame. The majority of Finns still belong to Christian churches, although they are usually not active participants. Thus, in public sessions which deal with eco-anxiety, there are practically always Christians present.

Important elements of this Finnish activity have been

- Giving voice to the voiceless, this time meaning those who suffer from eco-anxiety and ecological grief, but who have suffered from socially constructed silence. This has been done by writing stories about eco-anxiety in all kinds of journals and newspapers, large and small, and by several leading figures of the movement (most extensively myself) participating in television and radio interviews. In the background has

been the attention gathered by my book about eco-anxiety and hope, published in Finnish in October 2017.⁷⁸

- Developing and conducting small-group sessions, both in congregational spaces and in public libraries, where people have received the chance to discuss and share their dark ecological emotions in a safe space.
- Designing and leading grief rituals for both acute loss and anticipated loss in relation to ecological themes. In Finland, the theme has often been lament, either for felled forests or for climate change.
- Public witness to politicians, members of the parliaments, business people, and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This has happened through media, various conferences and seminars, and by designing sessions fit for special NGOs.

As a result of this and endeavours by psychologists, there is now a national discussion and growing recognition about eco-anxiety in Finland, and some influence of this has spread to other countries.⁷⁹

Among Finnish Christians, there have for a long time been various forms of environmentalism, although the situation has been complex. The main Christian church in Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran, has so many members that there are various opinions about environmental issues. Still, there has been Christian endorsement for nature preservation since the late 19th century. This was started especially by Zacharias Topelius, a Lutheran educator and churchman, and continued by others in the 20th century.⁸⁰ In the 1980s, more institutional support for ecotheology was gained in the church. Since the 1990s, there has been an active group of people working for the greening of the congregations, with the support of the Church Council.⁸¹ Scholars of theology and religion from both the University of Helsinki and Åbo Akademi have participated in ecotheological efforts. The recent activity as regards eco-anxiety and hope has found many proponents and supporters among these people, who have already had an environmental interest, but new recruits have also appeared.

Elements of a Christian theology of eco-anxiety and hope

On the one hand, Christians can benefit from many of the activities and approaches which have been developed in the general movement related to eco-anxiety. For example, many of Joanna Macy’s activities can, and have, been used in Christian congregations. However, Christians have some strengths of their own (and of course, some challenges of their own) for such activities. Following, I describe several key points related to various elements of Christian theology and congregational life as regards eco-anxiety and hope. Because there is already much literature on the possibilities for practical environmental action in congregations,

I focus here on aspects which have a strong dimension of dealing with the emotional side of the issues.

Encountering suffering, grief, and mortality

Christian theology and congregations have much experience of living with suffering, practising compassion for those who are in sorrow, and providing people with resources to deal with the fact that they are mortals. These skills are not prevalent in the general atmosphere of industrialised societies, which makes the potential contributions of Christians very powerful. The “pastorological skills”, which Sigurd Bergmann has discussed,⁸² are very much needed amidst the ecological crisis.

Skills of encountering mortality have been discussed in relation to ecological grief by the aforementioned writers Chase and Christie, and in relation to eco-anxiety by myself.⁸³ The ancient Christian attitude of remembering human mortality and practising joy and compassion at the same time is in high demand in the current ecological crisis. There has begun to appear general literature about “learning to die in the Anthropocene”, but this literature, albeit insightful, is very stoic in nature.⁸⁴ There is a need for Christian interpretations of the same existential challenge.

Spiritual care and pastoral care

Numerous people are in need of spiritual and pastoral care because of the ecological crisis.⁸⁵ Christians have a profound task and opportunity to help people. However, this requires understanding of the predicament which humanity is now in. Both action and rest are needed. Spiritual care in our times should not be just therapy which lets unsustainable practices be, but neither should its only purpose be to increase capacity for sustainable consumption choices. There is a need for deeper encounters with the dark emotions. For example, hidden eco-shame presents difficulties. A lot of people suffer from always feeling inadequate. Simply telling them that they are righteous or forgiven does not work; in Tillich’s phrasing, people should be able to “accept that they are accepted”.⁸⁶

In the history of Christian faith, there have been many ways in which believers have provided each other pastoral care; it has not been the task of only the pastors.⁸⁷ Since the communal aspects of finding meaning and mutual acceptance are so crucial amidst the ecological crisis, there is a need for strengthening both pastor-led and mutual pastoral care in relation to eco-anxiety.

Diakonia

The ancient Christian notion of service now applies to both humans and other creatures, towards Creation.⁸⁸ Those people who suffer greatly from

eco-anxiety and are rendered weak or voiceless are targets of “diakonia”.⁸⁹ However, “diakonia” can also be a channel which offers people opportunities to help others. This strengthens resilience and a sense of efficacy, which are elementary for psychological survival and wellbeing. The kind of activities which Macy calls “holding actions” have been taken by Christians in many parts of the world, including Christians protesting against the oil pipeline plans in North America or against the cutting down of the rainforests in South America.

There are several kinds of possible actions, and providing emotional and spiritual support is also one of these. Not everyone feels at home in demonstrations, but there are other possible tasks available, such as helping children to cope with climate anxiety or assisting local adaptation and mitigation activities. This can be framed as increasing both individual resilience and community resilience.⁹⁰ In these tasks, spirituality and religious communities have been perceived to be in an important position.⁹¹

Education

There is a need and a possibility to integrate environmental education which includes both a sense of tragedy and a sense of hope and meaningfulness into religious education. There are resources available in the field of environmental education for this,⁹² but there is work to do for Christians in integrating theology and practical Christian spirituality into them.⁹³

Worship

Because Christians have a hope that is related to both the visible and invisible world – one which is eschatological, both immanent and transcendent – they have special resources for practising radical joy and compassion amidst the growing ecological crisis. This joy and compassion should inform Christian education and worship life. Liturgy has always comprised both joy and sadness; now these elements resonate within a world characterised more and more by climate crisis and other ecological catastrophes. The efforts towards “greening” Christian worship life should be explicitly integrated with an increased understanding of the seriousness of eco-anxiety, ecological grief, and “eco-guilt”.⁹⁴ The recent work in studies on religion and ecology about ritual and ecological emotions provides important resources for this work.⁹⁵

Bible studies, study groups

The biblical texts offer many moving and deep depictions of various dark emotions and of people finding hope in the midst of difficult circumstances. There are many possibilities for Bible studies and study groups on themes related to eco-anxiety and hope. Some resources for this can be found in existing literature on ecological hermeneutics.⁹⁶

Congregations have many spaces which they can use creatively to provide people with opportunities to engage with eco-anxiety and hope. Because eco-anxiety can be difficult to face, holistic and embodied methods can help in this. Various forms of art and architecture can enable easily accessible but profoundly moving instances of encountering difficult emotions.⁹⁷ There are resources for this in art-based environmental education.⁹⁸

Concluding remarks: towards the future

It is impossible for me to express how much this discussion about eco-anxiety has helped me.

– feedback from a reader of my book on eco-anxiety⁹⁹

In this final section, I will briefly discuss the present and future challenges of the Finnish theology of eco-anxiety and its public implications. For this purpose, I also have to dwell a bit on recent history.

I have not collected actual academic data of the liberating results of my – and our – work on the theology of eco-anxiety, but I have several email messages and many personal experiences where people speak of profound relief. Especially in the winter of 2017–2018, a major change happened: socially constructed silence about climate change and eco-anxiety, including climate anxiety, was shattered in Finland. Lots of people were greatly relieved to be able to finally speak of their ecological emotions. The very fact that one receives public recognition for eco-anxiety can be uplifting. Many people have also sent or expressed feedback for the practical tips I have offered (for example, “10 Recommendations for People with Eco-Anxiety”¹⁰⁰).

In 2019, I and several other members of our vague eco-anxiety movement took part in organising more public advocacy, social support, and research projects. Various organisations, both in the social and health sectors and in education, have now started to offer support structures for people who suffer from eco-anxiety. Many groups or segments of people have provided contextual versions of their own for the alleviation of eco-anxiety, often drawing from the resources produced by me and others. For example, young climate activists have developed forms of eco-anxiety self-care and organised social gatherings where various dark emotions, including climate grief, have been shared and processed. We now have some research on the various emotions that Finns have in relation to eco-anxiety and climate anxiety.¹⁰¹

On one hand, we have witnessed liberating effects of theology of eco-anxiety (and its secular versions). But, on the other hand, there has also been backlash. Especially in winter 2019, several right-wing populists framed eco-anxiety and climate anxiety as something unnecessary and foolish. This is linked to wider phenomena which are studied in the field of

political emotions.¹⁰² There are explicit and implicit norms and power structures related to emotions and the public expression – or non-expression – of them. Certain groups of people have desired to portray almost any public expression of emotion as non-rational and foolish. Eco-anxiety and climate grief, to name two examples, have been challenged by some groups of this kind. This is usually linked to views that it is not necessary to make any rapid changes in environmental behaviour or legislation.

Reality is always complex, but if generalisations are made, certain factors related to people become connected with resistance towards recognition of eco-anxiety. For example, such recognition has been difficult for many older people and many men. These phenomena have direct implications for eco-anxiety discussions in such contexts as schools or congregations.

In schools and educational institutes, there have been both bold new initiatives in encountering eco-anxiety and resistance towards encountering the whole issue. In Finnish congregations, many of the active members are elderly people. Thus, in congregations, there have also been both initiatives and resistance. Some pastors, for example, have organised discussions and liturgies related to encountering ecological emotions in confirmation school camps. But many members of the parish councils – the local decision-making bodies – are sceptical of the validity of eco-anxiety, or at least they insist that younger people should move rapidly from anxiety into action.

I mention these examples because I presume that similar things may well happen in other countries where eco-anxiety will become a wider topic of discussion. It remains to be seen what the relationship of various strands of Christianity with environmental issues and eco-anxiety will be. Psychosocial pressures are rising as environmental damage and the impacts of climate change intensify. Which groups of people will turn towards denial, disavowal, and distancing? And which groups of people will bravely try to face the situation with honesty and effort?¹⁰³

In the Finnish theology of eco-anxiety, we – and I – have stressed the need both for acknowledging ambiguity and for action. This makes it possible to avoid black-and-white thinking and increases the ability to feel both grief and joy. Regardless of what the future brings, there is potential to find hope in the sense of meaning-making in the common struggle for human rights and ecological flourishing. This kind of hope is movingly summarised by Vaclav Havel: “Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well . . . but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good”.¹⁰⁴

Notes

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