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Thinking Otherwise: Theology, Inculturation and Climate Change

Glenn Morrison

Abstract: Eco-Theology and Creation Spirituality are examples of major attempts to dialogue with science. In the process, they have journeyed through diversity. In contrast, the essay will seek to take another route to think otherwise upon ecological responsibility. First, it comments on the danger of being forgetful of the Christian narrative. This is not to deny the impact of climate change or global warming, but to argue that fear and facts should not necessarily be the starting point for addressing our present concern. The essay then brings into conversation the idea of 'the quest' for Jesus the Christ. The quest consists of five key stages: life, journey, discovery, transformation and transcendence. Using these stages as a guide, the essay sets out to develop a logic of faith to bring theo-logical sense and meaning to the conversation upon climate change. Rather than the totality of the presence of personal experience, the objectivity of facts and the being of competing, purely anthropocentric self-interests, there is something "otherwise": the wisdom of God working in us in hidden ways. Through life, in the journey of faith, the self faces the opportunity to discover and discern God's will. This may perhaps lead to transformation and transcendence where prayer and ethics concord in the passion to give of oneself for the world. In other words, a thinking otherwise of 'what God has revealed through the Spirit' (1 Cor 2:10), namely the person and mission of Jesus the Christ, is invoked into the conversation. For the Church, this is the logic of inculturation, that is, of witnessing the Christian truth so that others can understand and accept it. Dramatically, the spirit of truth can be revealed in a personal 'hello' containing a benediction, a first transcendence or an invocation to be responsible. Vigilantly, in this encounter of the proximity of the other's face, the possibility comes to mind to hear the word of God and think otherwise upon ecological responsibility.

Eco-Theology and Creation Spirituality have been a growing phenomenon over the past fifty years. An array of authors such as Teilhard De Chardin, Thomas Berry, Denis Edwards, Matthew Fox, Paul Collins, Sean McDonagh, Brian Swimme, Leonardo Boff, Tony Kelly and Celia Deane-Drummond have begun to bring theology and spirituality into an open conversation with ecology and the environment. One recent author, Celia Deane-Drummond has written a very

engaging and informative book entitled, *Eco-Theology*.¹ Particularly what seems so practical is her outline of a “theological eco-praxis” in her postscript. This is the fruit of her discussion on climate change. For example, she writes:

I suggest that living *from* the Sabbath leads to *transformation*, a transformation of encounter, of renewal of covenant, which we can rightly name as a *cosmic covenant* of the kind that we may associate with the early experience of the first Israelite wanderers in the desert. Living from the Sabbath implies going beyond what simply happens on the Lord’s Day, but every day of the week becomes influenced by its transforming power. Such a transformation includes a deep sensitivity to the created world in way that weaves together some of the threads discussed in the book.²

The sense of the eco-praxis of “living from the Sabbath” is a very elegant one and Deane-Drummond provides eleven practical examples for this. In contrast in this essay, I want to do things a little more differently to reflect upon theology and climate change. Instead of the word, praxis, I want to use the word, ‘quest’ as it seems to me to bring together theology, spirituality and the inculturation of the Christian narrative in a more cohesive bond. Perhaps, a quest is itself the fruit of a theological praxis.

Furthermore, taking the lead from the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, it is my contention that theology is altogether first ethics, prayer and love. So with this in mind, when looking at climate change and global warming, I would want to start from the other way round from Celia Deane-Drummond and begin to develop a foundation of a theological ethics (a Judeo-Christian logic of faith) rather than first engaging ecological facts. This is not to say that my way is better. It is just my preference to focus on developing the theological and spiritual sense to gain meaning on issues like climate change. Once such a foundation of theological ethics begins to form, I believe then that it can be time to risk engaging in the world of ecology and the environment with all its array of facts and information. If theology and spirituality do not settle first in ethics, prayer and love, there may exist the danger to be totalised by science or contaminated by ontological arguments and

¹ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: DLT, 2008).

² Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, 183.

thematisations. So in order to resist such temptations, violence or excesses, I will venture now to set out on a path of developing a sense of spirituality and theology in the light of gaining some meaning about the notions of climate change and global warming.

Christian truth is never a fact, but always a revelation of God's love for us (1 John 3:16). The promise of peace and salvation for the Church and the world finds its fulfilment in Jesus the Christ. This is an underlying part of the Christian story of faith. But today, in the early morning of the twenty-first century, another story is beginning to take on a momentum. A new narrative is forming, however, not always by the language of faith, hope and love, but by perhaps the language of fear, facts and insecurity. Christian theology is well versed with this temptation. It remains always a danger to reduce God and Christian truth to facts, proofs, thematisations and personal experience. Now I want to be frank. This is not an essay for or against the occurrence of climate change today, but a critical reflection on the direction the conversation could be going. My contention is that the focus seems to be centred upon the objectivity of facts, the presence of personal experience and the self-interest of supposing a true reality of the future. Time seems to have lost its true meaning where the future has already been unveiled in an apocalyptic, projected future.

In contrast, Christian theology reflects on the revelation of God's word.³ This is a truly personal encounter because God's word unveils the person of Jesus the Christ. The sense of a Son incarnate bears a dramatic meaning of life, sacrifice and love. Everything about God's word - its universality, exaltation, presence and power, for example - is effected by the Spirit and offered in obedience to the Father. We have here something very Trinitarian, relational and personal, namely a triune drama of love and giving of oneself-for-another. Here, we are not engaged in the language of facts, but of personhood and relationality. God's word is personal and its revelation cannot be reduced simply to the everyday experience of the senses. Christianity

³ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Volume IV More Recent Writings*, translated by Kevin Smyth (London: DLT, 1966), 337.

therefore is beholden to God's word in the humility of mystery and faith. To take upon oneself such vulnerability suggests weakness. However, this is a weakness greater than any human strength and reasoning. To bear such weakness signifies the sense of thinking otherwise than 'the totality of the same,' a phrase the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas employed to point to the danger of releasing one's being to the anonymous and depersonalising ways of ordinary society. Hence, my argument in regards to the new, emerging meta-narrative of Climate Change is that it must not be the product of fear and facts. Facing this challenge, we need to be mindful of our Judeo-Christian ethic, namely the value of personhood and of being-for-the-other - otherwise a real danger will take hold as it has in the past. This danger is like the totality and insecurity of nationalism.

In the past nationalism was limited to one nation and its effects on its neighbours. But today, in a global world, a universal 'nationalism' or 'inculturation' could take hold to replace that human spirit with fear and facts. The new meta-narrative of Climate Change could one day hold sway over the world, enthraling the world with 'bad news' of an apocalyptic, projected future of horror, death and destruction. Again, I am not trying to make a comment on that state of the climate today, but rather on the possible tendency for the Climate Change story to turn into a global nationalism and an apocalyptic or gnostic reduction of the future to the present. Let us take a step back then to the challenge of German nationalism for Christianity, so that we may jump farther, so to speak, to understand a way for the Climate Change Story to be mindful of something otherwise than the objectivity of facts and proofs. Having experienced the totality of Hitlerism upon Christianity first hand, the Swiss, Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar reflects:

One difficulty of all missionary work is the fact that the truth of the Christian revelation cannot be embraced in its fullness apart from its prehistory, that is, the experience of Israel. Every 'inculturation' that attempts to replace Christianity's pre-history with the history of a particular culture will necessarily fail to attain the catholicity of Christian culture and introduce some kind of

nationalization of Christianity. Hitler's 'German Christians' should be a constant warning for us here.⁴

Today, world history is 'in the making' with the advent of climate change or global warming. There is no doubt that the climate is changing. However, the way people are responding depicts the effect of an intrusive globalisation ending in totality. On the face of things, this may seem to be a terrible value judgment. There are just so many facts indicating climate change and global warming. I certainly do not want to deny this. The world must take responsibility for the well-being of the environment. But my problem is precisely this: we are focused on an object rather than a subject. The work of caring for the environment depends first on the love of one's neighbour and in more hidden ways, on the love for God. One of the starting points is to be thankful first that we can do something, and then to realise our profound guilt before others and the world. Though, what is this something we can do? We must not first be swayed by a multitude of facts, interpretations and diagnoses. Empirical evidence, no matter how damning, will only take us so far. Empirical facts coupled with persuasiveness betray the human condition. There are questions that must be asked before and reflected upon. The response of a fact disguises itself as the totality of a complete answer. But truth remains beyond the proof of facts. Ultimately, truth lies in the humility and transcendence of prayer and ethics. Otherwise than uncovering data, there is the face of the other who orders us to responsibility and reminds us of God's word.

Christian revelation is concerned with God's love 'for us'. Underpinning the narrative of love is 'the experience of Israel'. This experience engages the world of grace, prayer, ethics, sacrifice, hope and the promise of peace, justice and mercy. Altogether, these biblical themes and be-attitudes signify the hope for redemption: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth" (Job 19:25). So in this time of ultimate concern about the environment, should not the first word of hope for the Christian believer be in the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). And it is in this hope that our humanity must learn to struggle with

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Theological Logical Theory, Vol. III: The Spirit of Truth*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Pres, 2005), 264.

existence, find meaning in suffering and death and so develop a sense of the sacred in the encounter with the other. It is obvious that humanity does not learn from history, preferring personal experience and egoistic desires to guide its path. Today, to suggest that Salvation History can provide infinite meaning for a world facing the shock of climate change and global warming may seem foolish. We produce and consume literally 'like there is no tomorrow'. But Salvation History reminds us that our human condition is in relation to God. Humanity is called to be like God, ethical, prayerful and loving.

People of influence and power may come to meetings. But many, many others are missing from these grand adventures like philosophers, poets, artists, writers and even theologians! And there are others still who need to be heard and who have priority, namely orphans, widows and strangers (Deut 10:18). Responsibility for climate change is hyperbolic. The more we realise our responsibility for the world, the more we must engage in the being and life of others. The first stage of a response exists far less in economic policies; these come later after the fruit of an engaged subjectivity of listening and sacrifice. The first stage begins in love.

Where there is love for others, a new knowledge begins to unfold. Beyond the seeing and hearing of facts and data of the Climate Change Story, there is another story, an ancient one awaiting to charge every soul with the light of grace and glory. This story proclaims, "The Lord is near the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (Ps. 34:18). We do want to become "Climate Change Christians" battling the World War Three of global warming. Rather, by first focusing on the face and vulnerability of the other, we can begin to develop a just sense in life. With this sense, meaning can be found and safeguarded from the temptation of persuasive facts and data. Again, I do not want to argue for or against global warming. My contention is that we need to learn from the Judea-Christian story that the other is sacred, and that the Absolute Other, God, commands and ordains us to an infinite responsibility of prayer, ethics and love. Developing such a radical sense of transcendence can become the hope and key to face many of the world's problems such as climate change, poverty, war, terrorism and the increasing

tendency to respond through the horror of genocide. So we need to respond by the carefulness of thinking otherwise. We have to be careful to recognise and not destroy the radical transcendence at work in the quest to inculturate the truth of the Good News in the 'global' world.

The Quest

The idea of a quest can be enthralling. However, altogether, I suggest, a quest unveils five themes or phases: journey, life, discovery, transformation and transcendence. These five themes can together point to one perspective of inculturating the Gospel in a global culture facing the threat of existence. I will now proceed to envision a response to the fear of global climate change. I will set out to phenomenological and theological deconstruct the temptation to reduce "an anticipated future"⁵ of death and destruction to an apocalyptic present. Again, I too may be falling into contention and thematisation by suggesting the future is not certain; it still remains secret. Even if the world is going to suffer catastrophically by global warming, there will always remain hope and this is a 'thematisation' that I am willing to risk. The human spirit is something greater and beyond facts and data. Within the innermost part of the spirit, lies a momentum and vision. To live is to begin to partake of this vision. The journey begins with every breath and takes shape particularly through such activities as engaging personally with others, sharing, reflecting on meaning and finding the courage to take a step further along a crooked and difficult road of ethics and prayer.

For the Christian, the search for meaning depends on the person of Jesus the Christ. The journey must therefore begin to search for the Christ in our world: "Are you the one who is to come or shall we wait for another?" (Matt 11:3) The search is not just a personal one, but integrally is defined by being in the Church. The self then is called to take up the witness of Christ and share in the Church's mission: "... the Church must go outward to the nations and teach them the Christian truth

⁵ Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. IV, 337.

in such a way that they can understand and accept it ('inculturation')".⁶ The Christian self, in the quest for Jesus the Christ, faces a difficult task. Not only must there be a witness of the Christian truth, but firstly, it has to be caught in the journey of faith. Truth to a certain level can be taught, but profoundly it must also be caught from the wisdom of God working in the innermost part of the soul. Where the Christian self encounters the stirrings of truth in the passivity of unknowing and in the bearing of suffering and dying, a 'good' truth emerges, namely the in-sight of the language of faith, hope and love. In other words, the quest for Jesus the Christ initiates a taste for Christian truth and a desire to witness to its dramatic veiling and unveiling of God's word in the world.

From the experience of a journey comes the sense that life is 'in me'. The phases along the journey of life can be quite dramatic and at other times even mundane and too quiet. Yet every stage has meaning, crisis, opportunity, challenge and hope. Today, we live in an era of things being done for us. Technology has done the world a favour making life easier and providing more opportunities for the pursuit of pleasure. Whilst the world may graze on opportunities for pleasure, accentuated by the ease of internet access, it may not realise that its existence is perhaps becoming more and more like cattle herded and controlled not just by conformity, but by moral relativism, radicalised modernity (the 'yes we can!'), and the ever awakening reality of boredom. As the world foregoes manual labour, there are naturally more opportunities to seek pleasure and turn this into the meaning of life. The pleasure of feeling exhausted by working on the land, or even of cooking everyday can be lost to more 'pertinent' concerns like instantly connecting on-line with others to surf, watch and discover things. This seems to me more a quest to avoid boredom and engage in the pursuit of pleasure rather than reflecting on life and finding its meaning in face-to-face encounters, sacrifice, suffering, dying and the hope for new life.

Now, what has all this have to do with global warming and ecological responsibility? Our perception of life is crucial. If people are so concerned with spending a good

⁶ von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Vol. III*, p.259.

part of their day discovering facts, enjoying new experiences and tasting the proof of personhood in only one's ownmost possibilities in the world, then many of the responses to climate change would likely be influenced by the totalising habit of competing, purely anthropocentric self-interests interpreting existence and reality. So, for example, people engaged in a self-interested life will perceive the effect of climate change as more an end to *my* personal pleasure-seeking in the world. Instead of fearing for the world, the deepest inner feeling will boil over as fear for oneself and one's own experiences and possessions against other self-interests. The face for the other, competing with *my* face and *my* opportunities, will be more despised rather than respected. All this underlines that the human striving for peace must face the temptation to reduce the world to the totality of self-interest, the presence of personal experience, and the objectivity of facts.

Developing a stance towards climate change "in the peace of Christ 'which the world cannot give'" signifies a 'thinking otherwise'.⁷ A helpful beginning would be to engage more in self-discovery rather than behaviours that favour self-interest. However, the discovery of the sacred in life, whether this is the environment, family, friends, the relation with God or even encountering the face of a stranger, depends more on the openness of passivity rather than the enjoyment of activity. For example, to look towards the future demands an openness of passivity of listening to God's word. Passivity as prayer, as hope for justice or more deeply, as encountering God in the innermost part of the soul gives light to the meaning of personhood. We are more deeply ourselves where we give room for God and others to enter our life, heart and dreams. The vulnerability and meekness of engaging at a more emotive and prayerful level does not mean a withdrawal of power, but more the inheritance of the earth (Matt 5:5).

One of the first words, then, in the concern of climate change should not necessarily be fear by itself, but the discovery of being able to give thanks to God for the world and one another. To give thanks to God for something so compelling like the climate that sustains and nurtures life and existence is to discover that we

⁷ von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, Vol. III, p. 265.

too have a role to play. However, our role depends upon the way we humans must discern our gifts and talents (1 Cor 12:10) such as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing and miracles. From the point of view of the Christian narrative, the rational way to speak about the world depends on the way we speak about God. Yet Christianity too faces the temptation to use “secular power in order (allegedly) to attain its purposes and goals”.⁸ Every institution faces the threat to confuse propaganda and totality with mission and truth.⁹ This is why the discovery of the sacred in life must lead to a transformation, conversion or a radical turnabout.

The nature of transformation relates not just to self-individuation but also to the *super*-individuation of relating to God. The relation to God bespeaks of openness. On the one hand, there is the “constant vigilance in the pneumatic discernment of spirits,”¹⁰ and on the other hand, there is the rupture of allowing God’s word to-work-in-us. In the darkness of God’s communication to the soul, the hard work of transformation and discernment begins. We may not know the difference at times between what is of God and of oneself. But where human thinking and being relates to the language of faith, hope and love, the human spirit may begin to find a voice to cry out to God. The transformation of grace then begins to sprout, as it were. To be poor in spirit (Matt 5:3) or to be blessed with God’s “own love in the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5),”¹¹ is to have encountered God by the good truth of love. In the course of the events of the journey of life, the discovery of God’s will may well lead to a new vision: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). This new vision unveils the Spirit at work behind God’s revelation.

Again, what does all this mean in terms of climate change and global warming? Even with all the ‘proof’ of facts indicating increases in global temperatures and the threat of death and destruction, such ‘human wisdom’ (1 Cor 2:13) is not the last

⁸ von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Vol. III*, p. 265.

⁹ von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Vol. III*, p. 266.

¹⁰ von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Vol. III*, p. 266.

¹¹ von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Vol. III*, p. 266.

word. Otherwise, the world will fall into the apocalypse of a future of “worthless time” and “nothingness”.¹² For the Christian, the encounter of God’s salvation in Christ through the Spirit is not a product of facts, a projection of the future or even statistical proofs. The encounter is an utmost passivity of bearing forth ethics, prayer and love; something of Christ has transformed the personhood of the human soul. And this ‘something’ is the grace or ‘carefulness’ of God’s action and wisdom-in-us to envision a future of hope from a present of bearing suffering to the point of expiation for others.

Whatever the circumstances of our changing world and history, the Christian self is called to the mission of witnessing the Christian truth so that others can understand and accept it. The temptation towards falling into the violence and totality of fundamentalism and proselytism, however concealed, remains always present. So the challenge now, moving towards a sense of ethical transcendence and compassion, is to find a rational way to speak about the mystery of God to the world in the face of fear and the threat of climate change. Theology should not be removed from the conversation. Theology can offer to the current dialogue a ‘thinking otherwise’ testifying that the Christian story of hope and redemption is not useless and for nothing, but rather, of infinite meaning and promise.

In the enlightenment age, reasoned ruled that all problems can be solved. The radicalisation of modernity continues also in our postmodern age to reduce the level of climate change to the sense of ‘yes, we can!’ Such an attitude can only end in catastrophe as it forgets the (im)-possibility of the aporia demanding a resolution in the language of faith, hope and love. And today, behind all the rhetoric of rationalisations and thematisations, there is a growing confidence that the world has entered or is heading towards a new, second enlightenment. We are witnessing here a benediction to bring faith and reason together. However, the irony is that such a benediction or transcendence has always been present; it is embedded deep within the Judaeo-Christian narrative. I want to suggest that a way forward for the conversation and dialogue on ecological responsibility and climate change is to start

¹² Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. IV, 337.

at the very beginning, at the greeting, 'hello'. My aim here is to conclude the essay and give some reflection on the underlying phenomenology in the proximity of the other.

Conclusion: 'Hello' - the first transcendence

The Jewish and French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, provides a helpful lens to develop a sense of the encounter and proximity of the other. He writes:

All encounter begins with a benediction, contained in the word 'hello'; that 'hello' that all *cogito*, all reflection on oneself already presupposes and that would be a first transcendence. This greetings addressed to the other man is an invocation. I therefore insist on the primacy of the well-intentioned reflection toward the other. Even when there may be ill will on the other's part, the attention, the receiving of the other, like his recognition, mark the priority of good in relation to evil.¹³

Again, what has all this to do with the Climate Change Story? If Christianity is going to have any success at inculturation, that is, testifying to a truly Christian logic of faith in a world threatened by a perceived apocalypse of global warming, then it must settle to begin with a face-to-face encounter, expressing the passion of a first transcendence: 'hello'!

In the 'hello,' in "the receiving of the other," time begins as the 'to-God' and the 'being-for-the-other'. Through every 'hello,' the passion of being-for-the-other unveils the hope of the Church for the world: "having a share in the fullness of the Godhead that dwells in Christ"¹⁴ (Col 2:11-15). 'In' the invocation of the benediction of the 'hello,' the trace of responsibility unveils as a trace of trace, namely something unheard-of or an absolute surprise: to nail our trespasses to the cross of Christ, openly and humbly. "In" the hello – like the 'In' of "In the beginning" (Gen 1:1) - we are called to confess our guilty conscience to the other through ethical responsibility.

¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, translated by Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 98.

¹⁴ von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, Vol. III, p. 267-268.

When ethics begins with a prayerful 'hello' and the welcoming of the other to the point of expiation and confession (the first transcendence), the world may rise in benediction and hope to give thanks. To first reserve a blessing for the other rather committing an excess of evil – for example, invoking artificial indulgences, expressing an apocalyptic world view and fostering the struggle of self-interests – initiates the hope and expression of responsibility for the future generations. There is no doubt that our current concern upon climate change evokes various appreciations and feelings. By 'thinking otherwise' and being-for-the-other, those who believe themselves to be 'victims' of global warming may well show the courage to begin with a benediction and "mark the priority of good in relation to evil". So then, by this inversion from victimisation to expiation, the hope to pursue ecological responsibilities – beginning with a first 'hello' in the proximity of the other – unveils a new vigilance and passion.

The 'other,' the poor ones who have suffered first hand from the passion of climate change bear an (im)-possible vocation or mission. Despite the excess of environmental change damaging or destroying their world, the saying of a 'hello' before the more powerful and influential can reveal something beyond consciousness. This something, related to love, is the passion of ethical transcendence articulated as prayer, benediction and the sharing in the cross of Christ. I do not think it is easy to say 'hello' to others with such passion and hope. But, if wisdom (God working in us) helps us to understand ecological and inter-human responsibility as preceded by and rooted in the experience of grace, then the service of being-for-the-other could become a true witness to the gift of nature - creation as benediction by the other one. This could be enough to inspire the promise of peace and healing for humanity and the world (Isa 57:19). Indeed, it could be the beginning to journey into the face of other. Not only do we encounter their pain, suffering and loneliness, but also perhaps the 'pain and suffering' of an 'other other,' namely nature, ecology and the environment. So in the face of the other, God's word communicates an order to fear for the state of the environment. This indeed can be conceived as quite a radical view. But, I believe, it is conceivable that if we are sensitive and compassionate before the face of our neighbour, then

we can begin to see with our heart and spirit and take on a new inner vision or revelation of hearing God's order and word to care for the state of the environment. So, just as we have developed compassion for the other, we also allow our hearts to be vulnerable to the 'pain and suffering' of creation. This may be just enough to initiate a response of ethics, prayer and love.

My desire in this essay has not been to argue for or against climate change, but rather, to invoke a sense of personhood, compassion and transcendence. Otherwise than the presence of *my* personal experience, the objectivity of facts and the being of competing, purely anthropocentric self-interests, there remains the good truth of the story of Jesus the Christ: "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Eph 2:14). Beyond conflicts, the quest of being a gift of self for another might truly begin in the goodness of greeting another and of giving thanks to God for the world and one another.

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