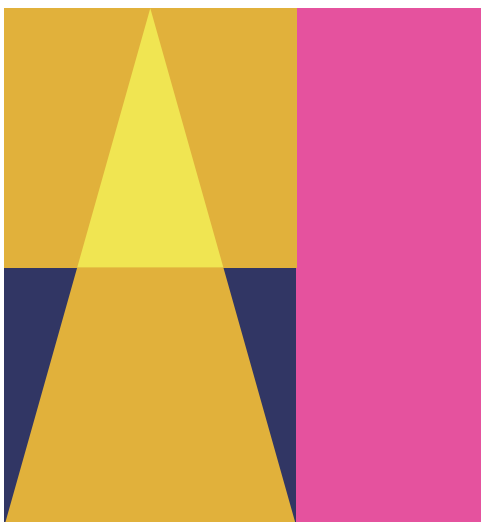
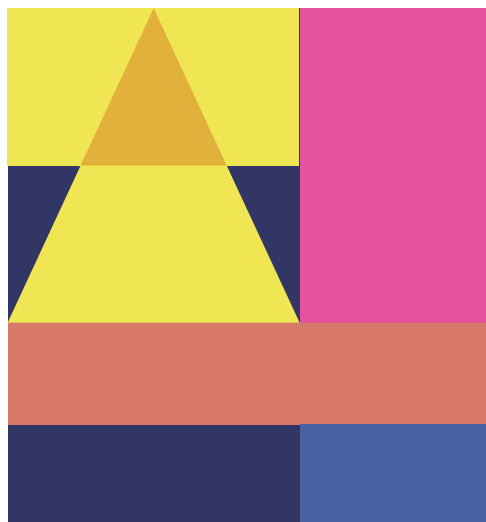
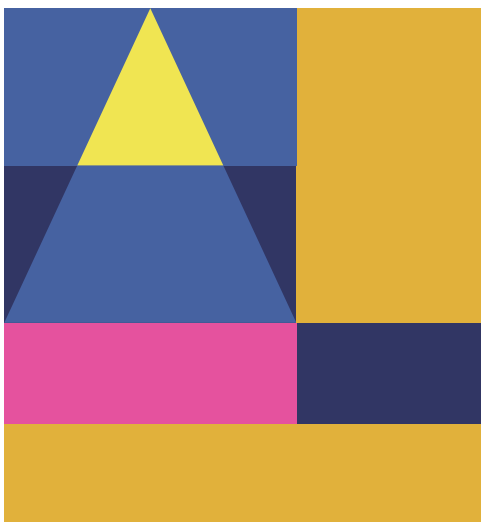




Hyun-Sook Kim, I Sil Yoon, Yunsoo Joo,
Mai-Anh Le Tran (Eds.)

Practical Wisdom in the Living Web of the Anthropocene



Seoul 2025



INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY
OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
CONFERENCE SERIES

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Preface

Practical Wisdom in the Living Web of the Anthropocene is the fourth free open access digital volume of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT) and joins the ranks of all previous publications—print and digital—which followed the Academy’s biennial conferences dating back to 1997. The IAPT’s Conference Series is dedicated space for wider sharing of juried papers presented at a given biennial conference. This volume brings together a selection of papers presented at the 2023 biennial conference held in Seoul, Korea. The Seoul conference represented a significant moment in the evolving discourse of practical theology, particularly in its endeavor to engage meaningfully with the complex exigencies of the contemporary world. The conference was hosted by Yonsei University and organized by a local committee comprised of faculty from multiple universities in Seoul and beyond. In addition to keynotes, plenary panels, and paper sessions, there were introductions to local religious communities and elective immersive experiences, including a peace tour of Korea’s DMZ (De-Militarized Zone), a historical tour of the city of Seoul, and a visit to the environmental justice activism

in Hongcheon. The conference was featured in Korea’s newsmedia, including CBS, the very first Christian TV station in South Korea, and GoodTV.

The IAPT Conference Series is a labor of academic calling, generous collaboration, and scholarly love. As editors, we extend sincere gratitude to all contributing authors for their arduous work, to the peer reviewers for their insightful support, to copy-editors who lent their keen eyes, and to creative designers and production technicians who organized academic words into beautiful form. We are especially grateful to Birgit Weyel, Hans Probst, Francesco Punzo, Henry Carrigan, Min Kyu Hong, the library staff of the University of Tübingen, among others, for their expertise and dedication to the development of this project.

It is our hope that this volume will serve as a meaningful platform for constructive and imaginative engagement with the multifaceted challenges of the Anthropocene.

Hyun-Sook Kim, I Sil Yoon,
Yunsoo Joo, Mai-Anh Le Tran



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Introduction

Hyun-Sook Kim, I Sil Yoon, Yunsoo Joo, Mai-Anh Le Tran

The 2023 conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT), held in Seoul, Korea, offered a profound platform to engage in critical reflection on the dynamic and interconnected challenges of our time. In the culturally and historically rich context of East Asia, the theme of the conference—Practical Wisdom in the Living Web of the Anthropocene—invited participants to grapple with the entangled relationships among technology, political and economic dynamics, and environmental crises. This introductory essay serves as a gateway to the collected works presented at the conference, framing the critical questions, insights, and aspirations that emerged during this remarkable gathering.

Contextualizing the Conference: East Asia's Complex Terrain

The Anthropocene, a term that underscores humanity's profound impact on the planet's ecosystems, highlights the vulnerabilities intensified by globalization and industrialization within ecological and social systems worldwide. This global context sets the stage for examining the particular challenges and responses in East Asia, where the consequences of ecological neglect—such as cross-border pollution and the pre-COVID-19 normalization of mask-wearing—demonstrate both the opportunities and risks of our interconnected world. The region's rapid economic growth has showcased the benefits of globalization, yet it has also led to significant environmental degradation, demanding collaborative efforts to address climate change and biodiversity loss (Steffen et al. 2011, 842).

East Asia, with its intricate web of connections that are simultaneously enabling and fragile, provides fertile ground for theological reflection on humanity's relationship with Earth. The region's rich heritage in communal values, ecological harmony, and traditions of stewardship forms a valuable foundation for integrating cultural, ethical, and spiritual perspectives into frameworks for sustainable living (Shapiro 2016). Practical theology in East Asia responds to these pressing issues by promoting

sustainability and justice through theological inquiry and ethical practices.

In South Korea, a nation profoundly shaped by the lasting impacts of colonization, war, and the Cold War, these global and regional dynamics find a distinct echo (Cumings 2005). The complex interplay of historical memory with present-day resilience in Korea provides a nuanced backdrop for the IAPT conference. The selection of Seoul as the host city for this conference was a deliberate choice, aimed at confronting urgent global ecological challenges within a context that reflects both historical struggles and contemporary opportunities for theological and practical engagement.

Thematic Core: Intersections of Technology, Economics, and Environmental Ethics

A central theme in the conference discussions was the growing recognition that technological advancements and economic imperatives often operate within a framework of neoliberal rationality, which prioritizes profit maximization over the common good. This tension is particularly acute within the environmental crisis, where urgent calls for systemic transformation clash with entrenched economic structures and political inertia (Klein 2014).





Speakers critiqued how technological innovations, while potentially offering solutions, are often driven by market forces that prioritize efficiency and profitability rather than long-term ecological sustainability or human well-being. For example, discussions highlighted how advancements in renewable energy technologies, such as solar and wind power, can be co-opted by large corporations that continue to exploit natural resources, undermining the very goal of reducing environmental harm. Similarly, the rise of greenwashing—where companies market themselves as environmentally friendly without making substantive changes—was discussed as an example of how neoliberal frameworks often dilute the potential of technological progress.

This tension between technological advancement and economic imperatives was explored through the lens of practical theology, which emphasizes the lived realities of individuals and communities and is committed to transformative praxis. Practical theology was positioned as a critical lens through which to interrogate the dynamics of neoliberal rationality, offering ethical and theological insights that challenge the assumptions of profit-driven models. One paper focused on how theological principles such as stewardship and solidarity can reframe the use of technology, urging faith communities and policymakers to prioritize the common good over market-driven priorities. Another presentation examined how the concept of care in practical theology can inform economic practices that genuinely promote sustainable development, focusing not only on financial profitability but on the well-being of all creation—human, non-human, and environmental.

In addition to critiquing the dominance of neoliberal frameworks, the conference encouraged participants to move beyond Eurocentric and logos-centered approaches to practical theology. The sessions underscored the importance of seeking wisdom from diverse cultural and theological traditions, recognizing that solutions to the global environmental crisis are unlikely to come solely from Western-centric paradigms. This call to expand the horizons of practical theology resonated deeply within the East Asian context, where indigenous wisdom and communal values offer alternative perspectives on sustainability and justice. By expanding the conference's framework to include non-Western perspectives, the discussions also engaged with communal ethics that prioritize collective well-being over individual gain. Participants explored how communal values rooted in solidarity and shared

responsibility can offer ethical alternatives to the neoliberal model, which often emphasizes competition and individualism. This emphasis on community and interdependence resonated particularly with discussions on sustainability, where the focus is not only on human welfare but also on the welfare of the broader ecological system.

Ultimately, the conference called for a reimagining of practical theology's role in addressing the environmental crisis. By drawing from diverse cultural traditions and theological frameworks, practical theology can offer a deeper, more nuanced approach to the intersections of technology, economics, and environmental ethics. In doing so, it challenges the dominance of neoliberalism and points toward a more just, sustainable, and harmonious way of living in the world.

Practical Wisdom: The Living Human Web and Eschatological Hope

The metaphor of the “living human web,” a long-cherished concept developed by Bonnie Miller-McLemore (1993), served as a unifying framework throughout the conference. This image powerfully encapsulates the complex, interdependent nature of human relationships, reflecting the interconnectedness of individual lives, communities, and the broader ecological and social contexts. Much like a web, each thread in this metaphor represents a relationship—whether human-human, human-nature, or even human-technology—that, when frayed or broken, sends ripples across the entire structure. A single action, positive or negative, can affect not only the immediate relational sphere but also larger environmental and societal systems. This metaphor emphasizes the fragility of our existence, reminding participants that even the smallest choices can reverberate widely, but it also highlights the resilience embedded within the web, suggesting that, despite its vulnerabilities, the web can also regenerate, adapt, and strengthen through collective care and action.

Central to the conference's discussions was the concept of “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*)—the ability to navigate complex, real-world situations with moral discernment and thoughtful action (Aristotle 1999). As participants examined the ongoing crises of the Anthropocene, they were invited to reflect on both the successes and failures of past collective efforts to address environmental and social challeng-

es. One session analyzed the practical applications of *phronesis* in environmental advocacy, drawing on case studies where communities had successfully resisted environmentally destructive projects by leveraging local knowledge, resilience, and collaborative wisdom. Another paper examined the failures of certain international climate agreements, questioning how theological frameworks could offer more sustainable and inclusive solutions that take into account the voices of marginalized communities. Participants also reflected on how *phronesis* could help theologians and activists untangle the complex “knots” within the human web—such as systemic inequality, environmental degradation, and political fragmentation—that obstruct efforts toward justice and collective well-being. The discussions focused on how practical wisdom, rooted in theological ethics, can guide the difficult work of fostering justice, solidarity, and long-term hope in the face of impending ecological and social crises.

Integral to the exploration of practical wisdom was the eschatological dimension of practical theology. Eschatology, the theological study of ultimate hope and the future fulfillment of creation, provided a vital counterpoint to the pervasive despair that often accompanies discussions of the Anthropocene. Many of the conference papers highlighted the importance of eschatological hope in motivating collective action. For example, one presentation proposed that an eschatological vision of redemption—seeing the world not as doomed but as being continually transformed toward healing—can energize faith communities to engage more proactively with the planet’s ecological needs. This perspective challenges the narrative of doom and helplessness, replacing it with a vision of renewed creation where human action can be a participant in divine restoration. In another paper session, scholars explored how eschatological hope fosters a long-term view of human flourishing, reframing current crises not as an endpoint but as part of a larger narrative of redemption that invites transformative action in the present.

The conference also featured dialogue on the integration of hope and practical wisdom, examining how these elements might complement one another in the face of societal collapse or ecological crisis. One particularly moving discussion focused on the role of religious communities in offering a vision of hope that resists both apathy and despair. Participants agreed that, while eschatology emphasizes the ultimate fulfillment of God’s creation, it also com-

pels individuals to act with urgency and care for the world, recognizing that the redemption of creation is an ongoing process in which humanity plays an active role.

Finally, the image of the “living human web” and its relationship with eschatological hope reminded attendees of the importance of cultivating a collective ethical consciousness. In practical theology, this means shaping lives and communities that not only care for one another but also for the earth and future generations. The conference ultimately suggested that through both practical wisdom and eschatological hope, theologians can guide society in navigating the Anthropocene’s crises, calling on communities to weave stronger, more resilient bonds and to act with the assurance that hope, grounded in divine vision, can empower sustainable justice and peace.

The conference particularly emphasized the pursuit of “critical hope” in the midst of the Anthropocene, marked by environmental crises and sweeping social changes (Kim 2015). Critical hope is not passive or merely optimistic; it is dynamic and engaged, challenging the status quo and prompting actionable change. Critical hope was seen as essential for navigating the complexities of the Anthropocene, where globalization simultaneously offers the promise of global awareness and the peril of a pervasive culture of fear. The conference highlighted how theological education and pastoral practice must not only confront these global crises with a clear-eyed recognition of reality but also inspire a hopeful commitment to transformative action. In doing so, it sought to redefine religious education and pastoral practice to foster social justice, cultural unity in diversity, and global responsibility—thus moving from a paralyzing fear to a mobilizing, critical hope that empowers individuals and communities to act for the common good.

With this theme and vision, the conference explored key themes at the intersection of economics, politics, peace, and environmental ethics. Discussions focused on the challenges of managing shared environmental resources in a neoliberal context, questioning how economic systems and socio-economic inequalities intersect with the environmental crisis. Participants also examined the role of faith communities in advocating for economic and political justice in the face of climate change. Another focal point was the relationship between peace, war, and environmental justice, particularly in Korea’s geopolitical context, considering the environmental



consequences of military activity and the potential for ecological restoration in conflict zones. The conference further called for a reimagining of practical theology, encouraging engagement with diverse cultural and theological traditions, including indigenous wisdom, to enrich the field and offer alternative frameworks for understanding the human-earth relationship.

Synthesizing Insights: The IAPT Conference Series on Theological Responses to Contemporary Challenges

The essays in this collection offer spirited explorations of contemporary theological responses to diverse global challenges, ranging from ecological crises to social isolation and racial justice. The synopses below depict the wide-ranging expositions of the conference theme, with interdisciplinary application and praxiological implications.

“A Theological Anthropology of the Undead: Did We Fail to Decay?” is Hee-Kyu Heidi Park’s evocative essay connecting modern cyber “zombies” with decomposing mythic dema deity. Pondering a theology of resurrection in (the cosmic) light of a theological anthropology of the undead, Park draws on cyberethnographic inquiry to trace the non-material, non-relational, anti-democratic linguistic and economic practices of reclusive *hikikomoris*—or “loners in reclusion”—found in Korean and Japanese society. Park suggests that the virtual spaces to which these socially marginalized and politically expunged individuals retreat for “decay” may very well be where we witness expressions of suffering and alternative political agency and subjectivity. If this zombie state is a radical affront to the consuming neoliberalism of the offline reality, it is not unlike the regenerative decomposition of northern Indonesia’s mythic Hainuwele, whose excrements produce riches and whose corpse fertilizes life-giving crops.

In “Spiritual Resources and Religious Leadership in Times of the Anthropocene: A Practical Theological Reflection,” Ian Nell insists that faith communities have a responsibility to protect the environment in the Anthropocene era. He identifies the Anthropocene as a geological period in which dominant human activities have been the primary influence on the Earth’s environment and climate. Focusing on the stewardship of the planet, Nell argues that a spiritual leader as a storyteller, moral compass and

symbolic worker should guide a faith community to a greater awareness of climate crisis. Addressing Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), the essay claims that the congregational leader should mobilize its members to alleviate climate change by employing the spiritual resources of the faith community—that is, a shared narrative about climate, shared values, and shared practices and symbols.

In his essay, “Is Eco-Anxiety Racial Anxiety? Harnessing Eco-Anxiety for Practicing Racial and Climate Justice,” Eunil David Cho addresses the pervasive occlusion of communities of color in scholarship on climate concerns and climate activism. Arguing that intersectional analyses of race and ecology are essential for understanding such systems as environmental racism, Cho points to how BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities are not only disproportionately impacted by ecological degradation due to structural disparities, but they are also falsely perceived to be either ill-informed or apathetic to such existential threat. Amplifying the long traditions of racial resilience and ecological phronesis of historically marginalized communities, Cho discusses the legacy of US Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer and the framework of her “ecowomanism.” For Cho, Hamer’s writings and activism connect the dots between racial injustice, colonialism, and environmental violence in the “wilderness” that is the United States and serve as a model of holistic ecowomanist praxis for contemporary efforts toward climate justice.

Drawing on the philosophical roots of a different religious tradition, Havva Sinem Uğurlu explores how Islamic theology’s understanding of humanity, and the application of wisdom can provide insights into the Anthropocene age. In her essay, “Understanding Practical Wisdom in the Anthropocene Age in Terms of Islamic Religious Education from a Koran-Centered Interpretive Perspective,” she argues that practical wisdom, as conceptualized in the Koran, encompasses existence, knowledge, and values, centering on the human being while emphasizing their responsibilities toward the Creator, themselves, and the universe. Uğurlu further posits that wisdom, as a Koranic concept, can serve as a theological foundation for religious education in the Anthropocene. This is achieved by focusing on the Qur’an and its accompanying literature and interpreting it through an interpretive perspective.

Pivoting attention to the material reality of the South Korean context, Boram Lee’s essay, “Ecological Injustice in the Anthropocene: Flooding in

Banjiha, ‘Parasite’-style Basement Housing in Seoul,” examines the interrelationship of ecological injustice and socioeconomic disparity, delving into the tragic event of Seoul’s flood in 2022, particularly its effect on *banjiha* (basement housing). In this work, Lee claims that the impact of climate crisis of the Anthropocene era has more severely afflicted marginalized people in society. According to her, the 2022 floods of Seoul demonstrated that the increased extreme weather events have deteriorated the vulnerability of disadvantaged residents who have often lived with disabilities or in extreme poverty. She argues that practical theologians and faith communities should address the immediate needs of those affected by ecological crises, while also confronting the structural injustices that perpetuate their vulnerability. Incorporating the framework of Pamela Couture’s social ecology of care, the chapter proposes a comprehensive approach to mitigating the detrimental effects of the Anthropocene challenges.

Querying the social situations of yet another context, Felix Roleder explores the phenomenon and nature of loneliness from the various perspectives of social science and presents findings in his chapter, “Fractures in the Living Human Web: On the Challenge of Loneliness and Social Isolation in Individual Life, Society and Pastoral Care.” He suggests ways in which religious resources can contribute to assuaging undesirable and destructive forms of loneliness. Roleder acknowledges the double nature of loneliness: one is the positive function of being alone for personal maturation and the other is the negative function of being alone resulting in structural exclusion or sociocultural marginalization. Paying careful attention to unwanted and chronic loneliness affecting the quality of life negatively, he suggests the integrative approach of pastoral care to intervene to restore the individuals and the societies suffering from detrimental loneliness in multiple dimensions.

In contrast, Simon Linder and Michael Schüssler examine the interplay between individual and collective approaches to climate action, reflecting critically on this divide from a German perspective, as presented in their chapter, “Christian Climate Activism: The Wisdom of Urgence ‘In-Between.’” Confronting the human-made climate crisis of the Anthropocene, they seek to uncover the theological wisdom of urgency “in-between.” By critiquing Christian anthropocentrism and sovereignty and drawing on Donna Haraway’s concept of “staying

with the trouble,” they challenge traditional theological frameworks. Linder and Schüssler move beyond theological engagement with ecological and social transformation, advocating for an open discussion on whether to foster green capitalism or pursue radical shifts in Being-in-the-world that embrace interconnectedness with non-human agency.

Meanwhile, in his essay, “Nomadic Ecclesia Praxes as an Eschatological Movement in, with, from the Margins of Oppression: A Practical Theology of Freedom and Justice,” Gordon Ernest Dames seeks to advance the concept of nomadic ecclesia praxes as an inherent eschatological movement embodied by Jesus Christ. He argues that this framework challenges the conventional theology of the church as an institutional system. Dames further contends that western theological traditions should be critically re-examined through the lens of the African context to envision an eschatological model for nomadic praxes. Drawing on indigenous cultural praxes, he attempts to articulate an eschatologically “not-yet” vision of nomadic praxes characterized by justice and freedom.

Redirecting our attention to the fecundity of the Earth, Heilim Choi pivots from human-centric to Earth-centric perspectives to lay out a foundation for a practical theology that is responsive to the voice of the Earth in her essay, “Mutual Care Based on Earth-Centric Empathy in the Living Ecological Web.” Extending pastoral care’s paradigm of intersubjective empathy, Choi describes and analyzes two case studies from Norway and Mongolia in which responses to specific ecological concerns were possible through effective human-human (intraspecies) and human-Earth (interspecies) empathy. If ecological research has shown the Earth’s resiliency and capacity for repair despite human acts of devastation, so can we find biblical witness attesting to God’s salvific intervention in response to the cries of the land. The implication for humans as co-creators with God is to sustain “holding environment” for symbiotic, interspecies understanding and empathy.

In the final essay, “Revitalizing Ecological Vocation: Transformative Ecological Practices in South Korean Churches,” Eunjin Jeon suggests that the Cold War-era exponential growth of evangelical Protestant Christianity in South Korea has been besieged by a prosperity gospel and privatized spirituality that is aligned with global neoliberal values, rendering many churches less engaged with climate concerns than the wider public. Drawing on biblical scholarship, Jeon contrasts the theology of “human



vocation as priesthood” based on Genesis 1 with the “ecological vocation of humans as farmers” as extrapolated from Genesis 2–3. Inspiration for a vision of “sang saeng” (mutual, co-living), ecological, agrarian faith is found in the teaching model of Beautiful Presbyterian Church of Gimpo City near Seoul, where creative practices of sustainability, mutual living, and earth justice include such initiatives as sustainable architecture, food waste collection, food hubs for interreligious hospitality, and restorative interventions with microorganisms.

All in all, these essays collectively illuminate the critical role of theology in addressing pressing issues such as climate change, social inequality, and the increasing sense of alienation in modern societies. Authors employ various academic disciplines and cultural perspectives to advocate for a more just and empathetic world, urging both faith communities and individuals to rethink their roles and responsibilities in fostering sustainable and inclusive environments. Through these insights, the series presents a compelling argument for the necessity of integrating theological insights with practical actions to confront and mitigate the adversities of our times.

Toward a Practical Theology of Hope and Justice

The 2023 IAPT conference in Seoul was a milestone in the ongoing effort to articulate a practical theology that responds to the urgent needs of our time. By grounding theological reflection in the lived realities of East Asia, the conference offered a unique perspective on the global challenges of the Anthropocene. The essays collected in this volume represent a rich tapestry of insights, questions, and aspirations, weaving together diverse strands of practical wisdom.

Practical theology envisions hope and justice not as abstract ideals but as tangible practices woven into the fabric of daily life. Hope, rooted in eschatological and critical vision, provides resilience in the face of crises, affirming that human action can contribute to divine restoration. Justice emerges as a call to dismantle structures of oppression and inequality, fostering ecological care, economic fairness, and human dignity.

This vision promotes a renewed commitment to solidarity and interdependence. It highlights the importance of building communities that embrace diversity and mutual care, modeling relational networks that resist fragmentation and isolation. Such a vision challenges neoliberal individualism, offering an alternative ethos grounded in cooperation, humility, and shared responsibility.

Furthermore, practical theology’s emphasis on hope and justice invites interdisciplinary collaboration. By engaging with scientific, economic, and political perspectives, it broadens its capacity to address systemic challenges. This integrative approach positions theology as a transformative resource for social change, capable of bridging divides and promoting sustainable solutions.

Ultimately, practical theology must continue to evolve, responding creatively to the complexities of the Anthropocene. Its commitment to hope and justice serves as a prophetic voice, calling humanity to envision and enact a more equitable and sustainable future. This collection of essays stands as both a testament to the conference’s contributions and an invitation to further reflection, action, and collaboration in pursuit of a world where ecological and social flourishing are intertwined.

Final note: The cover art for this book was especially designed and inspired by the Korean Jogakbo (조각보), a traditional patchwork technique symbolizing resourcefulness and unity. Just as small fabric pieces form a larger textile, the design reflects the global and communal effort of practical theologians from diverse backgrounds in addressing the environmental crisis and offering hope and justice. And just as each strand of fabric retains a measure of distinctive identity and integrity while woven into others, the editorial approach of this collection is to honor as much as possible the cultural-religious worldview, theological perspective, and rhetorical voice of each author.

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A Theological Anthropology of the Undead: Did We Fail to Decay?

Hee-Kyu Heidi Park

To conceptualize a non-anthropocentric theological perspective that can help humans navigate through the age of the Anthropocene, I construct a theological anthropology of the undead by exploring the decomposition happening on the body of zombies. To do this, I will first argue that there are real-life zombies whom the neoliberal political-economic process has expelled. Arguing that *hikikomori* are such zombie, I examine the life of *hikikomori* by looking into the space they occupy offline and online through a non-intrusive, observation-based cyberethnography. These spaces reveal ingenuine mechanisms that avert people's gazes. The dynamics of such aversion exposes a powerful process that decomposes the political system of democracy and the economic system of neoliberalism. From this analysis, I construct a theological anthropology of the undead by revising the Christian concept of resurrection from the perspective of decomposition.

1. Introduction

Today's human-caused climate crisis that bestowed the title of Anthropocene to our time calls for an alternative to an anthropocentric perspective that governs the current theological anthropology of Christian communities. This work excavates wisdom from the world of microbes or decomposers, the often disregarded elements in our ecosystem, to view the political and economic world of humans. Zombies' decaying skin, hunger, and lifeless life provide a very fitting location for this task. Using the metaphor of zombies as the undead, I build a novel understanding of the *hikikomori*, or individuals living in seclusion in their room for extended time without outside contact, who have a prophetic voice that may allow us to look at our world in a radically different light. However, the journey to get there follows a convoluted path through a very unfamiliar territory.

Therefore, I start with a roadmap for our journey. I will first argue that there are real-life zombies whom the neoliberal political-economic process has expelled. To construct this claim, I examine the life of *hikikomori* by looking into the space they occupy

offline and online. These spaces have ingenuine mechanisms that avert people's gazes, so I will examine the dynamics for such aversion in detail, revealing a powerful process that decomposes the political system of democracy and the economic system of neoliberalism. From this analysis, I will construct my theological anthropology of the undead by revising the Christian concept of resurrection, which assumes the individuality of the resurrected body.

1.1 We Fail to Decay

We start our journey with zombies' birthing ground—the tombs. The modern tomb culture operates in a sphere that puts a significant distance between the dead and the living, which was not the case in the near past. James Scarth Gale, a missionary of the late nineteenth century to Korea, recorded his crosscultural experiences in his journal (2018, 22). His first impression of Seoul at that time was centered around the smell of dead bodies decomposing. He visited Seoul during various deadly epidemics, so each household probably had a dead body decaying in their front yard in the tradition of hay

burial (*Ch'opun*): the dead body is placed on a raised wooden table or stone pile and covered with hay so that the body can decay completely. Then the remaining bones are collected and carried outside of Seoul's wall to be interred into a raised ground tomb, where the rest of the funeral process will be completed (see Chöng and Choi 2003). Not so long ago, the dead decaying among the living was not an unfamiliar sight.

Similarly, the official funeral of the king also involved a five-month period in which the body decayed among the living.¹ The length of the time the dead body was allowed to stay with the living was determined by social status of the dead, with the longest period reserved for the king. Among the thirty-six ritual steps from the king's death to the construction of the royal tomb, the delicate process of preparing the corpse involves first putting on the daily attire of the king and then covering the body with more than 100 layers of clothing. These clothing items function like the hay in the hay burials, protecting the decaying body, providing a safe decomposition site. The king's body decays in a special place prepared in the middle of the palace where the royal coffin is placed for the coming five-month period, receiving daily visits from family members and officers, until the royal coffin is finally moved to the official tomb site that is built during this period.

Such funeral practices were erased during the Japanese colonization period, namely for public health reasons but also to destroy traditions that could be the base of any political resistance. Decomposing bodies were to be erased from the public view. Hay burial practice, which requires double internments, were replaced by single internment practice that puts the dead body in underground tomb within a certain time frame. Thus, the distance between the dead and the living grew greater.

The modern world of coffins and vaults reveals the human fear of decomposition. The technology of corpses involves all efforts to prevent the natural elements from interacting with the dead body to slow down the decomposition process. The most ecologically sound corpse treatment remains simple inter-

ment into the ground and covering with dirt so that no other chemicals and human-made materials enter the underground to form chemical or microplastic pollution. For countless reasons, we are failing in this task.

A Western burial ground once taught me that the theology of resurrection can touch the primal fear of the posthumous decomposing body. I was passing by a cemetery with an atheist friend, who read the inscription on its gate, "The Dead Shall Be Raised." He commented that this inscription always creeps him out. This eschatological phrase signifying resurrection was a signifier of the zombie apocalypse for him.

1.2 Zombie

Zombies, while deformed, remain in their bodies. The individuality of the zombie, with the expression of personhood in decaying skin and singular hunger, manifests in the most marginalized spaces. Reports like, "Tranq Dope: Animal Sedative Mixed With Fentanyl Brings Fresh Horror to U.S. Drug Zones" (Hoffman 2023), pinpoints such spaces where the xylazine/fentanyl (the so-called zombie drug) epidemic actually produces zombie-like experiences on the streets in Philadelphia. Or maybe we find similar scenes in the most impoverished places in our society where medical care barely reaches, as reported regarding the city of Los Angeles in an article titled, "Medieval Diseases are Infecting California's Homelessness" (Gorman and Kaiser Health News 2019). However, while we find such marginal spaces often hidden from public view, they show up in media constantly, addressing this society's direst and most prevalent social and economic margin—zombies have a long history of representing such social reality.

Since they first appeared in the 1932 movie *White Zombie*, zombies have been haunting theater, literature, and the imagination of scholars across fields. Even without considering metaphors like zombie enterprise, zombie clients, zombie personal computers, and zombie mines, zombie-ness has become terminology that defines the narrative of political science and economics as in zombie liberalism (Lee 2014), zombie capitalism (Harman 2009), and zombie society (Krugman 2020). In Korean scholarship, zombie research focuses on understanding humanity and the lack of political agency in the neoliberal world (Lee 2018; Söng 2020; Kim Ŭ. 2021; Kim Y. 2021; Lee 2021). The most recent Korean Netflix series *All of Us Are Dead* (2022) is a critique of the so-

1 The details of this process were recorded by Hong Kyehi in 1758 during the reign of King Yöngjo in Kukchosangryepop'yön, which is translated into modern Korean by National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage in 2008. A helpful educational video demonstration of this process can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/96cUjU25NgY?si=FDbM2cDOgucD7u7w>.



cioeconomic divide in public schools that projects the public fear into the deadliness of the Zombies created out of a teacher's desperate effort to rescue his ostracised son, while another Korean Netflix series *Kingdom* (2018) depicts the politically powerful manipulating the general populations, who turned into zombies, perhaps reflecting the ultimate fear of those in power. The uncontrollable deadly zombies are the media's social commentaries on the society where the human decays without will in the neoliberal world.

In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown (2015) analyzes democracy's undoing by the neoliberal process in which the neoliberal rationality of the *homo oeconomicus* vanquishes the political agency of *homo politicus*. In this paradigm, the rationality of neoliberalism has turned human political subjects into economic objects and human beings into human capital rather than economic agents seeking their profit. The rationality of neoliberalism permeates every nook and cranny of contemporary human behavior and desires. Pastoral theologian Bruce Rogers-Vaughn (2016) observes that the human agency assumed in political equality is replaced by the principle of equal opportunities, thus turning political human agency into human capital competing against other human capital, isolating each human in their cage by blaming failures as their fault. This situation generates what he calls the third order of suffering, often unnamed and undiagnosed but ubiquitously felt in the neoliberal society.

While the third order of suffering pervades everywhere, neoliberal society's marginalized constitute surplus human capital in the economic terms of the neoliberal world. These individuals do not merely experience agony; instead, they face ejection from the system, a phenomenon sociologist Sakia Sassen (2014) calls "expulsion." The expelled have many faces and names: lepers, crazy, criminals, homeless, and zombies. If we overcome the instinct to avert our eyes from the scariness of zombies, we see that their faces and bodies are traumatized, decaying in pain. Given their birthing ground in neoliberalism, their trauma tells the story of Roger-Vaughn's third-order suffering. Then the question becomes, how do they look in real life?

There are several scenes of expulsion already familiar to Korean eyes. During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when Korea systematically implemented the punitive measure of neoliberalism imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), we witnessed a surge of suicide and homelessness in the

adult male population, who had been the head of the household. Recently, Korean society has been struggling with a high suicide rate in the teen and young adult population. Korea has been marking the highest suicide rate in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries for many years, with unusually high rates in the teens, 20s, and the elderly population. The threat of expulsion seems to be ever-present among us.

1.3 Hikikomori

The *hikikomori* phenomenon is curious in the context of neoliberal expulsion and self-destruction. *Hikikomori* are individuals who, for various reasons, have cut off all social ties outside of or even with their family and have lived in seclusion in their room for extended periods: three months or more, or six months or more (definitions vary). They have given up on being an economic contributor to their society. *Hikikomori* is a Japanese term coined by psychiatrist Saito Damaki in 2003 (Korean translation 2005) and translated into Korean as *Ŭntunhy-ŏng Oetori*, which means loner in reclusion. Due to the difficulty in its spelling in English, I will use the Japanese term *hikikomori*, which has been familiar to Koreans for the last twenty years.

They are invisible, hiding in their rooms, but their traces are everywhere. Their hiding is painful to their family members, and their stories abound among psychotherapists. I have relatives who are semi-*hikikomori*. Students bring stories of their family members and neighbors. Angry at the world, their surroundings, their family, and their supporters that did not give them enough resources to compete in the market; they have given up on their possible financial contribution to the family. Whether they have experienced school bullies or domestic violence, I sense that they hover in the unbearable clarity of their societal location—they are about to be expunged. However, their family members are frustrated by their lack of productivity due to their withdrawal. One student who had to support a middle-aged brother in hiding reported the sense of grinding the endless mill for his sake, a Sisyphean task. One mother sighed, "My son feels like a vampire, sucking on my blood." *Hikikomori* thus turns into the undead. As the about-to-be-expulsed, they could have gone through self-destruction or erasure, maybe to the point of suicide and substance overdose, but they are somehow alive, sucking on the blood of their family members.

Thus, the studies on *hikikomori* observed a high level of anxiety, gross lack of social skills, social withdrawal, hypersensitivity in interpersonal relationships, and aggression in this population (Yang et al. 2007). Another study (Kim and Park 2014), which probably misidentified symptoms as causes, suggests that the tendency to be a *hikikomori* influences gaming addiction behavior. However, as Rogers-Vaughn points out, looking for the cause of suffering within the third order can inadvertently result in secondary victimization within neoliberal trauma.

After the Japanese government recognized the severity of the *hikikomori* problem, they implemented a social support system to address *hikikomoris'* psycho-social limitations and boost their economic productivity. To address the *hikikomori's* social awkwardness, Japan implemented creative ideas like cafes where they served drinks through tiny windows in teddy bear costumes as reported in a *Sora News 24* article (McGee 2021). The goal is to turn the surplus and the expunged into functioning human capital by finding different ways to help the individual function in the market. The experts note that we need patient efforts devoted to these individuals to achieve such restoration.

However, as the undead, the *hikikomori* perhaps demand a more radically alternative perspective. Just as zombies do not recognize relationships and are only out to satisfy a single need, one might perceive their outward appearance as stubbornness and insensitivity to the concerns and pain of those around them. However, if we view the economic productivity they have abandoned as resistance to the paradigm of the neoliberal homo oeconomicus, who have lost their political subjectivity and become human capital, their seclusion may speak to a different form of political identity and subjectivity that warrants deeper exploration. Then, understanding how economic and political subjectivities play out in their lives becomes a critical project. Maybe their undeadly spectral intentionality has a call that I need to answer (Caputo 2015).

2. Method

To answer this call, I look into the space the *hikikomori* occupy by conducting a non-intrusive observation-based cyberethnography. My method was simple. After identifying a cyberspace as a place the *hikikomori* occupy, I regularly set aside several time

slots a day for about one month to stay in that space and observed the dynamics without engaging them. As people in hiding, *hikikomori* are difficult to approach. We know that the room into which they have retreated is a part of their home, overlapping with cyberspace where they quietly but actively engage with the world beyond their physical space. This space is a fractal space haunted by spectrality.² They report that night and day are not distinguishable, as they fall asleep when sleepy and wake up when their eyes open. Their awakening times start by looking into the smartphone, erasing the boundary of time and space. As early as 1997, cultural theorist Paul Virilio noted that in this screen space, architectural elements like a house or room begin to “drift and float in an electronic ether, devoid of spatial dimensions, but inscribed in the singular temporality of an instantaneous diffusion” (Virilio 1997, 360). This undead *hikikomori* inhabits a fluid and liminal space, distorting the gaze directed at them. Therefore, this research articulates the dynamics formed in this liminal space as it engages with the researchers' and others' perspectives, seeking to understand the political and economic subjectivity of the *hikikomori*.

2.1 The Space the Hikikomori Occupy

2.1.1 Family as Their Space vs. the Gaze

Hikikomori isolate themselves within their family environment, which is especially peculiar since psychotherapists unanimously point to family issues as the root of their psychological struggles. Domestic violence, parental pressure, divorce, and alcoholism are often the issues they report. *Hikikomori* are not exclusively from disadvantaged families; some belong to middle-class or affluent families. Yet, they found their external environment intolerable, prompting them to withdraw further into their rooms. This situation is curious to me, having seen many former clients cast outside their family space, forcing them to roam on the street, not allowed back home, or not having a home to which to return. Outside their locked door, the family members that

² I conceptualize the theological methodology of exploring the spectrality in the boundary space of the empire, which is characterized by its fractality, in “Postcolonializing Practical Theological Methodology as Cartography of Boundary Dynamics” (Park 2019).



pained the *hikikomori* are pacing around in frustration, concern, anger, and despair.

What should one call this ironic turn of hiding space? Those who might have run away now run inward despite the acknowledged pain around them. Many regard them as socially withdrawn, viewing them as those who failed in the fierce competition in the competitive market or as surplus humans who might have otherwise roamed around the outskirts of human society. Michel Foucault (1995; 2006) had traced them in the population of the lepers, the poor, and the vagrants, who ironically turned into the mad, the insane, or criminals, who were ultimately hospitalized in asylums or incarcerated. In this strange turn of the hiding place, the vagrant or the marginalized had imprisoned themselves within the family structure, forcing the family members to be the correctional officers. Only this time, the enforcer, the authority to incarcerate, is with the incarcerated. What does this reversal of agency achieve in social exclusion? Perhaps protection? What do they protect themselves from, and how?

As I am teaching spiritual counseling and pastoral theology, depressed students often visit me, seeking help. One student who had gone through severe withdrawal into her room, struggling with depression, anxiety, and an eating disorder, confided in me that many eyes always gaze at her. Their gazes follow her everywhere, and not only her. They show up in many other counseling sessions with young adults. One exemplary theology student once confessed that God is part of or even the whole of such surveilling eyes, distant but always watching, not in the loving parental gaze, but rather in the strict and distant austerity, waiting to see if she fails. These gazes refract with ambiguous angles when they enter the room of a *hikikomori*.

I say refraction, but the gazes may not even reach these spaces. In *Seeing Like the State*, political scientist James Scott (1998) explores how the state invented ways to make the land and population legible to the gaze of the state. Surveying and mapping the land to read the land as the taxable production area translated into accurately naming the people to count them as tax-paying servants of the state. However, in this room, *hikikomori* evades the counting gaze of the state. The investigators of *hikikomori* repeatedly report the difficulty in creating accurate statistics of this population for various reasons. They blend in with the job-seeking population, concealed by families who avoid labeling their secluded

children and siblings as *hikikomori* to protect the smidge of family honor. Instead, they insist their young ones try to achieve the expected neoliberal objective of becoming valuable human capital.

This hiding within the family is especially effective in Korean and Japanese society, where family liberalism functions. According to sociologist Chang Kyung-Sup (2018), in family liberalism the nuclear family functions as one economic decision-making unit, unlike in Western liberalism, where each individual is an economic unit making financial decisions. Paradoxically, in the case of *hikikomori*, the family's economic unit formation makes the individual family member invisible to the neoliberal state, as sequestered within the family's functioning economic structure. Their room, located within the family liberalism's economic unit, effectively evades the state's gaze.

2.1.2 *Internet as Their Space vs. the Gaze*

My effort to find them on the internet was unsuccessful, as they evaded the state's gaze and mine. However, it was obvious that they were gazing outward through the liminal and ethereal screens on their computers, tablets, and smartphones, secluded in their rooms, their voices mixed with others'. Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to distinguish them from the others: they resist distinction, categorization, and control.

Regardless, I searched hard to catch the gaze of *hikikomori* looking out from the window of the internet. As they travel through the liminal space of the internet, their gazes turn into fonts, icons, jpeg files, and gif files, then ultimately into the visual language, their visible voice, sometimes even audible. Thus, the search for the gaze turned to the search for their voices on various online platforms. As a non-gamer, I have asked gaming youth about the possibility of finding someone to talk to "live" in the internet games, but this effort taught me how unfit I am for such a task. My search for their political voices in the news media, where people can anonymously comment on each news article, also became impossible, as the voices of *hikikomori* are indistinguishable from those functioning without hiding. On the internet, the distinction between individuals crumbles down, and the unidentified subjectivity of the multitude safely sequestered the voices of the *hikikomori* simply as one of them. Thus, the internet is a safe space where they can see without being seen.

2.1.3 *Their Room and the Tomb vs. the Gaze*

However, their space also has a physical dimension. The image of the physical space floats around on the internet, reported by former *hikikomoris*. The image of their room with piled-up trash formed out of instant food and delivered food packages looks uninhabitable, but the *hikikomori* continue to live there. The plastic items in the trash cannot rot or decompose, yet something is decaying here. The undead seems to be lying in the plastic pile, like the oh-so-familiar scene of the undead lying in the coffin, ready to rise and roam around the human world. Figure 1 depicts a *hikikomori* room.



Figure 1. A photo provided by the owner of the room in *No Cut News* (November 22, 2022)

In the images of their rooms, the resemblance to the tomb or burial vault seems uncanny. The undead occupies both. A grave is where the state no longer gazes; a sheol where even God's grace and gaze do not reach. My constant frustration to find their gaze and voice finally reached this ironic conclusion: I am simply looking at the tombstone that marks its location, but I cannot see inside. A rare occasion in which one looks into the tomb after its interment is to investigate a crime or punish the dead posthumously. The state's gaze has no business there until they identify the corpses as criminals. Thus, their space is unreachable to my gaze until an accident warrants a police investigation.

2.1.4 *Gazing the Space: Depression Gallery Suicide Live-Broadcasting Incident*

In April 2023, a high school girl committed suicide, broadcasting herself live on Instagram as she jumped from a high-rise building on the busiest street in Gangnam, Seoul (Kim D. 2023). At the core of the accident was a "depression gallery," a live discussion board on an internet community platform called *dcinside.com* (see Figure 2). As an SNS platform created to share digital camera images a decade ago, this platform fossilized the term gallery to



Figure 2. A screenshot of the depression gallery page, taken by the author.

denote the discussion boards, which, to the surprise of many, has outlived all other online platforms and still functions as one of the most active interactions in cyberspace.

The depression gallery accident on April 16, 2023, prompted police and news media investigations. These inquiries revealed that primarily depressed teenagers and young adults in their twenties use the discussion board to share their emotional difficulties and find empathy from others facing similar challenges. However, it also attracted cyber predators who prey on vulnerable youth by luring them offline and sexually exploiting them. This girl had posted about being raped by someone she met on this platform and involved in prostitution. In April, she began to urge people to join her in her suicidal effort. They would dine at the gourmet beef BBQ place, play karaoke and games, and then proceed to the building's rooftop to broadcast the whole process. As the broadcast began, someone called the police, but the efforts to build an air mattress to catch her failed.

The media analysis and reaction to this accident focused on the sex-trafficking crime (*Manyöban-söngp'okryök Hwaldongga* 2023), and the strongly recommended course of action was to close down the depression gallery (Lee Y. 2023). Initially, the police investigation prompted the company to strengthen its policing function. It consisted of erasing questionable posts without warning and adding suicide hotline information at the top and bottom of the boards. As of May 15, the court has decided that there is insufficient irregularity to warrant closing the platform, which has enraged the concerned experts, including forensic psychologists and psychiatrists.

2.1.5 The Dynamics within the Depression Gallery

For me, this incident pointed toward a research jackpot. I found the most probable space frequented by *hikikomori*, and I spent hours in the depression gallery to figure out this community's dynamics. The gallery's layout is like any discussion board on online teaching platforms like Canvas or Blackboard. When I clicked on the newest post, it had a terse phrase, often esoteric slang, that I constantly needed to look up on urban dictionary-type online lexicons (Figure 3). These posts all had a picture file that users used almost as identifiers. I learned later that the rules of dcinside.com require the picture file, as it originated as a digital camera picture gal-

lery. Once I came out of reading the newest post, the discussion board had ten or twelve more new posts that pushed the post I just saw way down the list.

우울증 갤러리

오른쪽 땀타고 흐른 눈물이 배개 적시는둥

2023.06.03 22:46:06



스님..

Figure 3. A post on the depression gallery

After spending many days on this platform, I looked into other popular galleries where users consumed five pages of discussion board posts each minute. Depression gallery, as fast as its advancement looked in my perspective, was a slow, depressive gallery that moved slower than the non-depressive topic galleries. In this fast turnover, several conversation threads occurred through their likes, which read *kaenyöm*, or “concept,” and *bich'u*, or “not recommended” (Figure 4). If a post grabs the attention of many, it will gain a thread of conversation within the post, which becomes visible by the number of visits and recommendations as a “concept.”

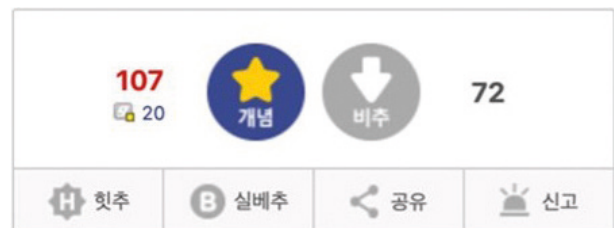


Figure 4. Concept and Not-recommended as Likes and Dislike

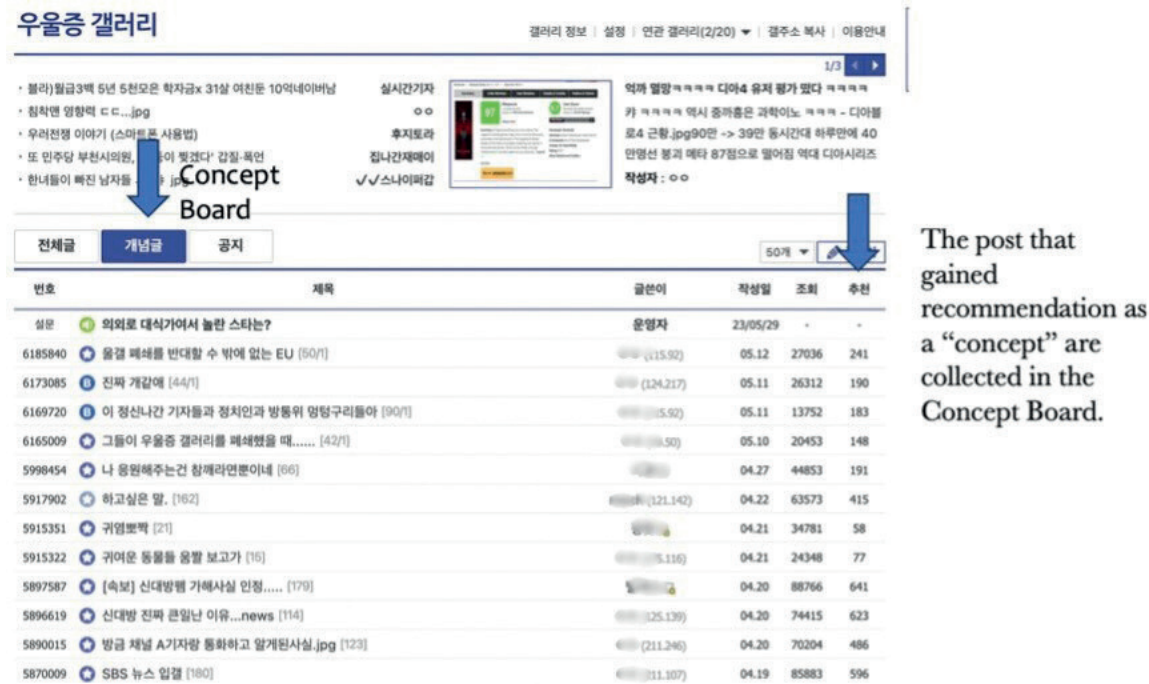


Figure 5. Concept Board

A post gaining many discussion threads moves to another board called Concept Gallery. This board thus turns into the historical record of the most popular posts that generated many responses. When a post gains legendary popularity, the fame travels through the internet, and people take a “pilgrimage” to this post to pay homage and read through the conversation (Figure 5). However, as a general process, the discussions on the depression gallery look fragmented and meaningless. Even the approaches of the sexual predators to the vulnerable seemed fragmented and unintelligible. For a conversation to happen, you need to understand who is speaking to whom, but such fundamental elements were not very visible to me.

Even here, *hikikomori* are not distinguishable. On this board, it is difficult to spot anyone who spends the whole day in this space alone. Those visibly active seemed to stay here chatting for about two hours. Each time I came to the board, new sets of nicknames conversed. The contents of their talk are depressive, but impressively, their activities are not limited to the depression gallery. After pouring out their fragmented thoughts to the unknown others for a while, they find other galleries with more upbeat material and journey through cyberspace. Thus, cyberspaces and cyber actors mingle and become indistinguishable. In other words, the *hikiko-*

mori here do not need to identify themselves as such. They are equal contributors to the relational dynamics forming in this space.

Nevertheless, their traces are there. Among the pilgrimage sites that internet users visit to commemorate a significant internet moment is a ghostly space on the Yahoo Korea server where dcinside had its IP address once upon a time. There remains the suicide note of a super *hikikomori* who terrorized internet communities 24 hours a day—the time spent on the internet by this user marked him as a *hikikomori*.³ This user, *daesenūnchōnryak* (roughly translated as mainstream-by-strategy), had roamed the internet, populating the boards with toxic comments and hate speeches, which made the managers block his posts, and other users resist his engagements. These activities ended when he committed suicide by jumping from his parent's high-rise apartment building, which the police reported to the community after an investigation. The pure efforts and time invested in these activities became a legend in these communities, warranting commem-

3 The following site is one example where the information about this user is recorded. (<https://bbs.ruliweb.com/community/board/300145/read/30568996>). Gilho Lee (2013) kept a detailed record of this super hikikomori in his cyberethnography.



oration in the next cohort of internet users. This user proved that in this space a *hikikomori* can gain the visibility unattainable offline. Thus, the maintenance of such an online presence becomes immensely meaningful.

2.2 Decomposition Happening in the Depression Gallery/DC Inside

2.2.1 Relationship/Friendship

Decomposition happens in this cyberspace. The first site of decomposition is relationship and friendship. The depression gallery operated with an ethical norm drastically different from the life outside the room of *hikikomori*. Although cyberspace constantly displays vulnerability, relationships are not the aim of such expression. In many posts, the users repeatedly evoke the ethical code against *ch'inmokchil*, a derogatory term for friendship. Namuwiki, a Korean wiki site forcefully toned with sarcasm, contains well-researched articles on widely spread phenomena. It devotes thirty-some pages to describing the *ch'inmokchil* phenomenon. This ethical code deters friendship formation on the anonymous internet site, as personal connections expressed on platforms like dcinside galleries would prevent new users from joining the community. In other words, if one newly visits the gallery and notices that the existing users know each other and form conversation based on a personal connection, the new user will assume that this board is operating to maintain their fellowship rather than to talk about the topic of the board. Preventing friendship permits all voices freedom of expression, guaranteeing absolute equality that forms radical democratization. The depression gallery operates very much under such a principle. Each user expresses themselves without receiving friendly empathy. Instead, they see the accumulation of expressions that normalize and validate their experiences.

Some of the most popular posts that got collected as the concept post (*kaenyömkül*) express such process as follows:

Coming to Depression Gallery, I get to see others who are going through similar experiences as mine. It was comforting to see so many of them here. Some had severe symptom histories, but they all said what was on their mind—I also expressed myself without holding myself back. This site helped my healing process. Outsiders say bad things are happening here, but that is only a minor part of our gallery. Those who inhabit this space get com-

forted and even get better. I finally got a part-time job and will go out to do the work. Do you know how much my mom cried out of joy? Have you ever thought about how much this depression gallery is contributing to lowering our suicide rate? (ngng 2023: translation by author)

Researchers pay attention to this ethical code of no-friendship and note the devastating effect of *ch'inmokchil* (friendship) that destroys the online community's self-correcting resilience, ultimately destroying the community (Chöng et al 2018). According to anthropologist Lee Gilho (2013), who conducted a cyber ethnography of the dynamics of dcinside.com, under the anti-friendship code, the collaborative process forms through honoring each individual's freedom rather than through respectful language. Such freedom calls for rigorous maintenance of one's agency instead of succumbing to others' needs, which behavior others passionately disdain as the "slave mentality." Creating an in-group is part of such a slave mentality, and the term that denotes people with such sense is, interestingly enough, a zombie. My pastoral sense of community broke down in this ethical code of no-friendship. A radical sense of equality forms with a new sense of relationality.

2.2.2 Language

A radical community requires radical language. Here, the linguistic hierarchy that distinguishes the formal and informal language breaks down, as the informal language with heavy internet slang becomes the lingua franca. Furthermore, the vulgar speeches that one would deem hate speech outside this space become the usual turn of phrases. The first impression of the linguistic environment of this space seems disrespectful, politically incorrect, and antisocial, but once immersed in it, one gains the sense that it is primarily a way of communication that does not necessarily carry the emotional weight of the terms. The roughness of the language has much to do with the no-friendship ethical code, as the aggressive language prevents friendship formation, which is necessary for the health of their anonymous online community (Lee 2016).

The language decomposes as the free agents and system control collide. First, vocabulary goes through a rapid transformation. Let me give you an example of a famous case of the birth of the term *Jujak*. The users of the StarCraft Gallery noticed that the host of a live-streaming online game fabricated the result and began to make fun of the

host. The host responded by blocking the term *chochak*, which means fabrication, but the users responded by substituting other terms for *chochak*. First, they changed the syllable *o* to *u* to make *chuchak*, which had another meaning. It meant red phoenix, a god belonging to an old pantheon. When the site blocked that term, the users used the names of other gods from the same pantheon, *hyönmu*, *chöngryong*, and *baekho*, to continue their mockery. In the resistance to such system control, the remnants of the currently used terminologies have transformed so much that the users are recording the genealogy of the new terms. Sites like namu-wiki archived the detailed history of such terminology developments by linking the events to the original posts, the so-called pilgrimage sites, in which the terminology broke down and, in my term, decomposed.

2.2.3 Democracy

Language decomposition leads to political decomposition. In each gallery of dcinside.com, a gallery manager is only visible through the announcement post that always floats on the top of the board. There, the manager claims the right to erase or block users using inappropriate language or posting unrelated content. Given that the lingua franca of this space is unacceptable in the offline world, this claim gives unchecked power to the manager in the eyes of the users. Korean society is well aware of two critical events resulting from such censorship. When the collection of the most recommended posts in dcinside turned more and more problematic in its aggression, the managers conducted proactive censorship, which prompted the gallery users to find another site to which they diligently moved the most recommended posts.

This situation was the case with *Ilganbest Chöchangso* (Daily Best Archive) or *Ilbe*, whose users are known for their misogynistic undertone in their language, often hovering over antifeminist political rhetoric. Megalian is another site that purports to mirror the misogynistic voices of *Ilbe* through effective yet sometimes very threatening tactics. Both sites gained tremendous public attention as they generated many debates and even violence that required independent examination. Discussions and criticism on the destructive influence of these websites abound. However, here I pay attention to how they resisted the managers' powers, which they call the "state," to maintain their free-

dom without turning into the "slave" of the state. The meaning of the term "state" as the managerial power, however, merged into the concept of the actual state as the political entity in their conversations. Their resistance to such a "state" generates images, videos, and texts full of vulgar satires and slang disparaging state control. Sometimes, they express their opposition through offline activities that defy societal norms, flabbergasting the general population (Kang and Shin 2019).

Under such political understanding, the evaluation system of thumbs up/like or thumbs down/dislike turned into Daily Best or Democratize (Figure 6). In other words, the term democracy deconstructs here to mean the negative system they all agree to dislike.

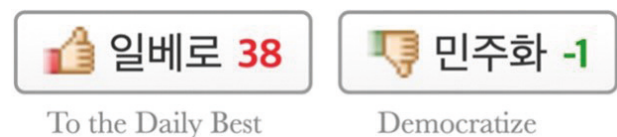


Figure 6.

As public media described *Ilbe* as the problem space characterized by aggressive, misogynistic hatred, it is often scandalous when one's anonymous participation in this online community surfaces. Nonetheless, *Ilbe's* decomposed terminologies of democracy proved to be impactful even among young women. A K-pop idol group member caused a scandal when she used the term in *Ilbe* style during a public radio appearance. She stated that her group did not discriminate against people and added, "We don't do democracy," thus revealing that she frequents the *Ilbe* sites.

Returning to the neoliberal processes that generate the third-order suffering and expungable population, I note that the *hikikomori* are here, possibly being the most engaged and active members of the community given their time at hand. The upper generation sometimes translates their negative public perception into losers, social evil, or a more colorful language such as "trash collection, fascists, extreme soap opera" (Chöng 2013, 332). However, several emerging researchers are calling for alternative perspectives. Taehun Chöng, a history doctoral student at Hanyang University, notes that the dynamics in this community are rather anti-authority and anti-majority, resulting from the exclusion they have experienced (2013). Many younger scholars observe the *Ilbe* population with curiosity and an empathic stance rather than as the object of hateful criticism (Pak 2016; Kang 2013; Han 2013).



The combination of neoliberal expulsion and radical equality forming the radical community resulted in a derogatory yet revolutionary self-conceptualization. Yang Kimin (2014) notes that underneath what is antisocial hate speech lies the *Ilbe* members' self-understanding that they are themselves worms, parasites, and ghosts, calling themselves *ilbechung*. Such language describes their lowly way of existence in the community, which allows the absolute freedom of expression that is less geared to despise the other. It is instead the language among the lowest of the lowest, interacting with one another in the muddy field of dirt, trash, and compost. Their political agency, which cannot function with legitimacy due to their age and social status, becomes that of a sub-human, not bound by political correctness, ethical norms, or state control.

2.2.3 Economics

The economic activities performed in this internet space are no longer neoliberal. While the websites have advertisements on the sides, keeping the "state" going, the relationships among the users are not that of the neoliberal market competitors. However, they are active producers endlessly generating new material and consumers eager to consume and transfer the goods to other internet spaces. Anthropologist Lee Gilho (2013) takes a detailed look into these economic activities, which he conceptualizes in conversation with the gift economy paradigm of Marcel Mauss, Levi Strauss, and Maurice Godelier. Users gain fame for their nicknames in this space when their meme production gets traction. Such production needs a context that draws everyone's attention, from which they construct a humorous/satiric/sarcastic digital meme that can circulate in the space.

When a meme grabs consumers' attention, they receive it with gratitude and adoration, leading to its copying and distribution around the internet or creating a mutation of the meme that circulates online. Through this generative process, the producer becomes recognized in the community as the meme's creator, and they receive acknowledgment for its origin. This process becomes a concentrated activity that requires a significant amount of intellectual energy. The entertainment value in this process is worthy of such devotion and time consumption that does not involve any monetary gain. The neoliberal market does not operate there; instead, it's a space for individuals to share their creations for others to

enjoy. This sense of gratification may not be as accessible outside the internet space.

Such economic activities of the online community users have many other layers of dynamics that make them all the more engaging and enjoyable. In a podcast interview with I Hyön (Hyun Lee) aired on April 12, 2023, economist Ha-Joon Chang addresses the issue of growth in this time of environmental challenges (Lee 2023).

He notes that economic theories have functioned like theologies of medieval times, representing the voices of the ruling class that control the society, and urges us to look beyond the paradigm of the current hegemony of the neo-classical economics that brought about the neoliberal paradigm that sees everything in terms of the market operation. Stepping out of the neoliberal framework, the original intent of the economic pondering becomes apparent: economics is the field that aims at better human life.

Chang notes that economically advanced states must focus on intellectual consumption when facing the current ecological challenges. At the same time, we should allow developing countries with a GDP of less than 10,000 USD to achieve material advancement. In other words, in countries where immediate physical security and hunger are not critical to resolve, we should encourage non-material consumption to derive human satisfaction, thus directing natural resources more effectively toward improving human well-being. The intellectual production and consumption happening in cyberspace achieve exactly such satisfaction. The *hikikomori* who spend hours online engaging in such consumption contributes to ecologically friendly economic activity. The social outcasts on the internet do not engage in self-destructive drug addiction or homelessness. Instead, they indulge in eco-friendly alternative political and economic activities that deter the expelled from material consumption-driven neoliberalism, actively defying the neoliberal rationality that governs everyone offline.

3. Theological Anthropology of Decomposition

Now, I want to move us to another space, equally liminal and transitional as the online space: the world of mythology. In 1927, anthropologist Adolf Jensen (Jensen and Niggemeyer 1939) collected the myth of Hainuwele from northern Indonesia, which

centralized decomposition and began theorizing the dema deity myth.

Nine families of mankind came forth in the beginning from Mount Nunusaku, where people had emerged from clusters of bananas. An ancestor named Ameta found a coconut speared on a boar's tusk and, in a dream, was instructed to plant it. In six days, a palm had sprung from the nut and flowered. Ameta cut his finger, and his blood dripped on the blossom. Nine days later, a girl grew from the blossom, and in three more days, she became an adolescent. Ameta cut her from the tree and named her Hainuwele, "coconut girl." But she was not like an ordinary person, for when she would answer the call of nature, her excrement consisted of all sorts of valuable articles, such as Chinese dishes and gongs, so Ameta became very rich.

During a major religious festival, Hainuwele stood in the middle of the dance grounds and excreted a series of valuable articles (Chinese porcelain dishes, metal knives, copper boxes, golden earrings, and great brass gongs). After nine days of this activity, "the people thought this thing mysterious . . . they were jealous that Hainuwele could distribute such wealth and decided to kill her." The ancestors dug a hole in the middle of the dance ground, threw Hainuwele in, and danced the ground firm on top of her. Ameta dug up her corpse, dismembered it, and buried the cut pieces. These pieces gave rise to previously unknown plant species, especially tuberous plants, which have been, ever since, the principal food of Ceram. (Smith 1993, 303)

For Jensen, this was the etiological myth that explains the origin of the principal crops of the region, in which the dema deity, like Tiamat in *Enuma Elish*, whose dismembered body became the fertile ground from which other living beings formed. However, Jonathan Z. Smith (1993) exegetes this story to reach a very different conclusion in *Map is Not Territory*. The central paradox faced in this story is that Hainuwele excreted the valuable objects, usually used as money in Ceram, thus curiously producing dirty money. This story denotes how the native and European economic systems crashed in what he calls the cargo situation. The cargo generates and exchanges mysteriously produced goods without honoring the reciprocity principle of the gift economy, thus making the gifted items extremely problematic. Therefore, the people killed and buried alive the suspicious products-excreting Hainuwele, but as grotesque as it may seem, such killing is not an unfamiliar theme in many cultural mythologies.

What draws my attention is that Hainuwele's body, regardless of its suspicious origin, decomposes and spawns previously unknown new crops.

Whether her body was mythical as signified by the prophecy in Ameta's dream, by a supernatural ability, or by the colonizing, manipulative deception, her dead body decomposed and produced life-giving crops. Decomposition equalized the previous political and economic agendas and turned them into life. In this process, the former entity, personality, and the former political and economic structure have all disintegrated and regenerated as new living beings, which the community then consumed. Thus, it incorporates into other living beings.

Here, I reach a new theology of resurrection that can contribute to a theological anthropology of the undead. Underneath the resurrection theology that inspired the cemetery inscription of "the dead shall be raised" lies the assumption that the resurrected body will somehow have individual bodily integrity, precisely the premise behind the individuality of each not-entirely-decomposed zombie.

The cyberspace where the *hikikomori* mingles with others who need to resist the neoliberal political and economic system turns into a site of decomposition, which at first seems unpretty and foul-smelling, as we see in the language and the breaking down of the political correctness. However, good, life-generating compost can form in the proper condition, as decomposition has already started. Something radical is beginning; regardless of whether it fits our comfort level, it is gaining its life and resurrecting. In this virtual world, the expelled *hikikomori* and others gain a political and economic platform radically different from what has expelled them. However, those on the outside have not glimpsed this world.

If so, can a Hainuwele type of resurrection happen in this place? Here, the vision of democracy, capitalism, patriarchy, feminism, empires, and colonies all seem to flow in and get decomposed, forming a mirky mess. Then, the next ecological process may turn them into a new life, totally unrelated to what has entered cyberspace, just like Hainuwelen crops. Could such new life constitute resurrection?

In the time of the Anthropocene, when we face the challenge of conceptualizing a radically different, non-anthropocentric vision of the world, I wonder whether we could confront and revise the conventional Christian concept of resurrection. When we resurrect, might we resurrect not in our individual, integral body but as a nutrient to many plants, fungi, and microbes in the ecological world, forming many different lives? Maybe in our ecological pyramids, our hope for resurrection and new life



should be becoming part of radical others, dirt, stone, micro life, fungi, plants, animals, and more, humbly returning what we received.

To put this theological anthropology in a larger frame, I turn to an atheist astrophysicist, Neal de-Grasse Tyson, whom *Time* magazine asked in an interview, “What is the most astounding fact?” He answered:

The most astounding fact is the knowledge that the atoms that comprise life on Earth, the atoms that make up the human body, are traceable to the crucibles that cooked light elements into heavy elements in their core under extreme temperatures and pressures. These stars, the high-mass ones among them, became unstable in their later years. They collapsed and then exploded, scattering their enriched guts across the galaxy, guts made of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and all the fundamental ingredients of life itself. These ingredients become part of the gas cloud that condenses, collapses, and forms the next generation of solar systems, stars with orbiting planets, and those planets now have the ingredients for life itself. So when I look up at the night sky, I know that yes, we are part of this Universe, we are in this Universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts is that the Universe is in us. When I reflect on that fact, I look up—many people feel small because they are small and the Universe is big—but I feel big because my atoms came from those stars. There is a level of connectivity. That is what you want in life; you want to feel connected, you want to feel relevant, and you want to feel like a participant in the goings-on of activities and events around you. That is precisely what we are, just by being alive. (Schlickemeyer 2012)

Then, the stars resurrect in me as my atoms. If a decomposition, even in a cosmic way, can result in my life, I say this is resurrection grace more than enough.

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Spiritual Resources and Religious Leadership in Times of the Anthropocene: A Practical Theological Reflection

Ian Nell

Faith communities are found all over the world as spaces where people find a spiritual home and where spiritual formation takes place. For this contribution the research question was: What can the leadership in faith communities contribute toward spiritual resources for their members in the time of the Anthropocene? Faith communities are spaces where three resources—a shared narrative about climate, shared values, and shared symbols and practices—interact and where each of these can also make a unique contribution in raising awareness of ownership and space in the time of the Anthropocene. If the Anthropocene is considered as the period in which human activities have the dominant influence on the climate and the environment, these three resources offer important contributions for a greater awareness of humans' influence on the climate and the environment. The congregational leader as spiritual guide in the modes of storyteller, moral compass, and symbolic worker can play a significant role in the process of mobilizing people of faith in becoming involved in their environment and climate mobilization.

Introduction

This contribution reports on my investigation from a practical-theological viewpoint of how and why the leaders of faith communities can mobilize themselves and their members to become involved in environmental issues, and in particular in climate change. Among other things, I employed resource mobilization theory (RMT), where the idea of “spiritual resources” is the focus. The latter helps to explain how spiritual identities, narratives, symbols, and values can facilitate a distinctive collective action regarding environmental and climate issues.

There is a set of resources available to spiritual leaders consisting of symbols, rituals, and traditions shaped by certain doctrines and theology that cannot be completely put into words by other explanations of climate mobilization. Although these spiritual resources do not translate directly into specific environmental or climate action, it is still possible to combine them with other resources. Where this happens, the leadership of faith communities can

motivate their members to become involved in environmental activities on an individual and a community level.

Understanding the Anthropocene

Before I pay attention to some theoretical perspectives, it is worthwhile to gain greater clarity about the notion of the Anthropocene. The influence of human activity on the global environment has not only been, geologically speaking, very recent, but also very profound. The variety as well as the longevity and the magnitude of the changes that human activities have caused in the composition and transformation of the atmosphere, which also includes the land surface, led to the proposal that we should refer to the current time as the “Anthropocene.” The academic and even the popular use of the term has increased dramatically since an influential academic publication saw the light just over two decades ago, namely the article by Crutzen and Stoer-

mer titled “The Anthropocene.” (2000) This paper suggests that the Holocene has ended, and the Anthropocene has begun, starting the contemporary increase in the usage of the term “Anthropocene.” Dean-Drummond, Bergmann, and Vogt (2018, 1) describe the Anthropocene as follows:

The global notion of the Anthropocene is meant to denote the current geological era as a new geological epoch in which the collective imprint of human activities is so pervasive that the Earth System, most notably that associated with climate change, is destabilized. Related assessments suggest that humanity is now close to passing several other planetary boundaries and tipping points. These notions have stirred up vigorous discussions in the earth sciences, where research now focuses on a rigorous understanding of humanity’s interaction with the biophysical Earth System. Treating humanity as a whole in this way has also come under serious critique from social science, given the disparity of impact between different human cultures and groups.

It becomes clear that the different reactions to the Anthropocene, according to Conty (2021, 2016), largely come from the social and natural sciences. However, in the last few years, there have also been reactions from the religious sphere, and these have also started to build momentum. That is why there are several scholars who are starting to ask for a religious response to complement the natural scientific response to climate change. If we take Genesis 1:28 seriously, which says that humanity received the command to “subdue the earth,” we also become aware of the fact that the monotheistic religions are often accused of being complicit in human exceptionalism and what some call “dominionism.” In addition, human exceptionalism, or dominionism, is seen as the most important factor that created the conditions of the Anthropocene. What is also interesting is the fact that indigenous animistic cultures, unlike what is the case with the Abrahamic traditions, generally respected all forms of life as “persons.” As a result, these traditions have become an important source of inspiration for the ecological movements.

White (2004, 192) argues that Christianity “in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.” Nearly twenty years later, White’s thesis is more relevant than ever. However, according to Ronan (2017, 92), a study of religion and the environment presents us with the complex-

ity of reactions to climate change: “Such research can identify, trace, and record the capacity for religion to revive, maintain and sustain essential planetary conditions.” There has been significant development in this exchange and a large body of research has emerged since the 1990s. With a better understanding of the Anthropocene, we can now focus on some theoretical perspectives.

Theoretical Perspectives

RMT focuses on the different ways in which groups identify resources (cultural, organizational, financial, human) and use them with a view to recruit and motivate people to act in a sustainable way (Walder 2009). Although this approach is not usually applied to faith communities, I aimed to adapt the theory in line with that of Bomberg and Hague (2018) to help understand how important it is to mobilize faith communities to become involved in local environmental and climate issues. For this purpose, I mainly investigated the cultural resources that are related to faith, transcendence, and inner belief and which we can consider as spiritual resources. The spiritual resources can serve as an important source for involvement in the environment and climate change. Unlike other frameworks that work with social movements, RMT is more interested in how and why groups mobilize themselves around a specific societal problem. Therefore, RMT is less interested in the various demands and grievances of movements and more interested in explaining why a group finds encouragement in pursuing a collective goal (Pinard 2011; Tarrow 2011).

Initially, scholars identified several categories of resources that include material resources, organizational resources, and human resources, all of which are used by groups to launch different actions. Later, some of the theorists moved beyond merely human and material resources and began to include resources that are not only related to the material and that we can describe as cultural resources. These cultural resources include aspects such as a shared identity, group values, and cultural symbols that facilitate, embody, and orient shared group experiences (Edwards and Kane 2014, 215). Part of these cultural resources are what we can call “spiritual resources.” The latter can be defined as “the collection of spiritual beliefs, symbols and identities that facilitate collective action on specific issues” (Bomberg and Hague 2018, 584).



One must further take into consideration that the notion of spirituality is very contested and is often broadly defined as a loving relationship that a person has with a higher or transcendent power or being (Sheldrake 2016). Underlying this loving relationship are aspects such as divine transcendence and a deep-seated interconnection that goes beyond the everyday and that is also related to the fact that people have a purpose that extends beyond what is immediately obvious. While spirituality largely focuses on a person's inner faith, it also has important implications for the outward behavior of people. McIntosh (2008, 3) points out that spirituality challenges our selfishness and that it can "carry us deeper than mere ethics and any notion of moral law," taking us "to the very source of conviction and motivation in the core of our being." With the latter in mind, it is the case that spirituality and the symbols and beliefs that go with it have the potential to serve as a powerful resource for recruitment and mobilization.

In this contribution, I would like to give the broad definition of spirituality a sharper focus in two ways. First, recognition must be given to the fact that spirituality is much wider than religion. Religion is usually best understood as a social structure within which a variety of spiritualities are at home. Second, I focused more specifically on Christian spirituality. In this connection, the symbols, traditions, and rituals of Christian teaching and theology were examined in more detail. Christian spirituality can be described, in the words of McGrath (1999, 9), as a "desire to live out the Christian faith authentically, responsibly, effectively and fully," and is therefore related to the dynamic and creative synthesis of life and faith. Sheldrake (2016, 4) defines Christian spirituality as follows: "The word 'spirituality' has become increasingly common. What does it mean? It is not limited to spiritual practices, such as meditation, but suggests the pursuit of a life shaped by a sense of meaning, values, and perhaps transcendence. Although the word is used in different religions, and by people with no religious beliefs, its origins were Christian and referred to living life under the influence of God's spirit."

Christian spirituality therefore suggests a form of integration and the search for an overall framework for unlocking meaning that will have a healing effect on being human and hence promote general human well-being. This form of spirituality wants to develop a holistic view of life and contribute to vision and hope. My research is therefore also interested in Christian faith communities in the form of

Christian congregations and attempts to investigate the way in which Christian spirituality can be a distinguishing source of mobilization for climate change in and through these communities.

Spiritual/Cultural Resources

With a better understanding of RMT, spirituality and, more specifically, Christian spirituality, we can now take a closer look at spiritual or cultural resources available for climate mobilization and action. When we now examine cultural or spiritual resources, I refer to the so-called intangibles—for example, narratives and symbols that can help to recruit or encourage new members and help with the socialization of existing members. According to Edwards and Kane (2014, 215), these spiritual or cultural resources include the symbols, beliefs, values and identity of a group that facilitate and orient their everyday activities. McIntosh and Carmichael (2015, 23) are convinced that faith-based groups can make use of very specific cultural resources in the form of a powerful identity that is inspired by stories of faith and that is often composed of shared narratives, practices, symbols, values and beliefs. The latter can be used sensibly in the context of climate change for the recruitment of new members and even further help with the mobilization of the members who already support these initiatives from their faith commitments.

Following Vonk (2012) and Bomberg and Hague (2018), I now discuss the spiritual resources in more detail below by breaking them down into three resources: First, a *shared narrative* about climate and the earth and humans' interaction with it; second, *shared values* that are linked to a very specific worldview; and third, *shared practices and symbols* that form the foundation for the shared narrative of the first dimension. Making use of literature on eco-theology as well as articles on the internet and news reports, I examined each of these three resources to determine what is distinctive about each and to make recommendations on how these resources can be used to motivate action.

Shared Narrative about Climate

A shared narrative about the environment, about climate change, and about the relationship between the earth and human beings is not only important but can also help with the motivation to take action.

From research it is clear that groups that work with shared narratives are more stable and more successful. A shared narrative provides the glue that binds people together by developing common goals that enable communities to act in the face of challenges such as climate change (Lejano, Ingram, and Ingram 2013).

Interesting research conducted among different church groups in Sweden by Clifton-Soderstrom (2009) points out two distinct aspects. First, he found that the climate narrative of these groups had a strong focus on hope, redemption, and healing. All these concepts naturally belong to the heart of Christian theology. One of the respondents in the empirical investigation remarked as follows: “We look for hope where we can find it. Doom and gloom don’t work very well though there’s plenty of it around.” From this Clifton-Soderstrom draws the conclusion that faith communities bring a vision of hope that overshadows any promise of community help or action by the government.

The second aspect that becomes clear from Clifton-Soderstrom’s (2009) research is the strong temporal element in the narratives of the different church groups. The latter is also related to multiple references to various interconnections across time. What is particularly informative is the reference to intergenerational topics, i. e. topics that span different generations. The motto of one of the churches that was part of the investigation was to be a congregation that cares for God’s creation now and in the future. There was also an important emphasis on how change can now be brought about in the sense of how one can change the future here and now before disaster strikes.

In this regard, we must bear in mind that the church has good experience of the past, but that the church is also able to look forward and can also offer different perspectives on how to think about the climate, the environment, the future, and the past. In summary, one could say that church groups’ narratives about the environment and climate change contain temporal notions not only about creation and eternity, but also about hope, transformation, and salvation.

Shared Values

The core values usually identified by Christians are awe, love, and respect for God’s creation. Respect for God’s creation is also often referred to as “steward-

ship” or “creation care.” Furthermore, respect and love for the earth also play an important role in secular environmental values. In eco-theology one finds the strong conviction that humans must take care of creation because the earth is part of God’s creation. This interconnection among God, creation, and human beings, where God’s creation is directly connected to the earth, reminds us of the core of spirituality, which can also serve as a strong motivation for action. Put another way, climate change can be attributed to the fact that we have not succeeded in our stewardship of God’s creation. Along with this, the thought that human beings are disconnected and separate from nature, according to eco-theologians, is exactly what made pollution and global-scale degradation possible (Northcott 2013).

The emphasis on the earth and on God’s creation presupposes a reinterpretation of the “dominion doctrine” of which we read in Genesis 1:26–28. Eco-theologians agree that this doctrine is not about a form of rule that wants to destroy, but one that wants to protect and respect. Unfortunately, this value is not universally lived by the Christian church, and one finds some evangelical churches, especially in the USA, where the dominion over creation is often still seen as a license to exploit the earth and the oceans. Fortunately, it is a case that most of the mainline Protestant and Catholic churches worldwide consider creation care as a powerful motivation and encourage their members to move away from the exploitation of creation toward action to address environmental degradation and climate change (cf. Action Institute 2000).

The second core value that motivates individuals to take action can be described as an ethical obligation and has to do with a Christian sense of responsibility or a sense of duty. As Christians, we are accountable to God for what we do with our lives. Philippians 1:27 serves as key text here, namely to “live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Durrant (2014, 37) describes the motivation behind this: “It’s not that we shouldn’t be spurred on by the hope of making a difference, it’s just that our prime motivation needs to be to live out who we are.” What is needed here is, in other words, a “change of heart,” which is first about the enrichment of our spiritual relationship with God and which then, second, serves as motivation for our righteous behavior toward God’s creation.

Linked to the idea of a sense of duty, the third core value is that of community. A sense of duty relates especially to a community of justice, which can



be linked to the biblical concept of caring for one's neighbor. Gottlieb (2006, 243), an eco-theologian, writes: "... we want to save the world, but right now we do what we do because we wish to be the kind of person who lives like this: who honors God's creation, feels and responds to the sacredness of the earth, and tries to love our neighbors as ourselves." In terms of neighbor care, it is specifically the poor of the earth, who are most affected by climate change, that we must keep in mind here. In summary, we could therefore say that the concepts of community care (justice), creation care, and Christian duty are all related to the values that motivate people.

While Christian faith communities and secular groups hold these same values, the former grounds its actions to change policy or care for the earth in Christian teachings, faith, and obligations.

Shared Practices and Symbols

Shared practices and symbols provide support for the shared narrative referred to above. McGurty (2009), a scholar of social movements, shows us how different groups use a wide variety of frameworks, symbols, and forms of protest to implement the common narrative and to communicate that narrative. According to him, we usually find, among other things, the famous images of stranded polar bears, melting icebergs, and the deforestation of the Amazon forests. The message that these core symbols are trying to convey is that we are responsible for what is going on, that time is short, and that the damage is devastating.

However, when it comes to Christian faith communities, there are other shared practices and symbols. Here we find that the different church groups share cultural resources based on their participation in common rituals and religious traditions. These shared meanings help to keep the message of healing, redemption, and hope alive based on a shared tradition and history. Ruether (2011), a feminist theologian, is of the opinion that Christian believers are more likely to take action if they are supported by traditions that are credible to them and that also have local significance. According to her, there are some interesting examples in this regard, such as "carbon savings," which are seen as "climate offerings" and which members can place in the collection plate as examples of what they have done to reduce their carbon footprint. There are also local harvest festivals, something not unknown to those

of us who live in the winelands of Stellenbosch, where the wonders of nature are celebrated. The latter is often related to symbolic actions that are expressed in the form of testimonies and reflections, rather than in large protest marches in which corporate greed, structures of government, or neoliberal practices are targeted, and which are often used as a strategy by secular groups. McIntosh (2008) refers to the actions of church groups as "otherworldly ways of knowing, being and doing."

With a good idea of the shared climate narrative, values, practices, and symbols, we are now in the position to move over to look at leadership. In line with the three spiritual resources above, I want to concentrate on three related competencies that I understand might be important for persons in leadership of faith communities. As an overarching competency, I think it is important for a person who takes the lead in a congregation to be a spiritual guide with three related competencies: to be a storyteller, a moral compass, and a symbolic worker.

The Congregational Leader as Spiritual Guide

Richard Osmer (2008, 25) makes a good case for using the term "congregational leaders" instead of "ministers" or "pastors" when he refers to these leaders' function as interpretive guides. According to him, the clergy are not the only people who can and should take leadership in a congregation. He is of the opinion that a strong theological case can be made for mutual guidance belonging in the first place to the whole people of God and in the second place to the people who are set apart by the congregation by way of ordination. Furthermore, it is also the case that the leadership in Christian faith communities is inherently a spiritual matter, where influence is used to guide the behavior and attitudes of people.

The development of a theology of congregational leadership should therefore pay special attention to the spirituality of leadership. And according to Osmer (2008, 27), what must be understood under the spirituality of leadership is that there must be an openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The role of the Holy Spirit is to form and transform believers to become more and more accordant to the image of the body of Christ in the service of the church and its mission. As an umbrella term, I think it helps to connect with Osmer's idea of the congregational leader as spiritual guide, where leadership then guides the

interpretation of the gospel in different ways of communication. For this contribution, I concentrate on three competencies or three modes that are important when it comes to guiding the congregation to understand climate change, namely the storyteller, moral compass, and symbolic worker.

In the Mode of Storyteller

The central message of the storyteller one finds in Goal 13 (climate change) of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals to transform our world: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. Goal 13 entails the following targets:

- Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries
- Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies, and planning
- Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning
- Implement the commitment undertaken by developed country parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to a goal of jointly mobilizing \$100 billion annually by 2020 from all sources to address the needs of developing countries in the context of meaningful mitigation actions and transparency on implementation and fully operationalize the Green Climate Fund through its capitalization as soon as possible
- Promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing states, including focusing on women, the youth, and local and marginalized communities. (United Nations 2023)

In the light of these targets, the role of the storyteller is to be a public critic. Wimberly (2011) summarizes this role in the following way: “The public theologian, also drawing on faith perspectives about human worth and experiences in pastoral counseling and psychotherapy, becomes a public critic promoting non-commodity-oriented images of human worth that can provide resources for public policies and planning” (129).

Storytellers as leaders of faith communities will have to find in their own context which relevant sto-

ries need to be told to address the challenge of climate change and the targets stated above. In the case of our South African context, there is for example the case of “Day Zero,” which dominates the water crisis in the Eastern Cape at the moment. According to Brown (2022), several activists in the city of Gqeberha (formerly known as Port Elizabeth) have warned for a long time of a Day Zero—the day when the taps will run dry in this South African coastal city. This follows on years of severe drought and municipal mismanagement, and it looks like that day is now very close:

On Monday, city officials announced that one of its four major dams had reached a level so low that barges trying to extract water sucked in mud instead. Another dam is expected to fail in the next two weeks, a third in about a month. Large parts of the city could be completely without running water by the end of the month, according to local officials. Four years ago, when Cape Town announced it was nearing its own day zero, the world turned to watch. Headlines blared that this was the first time in modern history that a major world city would be without running water. Gqeberha, by contrast, has received little international attention. (Brown 2022, n.p.)

The water crisis that we have experienced in our country over the past number of years is of course directly related to climate change and there are literally thousands of stories that can be told in this regard. Furthermore, one must also keep in mind that the shortage of water is also a study in inequality. Although it is a case that the lack of water affects the entire area, residents of the more affluent parts of the city have the advantage of being able to install boreholes and use bottled water. A borehole is a deep, narrow hole drilled into the ground to access underground water. It is usually only the affluent who can afford it. Unfortunately, it is the case that most residents of Nelson Mandela Bay in Gqeberha live in townships that lack the necessary resources and were built around South African cities during the apartheid years to house black workers. These areas have some of the densest populations and struggle with the least functional infrastructure.

In the Mode of Moral Compass

Climate change and the associated climate crisis puts us all in front of several difficult moral questions about *what* we value and *why*. The crisis further confronts us with the question of *who* decides what the value is and with *what authority*. Whichever



er way one contemplates these questions, according to Lee (2022, 3) there are five observations to which all of us should pay attention:

- The climate crisis will impact all of us one way or another.
- Some human communities will bear its brunt in far greater ways than others.
- Environmental crisis tends to provoke new geopolitical antagonisms and worsen old ones. This includes wars, as well as the ecological ruin and greenhouse emissions that come with war.
- Capitalism, a system of economic exchange rooted in the largely unchallenged assumption that all value can be converted to exchange or commodity value, plays a central role in environmental destruction, pollution, geopolitical violence, species extinction, and the climate crisis.
- An unprecedented number of nonhuman animal species will confront loss of habitat, starvation, and migration. But one of the most ethically troubling legacies of the Anthropocene, the age of human industrial domination, is extinction.

Leaders of faith communities taking their cue from these observations as moral compasses can make significant contributions in helping their congregations and communities to understand that climate change is indeed the greatest challenge of our times. Furthermore, we must bear in mind that for many people, climate change is not just a crisis in the future; they are confronted daily with a shortage of water, food insecurity, droughts, and all kinds of disease. The lack of action in this regard can effectively lead to the extinction of all life on earth. One can compare this situation with untreated cancer. We know that untreated cancer metastasizes and leaves the patient in a terminal position. We also know that treating the cancer may not eradicate the disease, but that early attention to the problem can reduce the side effects on the organs of the body. According to Lee (2022, 4), “[t]hat is the moral burden we bear to recognize that environmental conditions are existential conditions, that in having the planet ‘smoke’ we are imperiling it and every living thing that lives within its ‘body’.”

For a leader of a faith community to act as a moral compass, the leader needs to be inherently countercultural and, in that sense, also conflictual with all cultures. It is a fundamental attribute of the church to seek to domesticate the good news of the gospel (Willimon 2010, 31). To work against domes-

tication and to be countercultural is the task of prophet leadership. Prophetic discernment refers to ethical reflections in the sense of using ethical guidelines, rules, and principles to guide our actions toward moral goals and ends. All our actions and practices are filled with norms and values that are often in conflict. The role of leadership as moral compass is to channel behavior in the different contexts, episodes, and situations toward moral ends (Browning 1995). Prophetic discernment must be accompanied by good practice, as examples of good practice can “reform a congregation’s present actions” and can “generate new understandings of God, the Christian life, and social values beyond those provided by the received tradition” (Osmer 2008, 153).

In the Mode of Symbolic Worker

According to Stiegler (2004), symbolic workers are those people who are concerned with the spirit in the broadest sense of the word, such as writers, thinkers, artists, educators, and religious people. In that sense, all congregational leaders are in one way or another a symbol, representative, and mediator of the Holy One (God). As symbolic leader, predecessor, or liturgist, the person wants to bring the community together to celebrate its identity through Word and sacrament. In this regard, the leadership as symbolic workers participate in the formation of the symbols and culture of their communities.

Cormode (2020) points to the fact that culture (especially within our postcolonial context) shapes our expectations and perceptions and that leadership is expected to interpret new events and convey situations in such a way that they fit into the existing cultural repertoire. Symbolic leaders not only interact with these cultural symbols, but also actively give form to these symbols, practices, beliefs, and history of the local faith community. The structure and nature of these symbols, whether in the form of clothing, liturgical spaces, architecture, rituals, or music, will of course vary from community to community, which means that a good understanding and a delicate approach are important. One example of this is what is known in the Dutch Reformed Church family as the Season of Creation.¹ On the

1 See <https://kaapkerk.co.za/seisoenon-van-skepping/>.



website we find the following introductory paragraph:

Every year, churches around the world gather to celebrate a Season of Creation. This tradition has its origins in 1989, with the South African Council of Churches deciding in 2007 to make it a permanent part of the church calendar. What makes the annual Season of Creation different is that it is an annual celebration that begins on September 1 with a prayer day for Creation and ends on October 4 with the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis is one of the most famous figures in church history for his love and deep awareness for nature and creation. St. Francis embodied a faith and spirituality that regarded every animal, plant and insect as an equal creation by God.

This initiative is also closely linked to the World Communion of Reformed Churches' focus on ecological justice.² Various resources exist that can be used by leaders and faith communities. The theme of the 2022 Season of Creation was "Listen to the Voice of Creation." A book was published with the title *Listen to the land! Responding to cries for life*, published by the Oikotree Movement.³ The Oikotree Movement is a global movement of movements striving for justice, peace, and fullness of life, and is sponsored by the World Council of Churches, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the Council for World Mission. While we struggle for justice with people's movements and other organizations, the issue of "land" has emerged as a crucial factor in the destruction of creation itself, with all its beings. Therefore, at the 2013 Oikotree Global Forum, the movement decided to develop a thorough theological reflection on the issue of land.

Conclusion

I started this contribution with the following research question: In what ways can the leadership in faith communities contribute toward spiritual resources for their members in time of the Anthropocene? I set out to answer this question by turning to RMT, which focuses on the different ways in which groups identify resources (cultural, organizational, financial, human) and use them with a view to recruit and motivate people to act in a sustainable way.

Taking my cue from RMT, I looked at three spiritual or cultural resources: a shared narrative about climate, shared values, and shared practices and symbols. Turning to spiritual leadership, I looked at three competencies or three modes that are important when it comes to guiding the congregation to understand climate change—namely storyteller, moral compass, and symbolic worker. The congregational leader as spiritual guide in the modes of storyteller, moral compass, and symbolic worker can indeed play a significant role in the process of mobilizing people of faith in becoming involved in their environment and climate mobilization.

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² See <http://wrc.ch/justice/ecological>.

³ See <http://wrc.ch/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Oikotree-ListenToLand.jpg>.



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Is Eco-Anxiety Racial Anxiety?: Harnessing Eco-Anxiety for Practicing Racial and Climate Justice

Eunil David Cho

This essay aims to invite practical theologians to consider racial injustice seriously as they continue deepening practical theological scholarship on climate change and environmental crises. By looking at the specific issue of eco-anxiety, I examine how scholars and practitioners must consider how climate change and eco-anxiety are not uniformly experienced in the United States. While communities of color suffer eco-anxiety disproportionately more, their voices and experiences have been largely absent in the larger conversation. Subsequently, I look at Fannie Lou Hamer's practical theological work of ecological justice in order to suggest how practical theologians need to empower individuals and communities to harness their experience of eco-anxiety for practicing climate and racial justice.

Introduction: The Intersection Between Climate Change and Racial Injustice

On August 3, 2019, a mass shooting occurred at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, United States, located near the Texas-Mexico border. In this senseless terrorist attack, a far-right White individual named Patrick Crusius killed twenty-three people and injured twenty-three others; most of them were Latinx Americans. According to the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), the shooting was an act of domestic terrorism and a hate crime. Shortly before the attack, the shooter, using hostile anti-immigrant languages that have been popularized on the political far-right, posted his manifesto online that he was trying to stop a "Hispanic invasion of Texas" (Brockell 2019). But there was also a distinctly environmental theme to his manifesto titled, "An Inconvenient Truth," presumably named after Al Gore's 2006 documentary film on climate change. The shooter wrote, "The decimation of the environment is creating a massive burden for future generations. Corporations are heading the destruction of our environment by shamelessly overharvesting resources...If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can be more sustainable" (Darby 2019).

The shooter's motivation can be identified as a lesser-known far-right ideology called *eco-fascism*. American journalist Luke Darby claims that eco-fascists believe that "the size of the human population is not only putting a strain on natural resources, but also that masses of displaced people will be a threat to state and cultural stability in a seemingly inevitable post-climate change world" (Darby 2019). That's why, for eco-fascists, allowing immigrants into the United States is catastrophic. The El Paso shooting eventually came to symbolize powerfully the deep connections between racial injustice and the climate change in the United States. Similarly, during the pandemic, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on African Americans, Latinx, Asian, and Native Americans reaffirmed how systemic racism and its resulting health disparities remain deeply embedded in the United States (Magesh et al. 2021). It is as present in matters of the environment as in other aspects of life: Both historical and present-day injustices have left people and communities of color exposed to far greater environmental health hazards—including water and air pollution, extreme weather, chemical exposures, and negative mental health effects of climate change—than White Americans (Centers for Dis-





ease Control and Prevention 2018). The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) declares, “Environmental and climate justice is a civil rights issue. We all depend on the physical environment and its bounty...But not all people are equally impacted. Race—even more than class—is the number one indicator for the placement of toxic facilities in this country hit by climate change” (NAACP 2021). This statement displays how environmental issues and systemic racism perpetually go hand in hand in America. This interconnection is called *environmental racism*, which is “a form of systemic racism where communities of color are disproportionately disadvantaged due to policies, practices or directives that burden these communities by forcing them to live in proximity to environmental hazards/toxins or in degraded environments” (Washer 2021).

However, while it has become all the more significant to see climate change as a racial justice issue in the United States, scholars and practitioners in various academic disciplines have not considered the impact of environmental racism in depth. If it’s the people and communities of color who suffer ecological challenges more disproportionately, why don’t we hear about the voices of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities around their experiences of eco-anxiety? Why are those people responding to the issue of eco-anxiety predominantly *White*? To address these questions, I first engage the work of environmental studies scholars Sarah Jaquette Ray and Sian Kou-Giesbrecht to explore why and how the voices of BIPOC communities have been overlooked in the scholarly and public conversation around eco-anxiety. Then I turn to argue how practical theologians can intentionally resist the trend by intentionally uplifting the voices of marginalized communities and examining their lived experience of climate anxiety and engagement of faith-based activism. By looking at the work of Karen Crozier, who examines Fannie Lou Hamer’s practical theological work on racial and environmental justice, I investigate the importance of considering how climate change always compounds existing structures of injustice and how people’s various ecological emotions including anxiety, grief, fear, and loss can be harnessed for climate justice in practical theological scholarship.

Is Eco-Anxiety White Anxiety?

Based on American Psychology Association’s definition, climate anxiety, or eco-anxiety, is understood as “a chronic fear of environmental doom” (Dodds 2021, 1) and “the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse” (Pihkala 2020, 4). Psychologist Joseph Dodds argues that the past decade has seen the substantial rise of people’s experience of ecological loss, anxiety, and guilt, indicating climate change as one of the top threats to global health in the 21st century (Dodds, 2021). However, not every community experiences the same level of eco-anxiety. Because climate change disproportionately affects members of historically marginalized communities, communities of color are more concerned than Whites about climate change in America according to the national survey conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication (Leiserowitz and Akerlof, 2010). Particularly, Hispanics/Latinx (69 %) and African Americans (57 %) are more likely to be “alarmed” or “concerned” about global warming than are Whites (49 %) (Leiserowitz and Akerlof, 2010). This explains why non-White communities are more likely to experience eco-anxiety and also display more willingness to engage in climate activism as a way to address various issues around climate change and support climate policies and actions (Ballew et al. 2020).

However, while eco-anxiety has received growing attention in public discussions and research, the lived experiences of BIPOC communities regarding eco-anxiety have been largely absent. One of the compelling reasons is that White scholars and activists have made up the majority of voices in the conversation. In her thought-provoking article published in *Scientific American*, Ray asserts that eco-anxiety is “an overwhelmingly White phenomenon” (Ray 2021). Based on years of her research and activism, Ray observes that those who have been studying and actively responding to the issue of climate anxiety are predominantly White. To be more specific, these climate anxiety circles are even whiter than the larger environmental circles. Why is the conversation and interest in climate anxiety so White? What happened to the voices of communities of color? In her critical analysis, Ray writes, “The white response to climate change is literally suffocating to people of color. Climate anxiety can operate like white fragility, sucking up all the oxy-

gen in the room and devoting resources toward appeasing the dominant group” (Ray 2021). Ray implies that eco-anxiety can be “a form of white fragility or even racial anxiety” and asks, “is climate anxiety just code for white people wishing to hold onto their way of life or get ‘back to normal,’ to the comforts of their privilege?” (Ray 2021). As a result, in the field of ecological and environmental studies and practices, Ray argues, the perspectives of racial and ethnic minority groups have been alarmingly underrepresented. Furthermore, this significant absence of communities of color and other marginalized populations’ voices could potentially reinforce the dangerous assumption that these non-White communities are “uninterested” in the issues around climate change (Kou-Giesbrecht 2020, 1). A similar pattern, of course, can be found in theological and religious studies as well.

The Development of Practical Theological Reflection on Eco-Anxiety

Compared to other theological disciplines, practical theology has offered little to the conversations on climate and environmental crises. Only since the global pandemic have practical theologians begun to consider climate change as an emerging priority and produced some noteworthy articles and books (McCarroll 2020; Ayres 2021; Marlow 2022; McCarroll and Kim-Cragg 2022). But within the subfield of pastoral theology, scholars and practitioners have been grappling with the environmental crisis for a somewhat longer time, particularly focusing on how to provide care for individuals struggling with eco-anxiety, “a variety of difficult emotions and mental states significantly related to environmental problems” (Pihkala 2022, 1). The initial conversation began with Howard Clinebell’s book, *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth* (1996). In this pioneering work, Clinebell urges caregivers to reconsider humanity’s deep connection to nature by contending, “our relationship with the earth, mother-father of all living things, is an often-ignored but foundational factor influencing our overall wellness and the wholeness of our identity” (Clinebell 1996, 27). Although pastoral theologians did not initially respond to Clinebell’s invitation with enthusiasm, nearly twenty-five years later they have finally begun to reflect on the psychological and theological impacts of environmental crises on people’s lives, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly

spread across the globe. On the issue of eco-anxiety, a number of pastoral theologians have examined its numerous implications for pastoral care, such as the various forms of eco-anxiety (Pihkala 2020; Clayton 2020), the existential dimensions of eco-anxiety (Budziszewska and Jonssoon 2021), the role of responsibility and guilt in relation to eco-anxiety (Jenson 2019; Fredericks 2021), the political dimensions of eco-anxiety and ecological issues, and eco-anxiety’s wider connection with ecological theology and practical theology (LaMothe 2021; McCarroll 2020; Swain 2020). These pastoral theological reflections on eco-anxiety are timely and insightful, yet there is yet to be a substantial conversation in the field on the issue of eco-anxiety and racial justice.

Most recently, in his careful theoretical overview of pastoral theology and eco-anxiety, Panu Pihkala articulates the importance of justice in the conversation on eco-anxiety because “the most vulnerable populations are also the most susceptible to various kinds of climate-related harm” (Pihkala 2022, 7). Pihkala points out that although the movement of climate justice has been growing since the 2000s, theologians and religious scholars have not carefully considered how “there are strong inequalities related to political power, race, and gender, which also affect climate politics and emotions” (Pihkala 2022, 8). For instance, research shows that women tend to experience more climate-related emotions—such as despair, guilt, hopelessness, and mourning—than men (Hickman et al. 2021). Likewise, for indigenous communities in North America, climate anxiety is not a new phenomenon. It is simply a continuation of the oppression, suffering, and colonialism wrought on them for centuries by White settlers (Whyte 2017). Pihkala challenges practical theologians to address how climate change continually exacerbates structures of injustice, disproportionately affecting historically marginalized communities by intensifying their struggles with ecological emotions and existential threats over much longer and deeper periods. Specifically in the context of the United States, Ray makes a similar claim, arguing that the popular message of “climate change is the greatest threat of our time” often overlooks “people who have been experiencing existential threats for much longer. Slavery, colonialism, ongoing police brutality—we can’t neglect history to save the future” (Ray 2021). Thus, as practical theologians continue to grapple with climate change and its impact on both humans and the earth, we must ask, “How



can we critically examine our history so that we can better imagine our future?” In other words, if practical theology remains a theological discipline that privileges and engages lived human experience and practices, how can we continue this timely task in the era of eco-anxiety with an unwavering commitment to justice, liberation, and healing?

Uplifting the Stories of Communities of Color in the Era of Eco-Anxiety

Asian American environmental scientist Sian Kou-Giesbrecht points out how racial minority groups in the United States have been historically “depicted as disinterested in environmental issues” (Kou-Giesbrecht 2020, 2). This erroneous depiction has allowed racial diversity to be a low priority in environmental organizations as well as in ecological scholarship, research, and activism (Kou-Giesbrecht 2020, 2). For example, Asian Americans are not often associated with the term “environmentalist” and constantly perceived as “uninterested in environmental issues” despite the fact that Asian Americans are both keenly aware of and interested in environmental issues, based on recent data (Speiser and Krygsman 2014). A survey conducted in 2014 shows that Asian Americans display the highest proportions of any racial group in the United States in understanding the impacts of climate change and its solutions. 83 % of them believe that climate change is occurring, compared to 71 % of the U.S. population, and with 86 % of them agree that acting now on climate change would provide a better life for their children and grandchildren (Speiser and Krygsman 2014). For Kou-Giesbrecht, the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in environmental scholarship and activism has to do with the pervasive influence of the “model minority” stereotype, which has contributed to the lack and erasure of the voice of Asian American communities in the conversation around climate change (Chou and Feagin 2016). The model minority myth is a widespread stereotype that people of Asian descent in America are much “healthier, more hardworking, better educated, and more affluent than other racial and ethnic groups” (Cho 2021, 176). It dangerously assumes that Asian Americans are monolithic, singularly highlighting “the wealth, health, and success of a select few” and overlooks the wide range of inequality and disparity that exists in the larger Asian American communities (Cho 2021). Leclercq, the

co-founder of climate justice nonprofit “Start: Empowerment,” claims that “Asian people not being heard or seen as activists, which has contributed to the erasure of Asian Americans in the climate space” (Horn-Muller and Chen 2023). Their stories that demonstrate their concerns for environmental issues, their experience of a variety of ecological emotions, and their practices of environmental activism have been constantly silenced, overlooked, and unacknowledged.

Practical and pastoral theologian Mary Moschella argues that because many “stories seldom heard” have not been recognized due to racism, sexism, classism, ableism, colonialism, and other forms of systemic marginalization, pastoral theologians need to uplift those untold stories by empowering marginalized communities to tell their stories and create a space for them to do it (Moschella 2018, 20–21). Moschella writes, “In the current regressive political climate, it becomes all the more important to attend to the conditions of the most vulnerable, and to create venues in which their stories can be richly told and brought into greater public awareness. These efforts support the liberative and prophetic functions of pastoral theology and care” (Moschella 2018, 22). Although the stories of marginalized communities are often missing in the public conversation, historically marginalized communities including BIPOC communities “have developed traditions of resilience out of necessity” and “cultivated resilience over the long arc of the fight for justice” including ecological justice (Ray 2021). In her book, *Inhabitanace: Ecological Religious Education*, practical theologian Jennifer Ayres examines the story of San Jose Parish in Beloit, Wisconsin, as a case study to show how a marginalized immigrant community establishes a new ecological inhabitanace from the vulnerable place of psychological, social, and economic challenges. As a Spanish-speaking immigrant faith community, San Jose Parish has trained its members actively to engage in farming and raising livestock as faith-based ecological practices. For these immigrants who have experienced the trauma of migration and displacement, this small town in the rural Midwest became their new place of inhabitanace, their new home away from home. Ayres claims that ecological religious education forms “human beings into thriving inhabitants even in the most ecologically challenging contexts and times” (Ayres 2019, 129). San Jose Parish’s work of planting, farming, and harvesting is a faith-based ecological practice that empowers its members to lament their



experiences of displacement and, subsequently, to regain hope in their new inhabitation. Ayres argues that many faith communities, especially those based in historically marginalized communities, have been doing faith-based ecological practices of education, care, and activism for their lands and their inhabitants without naming and describing them as such. Put simply, in the United States, although their experiences, stories, and practices have received little attention and recognition, communities of color have been caring for their members and lands for many years in the face of climate anxiety and other environmental challenges. It is their Christian faith that has been an integral part of this resilience and resistance.

Fannie Lou Hamer's Practice of Racial and Environmental Justice Concerns

One of the few practical theological works that unveil untold stories of racial and environmental justice is Karen Crozier's *Fannie Lou Hamer's Revolutionary Practical Theology: Racism and Environmental Justice Concerns*. In this outstanding work, Crozier presents Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977) as a pro-womanist practical theologian by examining Hamer's religious thoughts and practices. Hamer was a Christian Black woman born in rural Mississippi in 1917 and became a formidable leader during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s: "Her Christian praxis was formed in the crucible of white domination and hostility, and her faithful way of being in the world enabled Hamer to bear witness to values and practices that affirmed and cultivated life and human flourishing" (Crozier 2021, 1). By analyzing the writing of Hamer on the U.S. democracy, racism, sexism, classism, and Christianity, Crozier argues that Hamer "articulated and exhibited a clear, cohesive practical theology that inspired friends and communities, challenges foes and changed the socio-political landscape of a nation" (Crozier 2021, 1).

As a Civil Rights movement leader, Hamer is best known for her work in voting rights and women's rights activism. However, Crozier reexamines Hamer as an environmental justice advocate who considered how the intersection of racial injustice, colonialism, environmental violence, and global warming affected Black people living in the United States' "wilderness" (Crozier 2021, 9). Hamer writes, "Should earth against my soul engage and fiery

darts be hurled, when I can smile at Satan's rage, and face this frowning world" (Hamer 1971, 6). Hamer also reflects critically on "the cruelty and antagonism that can be experienced and encountered in the Earth that is neither friendly, welcoming, or encouraging of her human flourishing in her darker-hued skin" (Crozier 2021, 77). For Hamer, the earth was the United States, that is "wilderness," an inherently hostile environment in which Black people could never exercise their human dignity and agency. The environment was systematically designed to "control, constrain, oppress, and suppress the natural movement and identity of black lives within United States border" (Crozier 2021, 78). Hamer resisted calling America "the land of the free and the home of the brave;" instead, she called it, "the land of the tree and home of the grave" (Hamer 1971, 126). In her speeches and written works, Hamer talked extensively and explicitly about the environment she inhabited, namely how the Deep South that was death-dealing and life-limiting for her and other Black persons: "Always under the constant pressure of being extinguished or disposed, Hamer knew she was perceived as an environmental and sociological problem" (Crozier 2021, 80). Because Hamer was born and bred in the wilderness of the United States that perceived her as "an environmental problem" without human dignity, she innately experienced and embodied a variety of ecological anxiety, such as existential angst, anxiety about the human condition, and problematic uncertainty about the future that emerged from the "forced segregation, dehumanization, subjugation, and denial of black self-determination" (Crozier 2021, 82).

Because eco-anxiety is inherited intergenerationally—an alarming reality especially for Black Americans in the United States "wilderness"—Hamer was determined "to protect and preserve vulnerable people who intentionally and systematically were denied access to sustainable resources and relationships" (Crozier 2021, 88). In her pursuit of ecological justice and racial justice as an environmental movement advocate, Hamer, claims that the environment in which Black people lived must be protected and preserved in order to alleviate the eco-anxiety of Black people and fight for liberation and healing.

As the environmental movement advocates for clean, quality water, Hamer had to advocate for access to running water because this public resource was not readily attainable for poor black Mississippians. Although she did not have running water in the house, she was none-



theless charged for the use of nine thousand gallons of water because the white predators were after black prey in the United States “wilderness.” As environmentalists advocate for the drastic decrease of fossil fuel emissions by multinational corporations and individuals, Hamer had to walk, carpool, or drive for miles for basic needs such as health care. Hence, for Hamer, it seems safe to say that her fight for racial justice included an engagement of the broader environmental challenges and conditions (Crozier 2021, 90).

According to current research on race, gender, class, religion, and the environment, Hamer’s work represents an important source for understanding and practicing ecological justice and ecowomanism, which is “critical reflection, contemplation, and praxis-oriented study of environmental justice from the perspective of women of color and particularly of African descent” (Crozier 2021, 88; Harris 2017, Loc 2598 of 2847).

In 1971, Hamer was invited to Tougaloo College, located in Jackson, Mississippi, to speak on the nation’s struggle with environmental and sociological challenges of racism, racial injustice, and racial dehumanization in her speech titled, “Is It Too Late?” Hamer opened the speech by stating, “In the streets of America, my home and land where my fathers died, land of my family’s pride, I have taken a stand for human rights and civil rights not just for my sake, but for all mankind” (Hamer 1971, 132). Although the United States “wilderness” had always been an unwelcoming environment for her and fellow Black people, she courageously hoped for “a more intimate sense of belonging to the nation that included yet transcended the domestic terror of lynching, murder, and assassination” (Crozier 2021, 83). Furthermore, Hamer not only recognized countless Black individuals who sacrificed their lives for the healing and reconstruction of the nation, but also expressed the importance of interracial solidarity with all people who belong to her homeland (Blain 2021, 55). From the perspective of ecological justice, Hamer’s ecological emotions—such as anxiety, grief, anger, loss, and frustration—were harnessed for practicing racial and climate justice, not only for Black communities, but also for *all people* in her land who were affected by systemic racism, global warming, climate change, rising sea levels, and fossil fuel emissions. In short, Hamer’s work of activism for racial and climate justice powerfully demonstrates how “climate anxiety must be directed toward addressing the ways that racism manifests as racialized violence” (Ray 2021).

Deeply informed by her Christian faith and commitment to justice and compassion, Hamer, as a practical theologian, was able to channel these challenging ecological emotions toward collective liberation for all people as well as for the earth on which she lived.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as we continue to observe how the voices and experiences of marginalized communities are often overlooked in discussions about climate change and eco-anxiety, this article seeks to encourage the practical theological community, particularly those who identify as White, to view climate change through the lens of racial justice more intently. This commitment will create more opportunities for BIPOC communities to center their narratives of resilience and resistance amidst racial and environmental injustices. Ray challenges individuals experiencing eco-anxiety not to ask, “What can I do to stop feeling so anxious?” or “What can I do to save the planet?” but instead to critically consider, first and foremost, “Who am I?” (Ray 2021). In other words, as we continue to deepen and expand our practical theological reflections on climate justice, we must ask, “How are my social roles, power, and positionality influencing the conversation about climate change and justice?” Encouraging those who are “ecologically anxious” to engage with this question will help them understand our profound interconnectedness and inspire them to seek meaningful ways to resist the structures of injustice that exacerbate climate change and crisis.

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Understanding Practical Wisdom in the Anthropocene Age in Terms of Islamic Religious Education from a Koran-Centered Interpretive Perspective

Havva Sinem Uğurlu

Wisdom, understood as practical, refers to existence, knowledge, and value by putting the human being at the center. While Islam defines human existence in terms of value, it also underlines their responsibilities toward the Creator, themselves, and the universe. However, it is also necessary to focus on the process, realizing that the human being is a being that continues to be. This paper examines Islamic theology's Koranic understanding of the human being and its reflection in life regarding the characteristics of the Anthropocene era. Moreover, the possibility of understanding "wisdom" as a Koranic concept as a practical theological basis for religious education activities is discussed, focusing on the Qur'an and the literature. The potential of Islamic theology's understanding of the human and the reflection of wisdom in life in terms of making sense of the Anthropocene age and turning its disadvantages into advantages is also evaluated from an interpretive perspective.

Introduction

Religious education is a field of science that integrates—or at least is expected to integrate—theological, philosophical, and educational perspectives. When this field moves from theory to practice, it is necessary to give importance to these perspectives at a level that will ensure the complementarity of theory and practice and their transitivity. Due to this importance, being able to put forward the aims of religious education is always one of the most valuable and worthy of discussion for scientists working in this field. Because in this field, which is based on the unity of theory and practice, goals and objectives that cover both theory and practice and can adapt to transitivity will be able to contribute to the existence and scientificity of this field of science. Following its nature, religious education has benefited from the accumulation of the fields of education, philosophy, and theology. Discussions that its goals should be compatible with the goals of education, that it can only get its goals from theological sources, or that it should have goals compatible with

all disciplines that comprise it have found a place in the literature (Tosun 2017).

The science of religious education in Turkey includes formal and informal education and religious services. The main heading of religious education covers religious education activities offered in formal and nonformal educational institutions and all areas of religious services such as preaching, sermons, religious and spiritual counseling, and guidance. Religious education as a science is a modern university science field that deals with all aspects of practical theology (Uğurlu 2023). Against this background, program development studies in formal education progressed in parallel with the aims of general education practices until the 2000s. In nonformal religious education and religious services, the perspectives in teaching the Koran, religious knowledge, and diversified religious services carried out through the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) have gradually transformed into a structure that includes moral and values education (Karataş 2020b). In fact, it is possible to see changing aims and practices in nonformal education and

religious services under the influence of changes and developments in the fields of education, sociology, and psychology in general and educational sociology, and psychology in particular, although not as pronounced as in formal education (Karataş 2020a). Along with these developments, issues such as the definition of religion and the characteristics of the people that this defined religion wants to raise have started to come to the forefront more in the studies of goal setting and curriculum development (Yürük 2010). This has brought scientists working in the field to the point of discussing the theological foundations of the aims of religious education (Batar 2018). While doing this, the Koran, the main source of Islam, is naturally taken as the center. The Koran is a book that focuses on Allah as the creator, human being, life, and the relationship and communication among Allah, humans, and life (Fazlurrahman 2004). Wisdom is one of the basic concepts in the Koran with its emphasis on the Creator, human being, life, and the relations among these three. With this feature, wisdom is proposed as the aim of Islamic religious education in Turkey. There are even studies that suggest that wisdom could be theologically fundamental in the formation of a philosophy of Islamic religious education in Turkey; that is, wisdom could be the main aim of practical theology (Önal 2007; Batman 2016; Bağcı 2022).

Discussions on the theological foundations of the philosophy of Islamic religious education are significant for the field. However, some basic questions need to be at the center of these studies: “What is Islam/religion? Which characteristics should the person have that Islamic religious education wants to raise? What are the methodological bases for raising individuals with these characteristics? How can a theological aim that can be integrated with the aims of religious education in today’s Turkey? In which dimension can this theological aim be implemented in today’s religious education practices?” These and other similar questions are important for the science of religious education. However, in my opinion, there is one question that lies at the heart of all these questions, and that is “what is a human being/what is it to be a human being?” These questions will not be meaningful without a description of what a human being is. In this paper, starting from this fundamental question, first, the Koranic understanding of the human being in Islamic theology and the reflection of this understanding in life in the characteristics or disadvantages of the Anthropocene age are examined. Then, the possibility of un-

derstanding “wisdom” as a Koranic concept as a practical theological basis for religious education practices is discussed with a focus on the Koran and the literature. The potential of Islamic theology’s understanding of human beings and the reflection of wisdom in life to make sense of the Anthropocene era and perhaps turn its disadvantages into advantages will also be evaluated from an interpretive perspective.

The Anthropocene, the “Human” in Islamic Theology, and Practical Theological Reflections

The Anthropocene, as a characterization of an epoch, can be described as a claim of a period in which the earth and the universe are undergoing an irreversible change. It is seen as a definition or explanation in which human beings are at the center, and human beings are accepted as the necessity and necessarily the elemental truth for the universe (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010). Everything that serves human beings on earth is valuable to the extent that it satisfies them. However, the position of serving human beings has also revealed the infinite and irresponsible use of the earth’s resources and its geological damage. The situation cannot be deemed negligible on behalf of human beings and everything that continues to exist on earth. (Ateşoğlu and Bozok 2023). Since the Industrial Revolution, which is considered to be the beginning of the Anthropocene, the effects of humans on the earth have reached the highest levels, while events such as pandemics and natural disasters in the last few years have led to the emergence of arguments that this era is now moving toward an ecological extinction (Gökten et al. 2022). Discussions on the validity of these and similar arguments have sprouted efforts to define clearly the relationship between the earth and humans. According to Erçandırlı (2023), in the Anthropocene understanding, “nature is no longer outside human societies, it is produced by human societies as a whole, it is moving towards a process different from the conditions that brought humans into existence, and the change in human actions can change nature again” (40–41).

To overcome problems such as climate crisis, environmental pollution, pandemic diseases, etc., fields of study which aim to understand the human being, to shape their perspective on the earth and to educate them in every aspect are also important.

As a matter of fact, the impact of human beings and their actions on the world has led fields such as philosophy and anthropology to raise debates on this issue (Yorulmaz 2022). One of the points on which these debates are based is the argument that if the Anthropocene is causing human-induced ecological destruction, both individually and socially, then changes in human (individual) actions can change the course of global ecological change. When discussing the issue of changes in human actions, the topic naturally turns to religions. This is because religion has the power to bring about change in human actions. In this context, the anthropic principle is also considered a version of the proof of principle, order, and purpose in creating the earth (Kurşunoğlu 2002, 109). Although this makes the anthropic principle proof that explains the divine creation process, it raises new questions. If the universe and the earth were designed by the Creator for human beings and the world today is trying to cope with many human-induced problems, will religion(s) assume a responsibility here? Does the creation of the earth by the Creator for humankind give the human the right to use it unlimitedly? Or can religions play a role in transforming the Anthropocene, which, when understood as the earth's service to the human, leads unpredictably and rapidly to more destruction, with a new understanding – or by recalling our understandings that can be a solution to it?

Islam views the human being from a holistic perspective but also as a being of value (Surah al-Tin 95/4). However, the source of these values does not come from the human being, but from Allah, according to a holistic view of the universe (Surah Beled 90/8; Surah Kahf 50/16). Although it is stated in the Koran that everything on earth has been given to Allah's command (Surah al-Baqarah 2/29; Surah al-Ra'd 13/2), the human is not a being who rules the world, but a being to whom Allah has entrusted the world (Surah al-Baqarah 2/30), a being who has weaknesses and shortcomings (for details, see Izutsu 1975; Binol 2017, etc.), but who must live a life following Allah's will (Surah al-Nahl 16/81; Surah al-Isrâ 17/20). In Islamic theology, Allah has superiority because He is the Creator and, in this respect, Islamic theology is theocentric. However, Allah, human beings, and the universe are seen as a whole. It is not possible to speak of absolute superiority or inclusiveness for human beings and everything else living on earth (Sinanoğlu 2008). In fact, the human being is at the center of all components

because of their responsibility to Allah and everything on earth (Surah al-Nahl 16/93) and because they must treat the earth entrusted to them following Allah's will (Surah al-A'râf 7/74) (Binol 2017; Kurt 2020, 785). At the same time, human beings are conditional beings. In other words, while adapting to changing conditions, it is a being that gives new meaning to themselves, their environment, and Allah. The Koran also sets an ideal goal for human beings in the ultimate sense (Köylü 2007). This goal is expressed as the attainment of a "perfect/ideal human being," which is an ethical ideal in Islamic thought (Sinanoğlu 2008; Durak 2010).

All practical theological endeavor "deals with the entire human being. It deals with the human being from its own perspective and deals with the human being with their place in the integrity of life, that is, it deals with the human being as a human being" (Bilgin 2007, 39). Religious education covers the human being, their relationship with Allah and life, as well as the relationship of religion with life and the questions and issues related to them. Therefore, how the believer can make sense of religion and life is the central question of religious education. "Religious education and training aim to help the individual to feel, live, hear, think and reflect their religion within themselves" (Bilgin 2001, 12). In other words, religious education guides, or should guide, a person to feel, live, hear, think, and reflect his/her religion in his/her behavior within the framework outlined by the Koran, the main source of Islamic theology.

The Koran's understanding of human beings and its reflection on life and the dimensions of human understanding of religiosity is at the center of forming the theological basis of religious education science. According to the Koran, the religiosity of believers is elaborated with the dimensions of faith, worship, and morality. A meaningful religiosity for Islamic theology can be formed when these three are reflected in the human understanding of religion and life with the dimensions of thought, emotion, and knowledge (Peker 2012). Each of these dimensions is oriented towards the individual, society and the earth. The fact that man is a being of value also gains meaning in his moral religiosity. The definition of "perfect/ideal human being" is the goal of moral piety to be built on, and together with, other dimensions. In this case, a basic inference is that religious education should ideally guide individuals on how to become a "perfect/ideal human being," in a way that includes all possible dimensions.

Wisdom as a Koranic Concept and Living Life

In Islamic theology, studies have been conducted that argue that “wisdom” can be the value that can form a perspective in the realization of the values that religious education aims to gain and that it is decisive in achieving the ideal human being (Önal 2007; Selçuk 2012; Demir 2015; Fakioğlu Bağcı 2022). Does wisdom as a core value provide a framework that can be utilized in religious education in terms of the discussed aspects of the age of anthropocentrism? Or, which framework of signification can serve to position it as the central value of religious education? Determining which dimension of wisdom can be evaluated in the mentioned position first requires a deepening of its meaning.

The Koranic scholars of *tafsir* (exegesis) and *ta’wil* (interpretation) have explained the concept of wisdom in the most general sense as “understanding,” “knowledge,” and “the name of every good and useful work” (Râzî 1981 cited in Yüksel 1988; Yazır 1936). According to Yüksel (1988), who analyzed the studies on the concept of wisdom in the field of *tafsir*, “Wisdom about Allah is to know the things and to bring them into existence on this solid and firm purpose. On the other hand, wisdom about man is understood as the knowledge of things and doing good based on this knowledge” (p. 44). The Koranic semanticist Mawdūdī (d. 1399/1979), who studied this concept in the recent twentieth century, and *tafsir* scholars like him who think that wisdom has other dimensions besides the mentioned meanings, explained wisdom as “knowledge that helps to distinguish what is right and what is wrong” (see Şavlı 2014 for opinions) and “understanding” and revealed that it has a value attribution aspect with this dimension. Accordingly, Allah, being the Creator, has knowledge of all visible and invisible aspects of existence, that is, wisdom. Human beings, however, have to try to understand existence in all its dimensions under the guidance/teaching of revelation from Allah and prophets and to direct their behavior/life with the knowledge they produce. According to Islamic theology, the human being is a human profile that redefines their relationship with the Creator and the universe according to constantly developing and changing conditions. In this case, when the concept of wisdom, which will determine the ultimate goal of religious education, is evaluated together with its attributed value, can it be considered together with the

fact that human beings are expected to adapt to changing conditions?

In the Koran, the main source of knowledge in Islam, wisdom is mentioned without any adjective in front of it. However, it is a concept used both for the Creator and the Koran itself (Surah Yunus 10/1, Surah Baqara 2/231, Surah Nisa 4/113), for the prophets (Surah An’am 6/89, Jumu’ah 62/2, Al-Imran 3/164), for the earth (Surah An’am 6/73, Surah Nahl 3), and human beings (Surah Hijr 15/85, Surah Baqara 2/269). It appears as a characteristic of the Creator when it is directed toward Him. However, when this concept is used for Allah, it is always used in sequence with other concepts or with the conjunction “and” (Surah al-Baqarah 2/32; 129; 209, etc.). These are knowledge, power, and the establishment of religious rulings. The fact that it is used in conjunction with these concepts suggests that it is a concept that is related to, or preconditioned by, them, but it also indicates that it is something more than knowledge, power, and judgment.

When the Koran uses wisdom for prophets, it emphasizes that it is a prophetic duty (Surah al-An’am 6/89, Surah al-Jumu’ah 62/2, Surah al-Imran 3/164, etc.). Allah also states that He will give this duty to whomever He will. This means that prophethood is a task given by Allah’s choice.¹ However, the Koran emphasizes that this duty is something other than the holy book since these concepts are also used in the verses, separated by commas or the conjunction “and” (Surah al-Baqarah 2/231).² According to Önal (2009), this is the “practical example of the Prophet that reflects the spirit of the Koran” (199). According to him, practical wisdom, in this respect, also points to the lifestyle in accordance with the revelation that Allah has conveyed to human beings. In addition to this, it is understood from the relevant Koranic verses that wisdom is something that is—or should be—taught to the believers by the prophets and that it is naturally expected to be applied. “O our Sustainer! Raise from the midst of our offspring an apostle from among themselves, who shall convey unto them Thy messages, and impart unto them revelation as well as wisdom, and cause them to grow in purity: for, verily,

1 “Such is the Bounty of Allah which He bestows on whom He will: and Allah is the Lord of the highest bounty.” Al-Jumu’ah 62/4.

2 “Allah will teach your son the Book, the Wisdom, the Taurat (Torah), and the Injeel (Gospel).” Surah al-Imran 3/48.

Thou alone art almighty, truly wise!" (Surah al-Baqarah 2/129) is one of the most frequently mentioned verses in this regard. Therefore, in terms of the prophetic mission, wisdom describes a dynamic process involving the application and teaching of revelation in every aspect. Based on these meanings, it is clear that wisdom is a root concept of knowledge, existence, and value for religious education in its practical aspect.

The Koran-centered effort to understand leads us to think that the concept of wisdom is a characteristic of Allah Himself and the prophets, as well as referring to man and the universe. When the subject is an endeavor to create meaning through the human and the universe/earth, is it necessary to make an evaluation together, or is it possible to make sense of the individual and the universe separately? According to the Koran, we can say that the Creator's wisdom is unlimited and that it covers a wider range compared to human beings since communication with the Creator continues as a duty and characteristic of prophets. When it comes to human beings, wisdom becomes a goal to be achieved. This goal includes both theoretical and practical dimensions.

The meanings of understanding and comprehension of wisdom should especially emphasize human beings. When wisdom is considered through human beings, it is something offered by Allah and His infinite knowledge to the prophet to convey to human beings. This is the aspect of Allah's infinite knowledge of human beings and their life in terms of understanding and comprehension. At this point, philosophical studies as well as exegetical studies have come into play, because these are concepts that should be understood with the help of philosophy. Accordingly, those who have studied this Koran-centered concept have either focused on the etymological meaning of the concept or have tried to understand it contextually within the integrity of the Koran itself (see Cansız 2014). Although both ways are necessary to understanding this concept, they are not considered sufficient. Contextual understanding can bring with it the interpretation of the background of the concept. However, at the same time, an understanding that brings all dimensions together at a common point can only be realized by looking at the Koran holistically and interpreting it together with its main goals. As such, two dimensions of wisdom have emerged. The first one is wisdom as science, which is more in the theoretical dimension, and the second one is practical wisdom, which is related to science but expresses something

beyond it (For detailed information, see Tan 1997; Şavlı 2014; Cansız 2014; Fakioğlu Bağcı 2022). According to Arslan (2014) practical wisdom should be directed toward both individual and interpersonal relations, society, and the universe. Based on these dimensions, wisdom can be defined as "knowledge, awareness, and internalization of acting accordingly, which includes all kinds of invisible and visible truths about existence" (Fakioğlu Bağcı 2022).

Wisdom, which can be defined in this way in its most general form by focusing on the Koranic verses, also has the obligation to turn into practice with its human dimension. This, in fact, constitutes one of the main points in evaluating the possibility of practical wisdom being the practical theological basis of religious education.

Practical Wisdom and the Possibility of a Theological Basis for Religious Education in the Anthropocene

This paper has discussed the meaning of the Anthropocene and its interpretation of the human being, how the Koran defines the human being, the dimensions of religiosity, and how humans understand wisdom and behave with wisdom. But how will the human being who wants to bring their moral religiosity together with life and who has been given the responsibility to use the earth, but also to protect and preserve it, draw their road map? How can they manage their moral behavior and be the kind of believer (al-Mu'min) that Allah wants them to be? In fact, the Koran provides examples and perspectives on how the human being, as a believer, should live in the world and with other people (examples such as justice (Surah al-Ma'idah 5/8), wastage (Surah al-An'am 6/141), stinginess (Al-Imran 3/180)). These theological propositions presented to human beings through examples in the Koran are value-laden statements that aim to change consciousness and behavior (Çetin 2012). It is the responsibility of the believer to behave in a way that pervades their whole life through these specific examples. However, in changing living conditions and in situations that are not easy to make sense of, believers need a perspective that will be a point of movement. This can only be achieved by feeling, living, hearing, thinking, and striving to reflect all this in one's behavior from the perspective of wisdom, which seems to be in line with the premise of the paper. If human beings (can) act with wisdom, they

will be able to behave according to the revelation from Allah, the guidance of the prophet, and the common sense given to them by Allah, and this common sense can only be mobilized with a high level of consciousness.

The practical aspect of wisdom is the practical result of knowledge, which includes all kinds of truths about existence, manifested in human life. However, knowledge, which includes all kinds of truths about existence, also includes comprehension beyond the visible. In this respect, it includes the ability to reason and problem-solve. According to Selçuk (2012), this can only be realized by putting the mind and heart to work together. Because in Islamic theology, the heart is a source of knowledge along with the intellect (101). According to Yar (2007), the first characteristic of human creation in the Koran is that he has “consciousness.” This is a mental act realized through the heart and cognition. This first characteristic is followed by agency and production. Being human, human beings are capable of good and evil behavior, and their ability to do good is prioritized over evil, and they are encouraged to do good with their consciousness (24). According to Ay (2015), an action without wisdom cannot be considered morally good (33). Individuals must act with wisdom that contains consciousness to commit morally good behaviors.

The collaboration of the mind and heart, that is, the formation of consciousness, is crucial for individual religiosity, but at the same time, this needs to be discussed in a value-centered manner with the dimension of practical wisdom toward society and the universe. Because, according to the Koran, the human is also a social being and the regulation of social relations is the basis of human responsibilities (Yar 2017, 39). According to Özdemir (2022), behind the disadvantages of the Anthropocene era lies “the dualistic understanding that puts the human mind ahead of the soul and, as a continuation of this, the mechanistic approach that accepts the universe as a functioning machine” (214). However, the understanding of wisdom that emerges in the Koran envisages that human beings should use their soul, that is, their heart and mind together. By defining the heart and soul as the source of knowledge, it aims to be able to recognize wisdom in all kinds of encounters and events in life and to behave accordingly.

The Koran’s understanding of the universe, along with its understanding of the human being, must be evaluated in terms of wisdom in order to be useful in dealing with the disadvantages of the Anthro-

cene. Verse 85 of Surah al-Hijr can be given as an example: “We did not create the heavens and the earth and everything between them without a true purpose (wisdom)...” (Surah al-Hijr 15/85). Allah clearly states in the Koran that the universe was also created with wisdom at its center and that it should be treated in the best way (Surah Rahman 55/7–9). If the human being is expected to act in accordance with wisdom and if the earth was created in accordance with wisdom, this naturally recalls the human being’s responsibility to live a life in harmony with the order of the universe and his responsibilities toward the universe. Therefore, even though everything on earth is available to human beings, it is also the duty of a believer (al-Mu’min) to live in harmony with the order of the universe. Izutsu (1975) stresses Allah’s forgiveness, highlighting how He refrains from punishing His creatures if they make mistakes. This leniency can be seen in verse 155 of Surah al-Imran: “Allah has now pardoned them: Allah is most forgiving and forbearing.” According to Izutsu, this is being wise, not choosing to punish when Allah is in power, and can punish (196). This interpretation might suggest to us that wisdom requires that when power is acquired, it should be used for building rather than destruction and that it should be used with forbearance. Similarly, “... who restrain their anger and pardon people – Allah loves those who do good” (Surah al-Imran 3/134). In the verse describing people of piety (*taqwa*), Allah mentions forgiveness as one of their characteristics. In this sense, the fact that human beings are in a position of power vis-à-vis the earth – power is hypothetically stated in this way – does not require them to use this power in their favor. The relationship between the human and Creator should be exemplary of the relationship between human and world. The human being, too, must approach the world from a perspective of construction rather than destruction, that is, with wisdom.

Based on what has been explained so far, we can interpret the concept of wisdom, which is used in the Koran in reference to Allah, prophet/hood, the holy book, human beings, and the earth, as practical wisdom when it comes to the knowledge of revelation from Allah reaching the addressee, human beings, and human beings acting with this knowledge. Although the concept of practical wisdom is not explicitly used in the Koran, wisdom has been interpreted as practical wisdom by scholars of exegesis with its emphasis on human beings and living life. This makes sense because wisdom, which has the meanings of



knowledge, understanding, comprehension, and acting accordingly, has references to existence, knowledge, and value in guiding the lives of individuals.

Religious education also aims to realize gains in individuals that will be transferred to life experiences and that will take an active role in the individuals' relationship with the Creator, with themselves, with their environment, and with what they believe in. In this way, it can be said that the goals of religious education and the goals of wisdom—which the Koran sets forth as a goal for human beings, emphasizing practice—are compatible. However, the most important question that arises here is in which dimensions, from which angles, and how wisdom will influence and play a role in the life experiences of individuals.

According to Koç (2015), wisdom “requires the functionalization of reason and conscience in the sense of being moralized with the morality of Allah” (115). It should be noted here that practical wisdom emphasizes a functional conscience. It was mentioned earlier that practical wisdom can be put to work through its ability to solve problems and make decisions. However, while it is possible to put it to work with these skills in terms of having knowledge of existence and transforming it, can only these skills be sufficient in a dimension that will make the conscience functional? This is the most important question to be asked in terms of religious education. The transformative power of religious education has the aim of bringing people to a state of consciousness (Öz 2022). Consciousness is a state of mind, but it cannot be said to be only a mental effort. Consciousness is a state based on being in a constant state of being and its continuity, which emerges when people remind themselves of themselves (Eroğlu 2012). Practical wisdom envisages and aims for this state of consciousness to be formed, sustained, and maximized. This can only become functional in this way. While the human being is a being who tries to adapt to new conditions and is constantly transforming with their internalized sense of religion, practical wisdom is the consciousness through which transformation can be realized and the power that can mobilize this consciousness.

Conclusion

As discussed by scholars, practical wisdom may be a goal that is expected to be gained by the target audience as it refers to existence, knowledge, and value. However, if this goal is a goal that focuses on the

transformative power of religious education and centers on creating a state of consciousness that starts from oneself, practical wisdom and religious educational goals can be met on common ground. When practical wisdom is understood and understood in this way and positioned as the ultimate goal of religious education, it can contribute to turning the disadvantages of the Anthropocene era into advantages. The human beings who can approach the Creator, themselves, revelation, other human beings, and the earth with this state of consciousness will be able to comprehend the responsibility that the Creator has imposed on him in all its forms. This sense of responsibility will also be able to move them away from being solely self-centered.

Islam defines humans as beings of value and underlines their responsibilities toward the Creator, themselves, society, and the universe. Therefore, in the literature on practical wisdom, when the practices of prophets, or of individual and group piety are evaluated in one-dimensional way, it may be an incomplete explanation. The evaluation ignores the holistic meaning of the Koran. However, attempts to make sense of the Koran, religion, prophets, human beings, human relationships (with the Creator, with oneself, with one's environment, and with the universe), and the universe from a holistic perspective can be significant. At this point, when trying to understand the human being, it is necessary to focus on a holistic view that will not ignore any aspect of them and to focus on the process with the awareness that they are a being that continues to be. In this regard, there is a need to conduct research that tries to understand human beings in multiple ways.

Moreover, the Koran states that practical wisdom is something to be wished for and pursued. It is also possible to understand this wish as referring to the formation of a common mind, collective consciousness, and desire in society to realize that there is always a need for it. In other words, even if practical wisdom cannot be acquired by individuals in terms of its value dimension, the social consensus and desire that it is a necessity would also be in line with the Koranic understanding.

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Ecological Injustice in the Anthropocene: Flooding in *Banjiha*, “Parasite”-Style Basement Housing in Seoul

Boram Lee

This paper explores the intersection of ecological injustice and socioeconomic disparity in light of the tragic flooding of Seoul’s *banjiha* (basement housing) in 2022. As the Anthropocene era advances, the impact of climate change, including the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, is disproportionately affecting marginalized populations. This is particularly evident in Seoul, where *banjihas*—homes that are half-underground—have become critical sites of ecological injustice. The 2022 floods, which inundated *banjiha* homes during record-breaking rainfall, resulted in fatalities and severe damage, highlighting the vulnerability of disadvantaged residents who often live with disabilities or in extreme poverty. This paper analyzes how the structural and socioeconomic conditions of *banjiha* housing exacerbate the impact of climate-induced flooding. It argues that the 2022 tragedy was not merely a natural disaster, but a revelation of deep-rooted social inequalities. Through the lens of practical theology, informed by Pamela Couture’s social ecology of care, this study proposes a comprehensive response to address such ecological and social injustices. By examining the roles of individuals, families, community institutions, culture, economic conditions, and governmental policies, the paper advocates a multi-dimensional approach to mitigating the effects of climate change on vulnerable populations and to promoting equitable and sustainable living conditions. The aim of this approach is to bridge the gap between theological reflection and practical action. It does so by offering strategies for practical theologians and the churches to engage with as they support affected communities in the face of ongoing ecological challenges.

Introduction

We are living in the era of the Anthropocene, where the relentless expansion of human activities has wrought irreversible change in the natural systems of the world. This change is evident in various manifestations, such as carbon dioxide emissions, global warming, ocean acidification, habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and widespread over-extraction of natural resources.

Among the many challenges we face in this era, climate change stands out as a significant threat. The concentration of greenhouse gases in the earth’s atmosphere, caused by human activities, has been steadily increasing, resulting in rising global temperatures. The recent release of the International Panel on Climate Change Report (IPCC) in 2023

draws attention to the fact that the risks and damage from climate change increase with each incremental rise in global temperature. As average temperatures rise, acute climate hazards, such as floods, hurricanes, storms, droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires, intensify and become more frequent (IPCC 2023). The climate crisis has emerged as a highly destructive force with far-reaching consequences, posing a serious threat to populations across the globe.

South Korea is not immune to the impact of climate change. There is now an increased possibility of heavy rains, short-term floods, and high-intensity floods, associated with tropical cyclones such as typhoons and hurricanes. A joint study conducted by the Korea Meteorological Administration and the IPCC estimates that if carbon emissions continue at current levels, South Korea’s average rainfall will in-

crease by over 70 % compared to the present rate by the year 2081. This increase will take in extreme rainfall events with daily precipitation exceeding 500–600mm in certain areas. It will be as if the sky has been pierced with holes (Jeong 2022). The 2023 IPCC report also predicts a significant increase in rain-generated local flooding due to global warming (IPCC 2023). Rain-generated local flooding occurs in specific regions or localities and is often caused by an excessive volume of water overwhelming the capacity of local drainage systems.

This is the type of flooding that occurred in Seoul in 2022, leading to significant damage and critical consequences, particularly for residents of *banjiha*, i.e., housing that is half-underground. This paper delves into ecological injustice in an era in which the climate crisis disproportionately impacts socioeconomically disadvantaged populations. The primary focus is a tragic event—the flooding of *banjiha*, which resulted in several deaths and raises critical questions. Was the tragedy of *banjiha* flooding a consequence of a natural disaster or of social inequality? How might practical theologians and the churches address ecological injustice in this Anthropocene era? Exploring these questions, this paper proposes a multi-dimensional approach, informed by Pamela Couture’s social ecology of care.

The *Banjiha* Flooding Tragedy

In August 2022, record-breaking rainfall—daily precipitation of 381.5 mm,¹—inundated Seoul and the surrounding metropolitan area with devastating consequences. This extreme weather event, attributed to global warming, overwhelmed the country’s infrastructure and caused unprecedented destruction. Thirteen people lost their lives in the flood, five remain missing, and twenty-six were injured.

This torrential rain that persisted for an extended period posed a significant threat to those living in *banjiha*. The term “*ban*” means “half,” while “*jiha*”

means “underground,” so *banjiha* can be translated as half-underground housing. Due to the *banjiha*’s unique architectural design, with windows positioned at street level, these dwellings are highly vulnerable to water infiltration and subsequent flooding.

In Joon-ho Bong’s Oscar-winning film, *Parasite* (2019), there is a vivid rendering of just such a flooding scene. This critically acclaimed film depicts the impoverished Kim family living in a *banjiha*. The flooding scene, sudden torrential rain in the middle of the night, submerges the lowest parts of the neighborhood. When the Kim family return to their *banjiha*, their home is flooded, and the rising rainwater reaches their necks, while their household belongings float around. They struggle to breathe while clinging to the floating toilet seat. Remarkably, three years after the release of this movie, precisely such a scene occurred in the *banjihas* of Seoul.

Unprecedented torrential rainfall of 140 mm per hour over three consecutive days threatened hundreds of thousands of Koreans living in *banjihas*. In the end, nearly 900 *banjiha* households were flooded (KBS 2022). Tragically, people drowned in their *banjihas* after being trapped by the rising water and finding themselves unable to open their doors because of the force of the water. A family with disabilities, consisting of a woman with Down syndrome, her sister, and her sister’s 13-year-old daughter, drowned in their *banjiha* in Gwanak-gu, Seoul, when a torrent of water blocked their only exit, leaving no chance for escape. According to one report, as the road filled with water, their home rapidly flooded and, within just two minutes, became completely submerged. Neighbors who received an SOS message from the family fought to open the door but were unable to do so because of the force of the water. They then attempted to tear off the metal security bars installed over the outside window, but their efforts were ultimately and tragically unsuccessful.

Another 52-year-old woman, living in a *banjiha* in Dongjak-gu, Seoul, also drowned when trapped by the rapidly rising water. According to a report, she was an impoverished individual with a development disability who depended on the government for meager basic livelihood support (Kwon 2022).

From War Shelters to Homes: *Banjihas* in Korean History

Because affordable, *banjihas* are common dwellings in Korea for those facing financial hardship. Howev-

1 The day that recorded the highest daily precipitation in history was not in modern times but during the Japanese colonial period on August 2, 1920. On that day, it set an unprecedented record of 354.7mm. The rainfall of 381.5mm on August 8, 2022 broke the previous record. But it was an unofficial measurement taken in Sindorim-dong, Dongjak-gu, not at the Seoul Meteorological Observatory in Songwol-dong, Jongno-gu, and so it was not included in official statistics.



er, this type of accommodation typically offers poor living conditions, such as inadequate ventilation and plumbing, high humidity, rapidly growing mold, limited sunlight, and weak cellular service, as vividly portrayed in the film *Parasite*.

Banjihas were originally created in the 1950s as a means of safeguarding citizens from the threat of war with North Korea. They were envisaged as underground shelters to provide protection in the event of a national crisis. In the 1970s, after North Korean commandos had infiltrated Seoul with the aim of assassinating President Chung-hee Park in 1968, the Korean government mandated the construction of *banjihas* in new buildings. These, too, were originally not intended for residential use. However, in response to increasing population migration to major cities such as Seoul between the 1980s and 1990s, these spaces were later opened up for residential purposes.

The relaxation of the Building Act in 1984 further fueled the rapid increase in numbers of *banjihas* (Ha 2023). According to data from the Population and Housing Census conducted by Statistics Korea, there are 327,320 households (about 600,000 Koreans) living in *banjihas* across the country, which represents 1.5 % of all households nationwide. Among them, 200,849 *banjiha* households (61 % of all such households) are located in Seoul (Statistic Korea 2020).

The unique bunker-style construction of the *banjiha*, with its street-level windows, makes it susceptible to flooding during heavy rains. Despite the persistent flooding, residents endure these conditions due to the lack of affordable options. Additionally, to mitigate crime risks and maintain privacy, most *banjihas* have metal security bars installed. However, these bars create significant problems during floods, as they hinder escape and trap residents inside. Clearly, the *banjiha* is not a suitable place for human habitation. This situation underscores the harsh reality that the financially burdened are compelled to live in flood- and crime-prone *banjihas* due to the lack of alternatives.

The Socioeconomically Disadvantaged: “Half-Buried” in Korean Society

Approximately 600,000 people live in *banjihas*. These residents are, metaphorically speaking, “half-buried” in Korean society, as the word *banjiha* literally translates as “half-underground.” In this

marginalized status, these people remain largely invisible and vulnerable. It is noteworthy that two of the families trapped by the 2022 torrential flood were socioeconomically disadvantaged, sharing several components of vulnerability:

- Families with disabilities;
- Low income and poverty;
- Female-headed households;
- Elderly mothers as heads of household who, despite being of retirement age, are compelled to work to support their families.

It is thus important to pay attention to the objective and statistical data of the social groups living in *banjihas*. According to the Population and Housing Census, *banjihas* are predominantly inhabited by (1) elderly households with impoverished elders, (2) households with disabled individuals, (3) households with low-wage workers, and (4) low-income households raising children. The common feature of all these groups is their low income. The only housing option available to them is *banjiha*. The average monthly income of households residing in *banjihas* in the metropolitan area is 1.82 million won (\$1,400 USD), which is half the average income of households living in apartments or regular houses, i.e., 3.51 million won (\$2,700 USD) (Statistics Korea 2022).

Those aged 60 and older living in *banjihas* account for 176,000 people, which is approximately 29.5 % of the total *banjiha* population (Statistics Korea 2022). This means one out of every three *banjihas* is a household with elderly residents. The Korean poverty rate for the elderly is the highest among the OECD countries and four-times worse than the average OECD poverty ranking of older adults (OECD 2013). At 47 %, this poverty of the elderly affects nearly one in two Korean seniors (Kwon 2019). What makes matters worse is that the poverty rate of the elderly increases with age: the rate of poverty of those aged 75 and older is 20 % higher than that of those aged 66 to 75 (Weon 2020). Furthermore, nearly half of the elderly in Korea receive no government pension and little to no support from family or relatives. Only a third of Korean seniors receive a state pension of \$200 per month, which is not enough to cover living expenses and impossible for dealing with high medical expenses. Many cannot afford to go to a senior facility or nursing home and live alone, mostly in *banjihas*.

The proportion of households with children living in *banjiha* is also significantly high at 22.1 % compared to non-housing rental households (1.9 %).



Banjihas serve as a last resort for low-income families raising children. Descending from above-ground housing allows them to find spacious accommodation at more affordable prices. According to a survey conducted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government last year, 61.6 % of low-income families with children reside in *banjihas*.

Households with disabilities account for approximately 21.6 % of the total *banjiha* households. This means that one out of every five *banjiha* households is a household with disabilities (Lee 2020). However, the percentage of the *banjiha* households receiving government assistance, such as basic livelihood support, i.e., only 15.5 %. This indicates a lack of welfare policies targeting this impoverished population (Gye 2022).

These socioeconomically disadvantaged populations have no choice but to live in *banjihas*, despite repeated and devastating flooding which poses serious risks to their safety and well-being. An interview conducted twenty-three years ago with a single-parent household that had been residing in a *banjiha* in a flood-prone area of Gyeonggi Province for twenty-four years vividly illustrates these ongoing challenges.

The flooding incident in 1999, just two years after the Kang family moved into their *banjiha*, was initially manageable. Although water seeped into the house, the damage was not severe. Most of their belongings could be salvaged, and their daily routine continued with relatively minimal disruption. However, the situation worsened significantly in the summer of 2001. The water inside the house rose to waist level, causing the refrigerator to float. Other appliances were damaged, and the furniture became soaked and distorted.

When asked why the Kang family did not leave their *banjiha* despite the recurrent floods, Ocksoon Kang responded: “In May next year, our lease term will end, and the landlord has asked us to move elsewhere. Well, they’re not exactly kicking us out, but they’re making a fuss about the basement rooms being flooded at their place too. They said they would refund the security deposit once we decide on a new place. But the problem is, where can we go? We have no money.... And do you know how much the rental prices have increased this fall?” (Kim 2022)

The prices of apartments in Seoul have more than doubled in the past five years, and the increasing interest rates and mortgages are making homeownership unaffordable for many residents. In addition, landlords have significantly raised rental

prices, forcing people to leave homes they can no longer afford. Consequently, *banjihas* serve as the only affordable housing option for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, including the poor, the disabled, single parents with children, the elderly, and young Koreans.

In 2018, the United Nations reported that South Korea’s shortage of affordable housing presented a significant challenge, especially for young people with lower incomes, despite the country ranking as the 11th largest economy globally. The rent-to-income ratio for individuals under the age of 35 has consistently stayed around 50 % over the past decade. As a result, *banjiha* housing has emerged as an affordable solution for young people. The monthly rent for these apartments amounts to approximately 540,000 Korean won (\$453), which aligns with the average monthly salaries of individuals in their twenties of around 2 million won (\$1,679) (BBC 2020).

The *Banjiha* Flooding Tragedy: Natural Disaster or Consequence of Social Inequality?

Is the *Banjiha* flooding tragedy a consequence of natural disaster or social inequality? Rain falls from the sky, but disasters rise from underground. The *banjiha* flooding tragedy reveals that the challenges of the Anthropocene do not affect everyone equally. Vulnerable groups, including socially disadvantaged individuals, older people living in poverty, low-income families with children, recipients of basic livelihood assistance, individuals with disabilities, and low-wage workers, are disproportionately impacted. Thus, the 2022 torrential flood was not solely a natural disaster resulting from the climate crisis but also a profound social catastrophe exacerbated by underlying social inequalities.

The *banjiha* tragedy sheds light on the critical issue of ecological injustice in the Anthropocene. This term, i.e., ecological injustice, denotes the unequal impact of environmental harm, pollution, and climate change on poor, powerless, and marginalized populations (Young 2021). Those who are most vulnerable and least responsible for causing environmental problems bear the greatest burden of the consequences.

The IPCC’s Sixth Assessment Report predicts that impoverished nations, impoverished populations, children, women, temporary and informal workers,



individuals with disabilities, and economically marginalized groups will be the primary victims of climate change. Studies consistently show that the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change are individuals with disabilities, female-headed families, elderly people, migrant laborers, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups (The World Bank 2023). Correspondingly, the household most severely affected by the flood was a female-led family with a disability, struggling with financial hardship.

There is worldwide evidence of ecological injustice. The advantages of resources disproportionately benefit developed countries while developing countries bear the environmental costs. Developed countries in the global North contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, yet developing countries in the global South are heavily affected by the climate crisis (The World Bank 2023). Furthermore, the disposal and exportation of waste from developed countries into poor and developing countries perpetuates environmental injustice on an international scale (Lucier and Brian 2015).

While the global North also experiences the impact of heatwaves, wildfires, and other climate-related disasters, impoverished and vulnerable countries and people who have contributed the least to climate change suffer the most. Poverty, land degradation, and deteriorating public health are particularly prominent in the global South and among socioeconomically poor and vulnerable populations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. For instance, in South Asia, millions of people have been forced to leave their homes due to rising sea levels (Johansson et al. 2016). The World Bank has forecast that approximately 143 million people will be displaced by rising sea levels, and water and food shortages caused by climate change.

The susceptibility of vulnerable populations to the challenges of the Anthropocene era can be attributed to various factors, including their geographical location, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and access to resources, services, and decision-making power (The World Bank 2023). When we apply these factors to the *banjiha* tragedy, *banjiha* dwellings, those “half-buried” living environments, are geographically vulnerable to torrential rain. And as noted, those living in *banjiha* have no choice but to reside in these terrible conditions due to their precarious socioeconomic status.

Thus, the climate crisis goes beyond its environmental implications and has profound social consequences, exacerbating inequality and existing social

disparities between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, and wealthy and impoverished countries. Vulnerable people and countries are more deeply impacted by the Anthropocene challenges. The World Bank highlights that the climate crisis will worsen inequality, and a growing number of impoverished individuals will face mounting obstacles, such as extreme weather phenomena, health problems, food and water scarcity, threats to their livelihood, displacement and migration, erosion of cultural heritage, and other associated hazards. By 2030, climate change could push an additional 68 to 135 million people into poverty.

A Response from Practical Theology to the *Banjiha* Tragedy and Ecological Injustice

Despite growing human suffering caused by the devastating effects of climate crises, there has been limited research in the field of practical theology addressing the enormity of the situation. Pamela McCarroll comments critically on this lack of attention given to the environment. She discovered only four articles focused specifically on ecological crises out of 242 research articles published in the *International Journal of Practical Theology* over the last five years. This neglect led her to conclude that climate and environmental crises are not primary foci for researchers in the field (McCarroll 2022).

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore counters McCarroll and other practical theologians’ claims that practical theology remains silent on the crises of the earth, however. Drawing on research in the field from the 1950s to the 2020s, she argues that practical theologians have already shown significant concern for ecological crises and have actively advocated for environmental justice (Miller-McLemore 2022).

In recent years, there has, in fact, been growing recognition of ecological issues within the field of practical theology. Ryan Williams LaMothe sees climate change is detrimental to both human and non-human life and proposes that we reimagine political and theological frameworks to foster a more inclusive and caring approach to both human and environmental well-being (LaMothe 2022). Joyce Mercer examines the effects of climate change on children’s mental health, emphasizing the need for practical theology to address this issue. She advocates for incorporating ecological awareness and care for the environment into religious education to

support children’s well-being and foster their commitment to ecological justice (Mercer, 2022).

Ted Peters addresses the contemporary ecological crisis by invoking the prophetic call to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). He asserts that the Christian response to climate change should be grounded in a beatitudinal life, as articulated in Matthew 5:1–12, where the blessings of the eschatological kingdom are already present in the here and now. Peters introduces proleptic principles as a framework for addressing climate crises and environmental injustice. He underscores the role of the public theologian in envisioning a hopeful future that bridges Christian eschatological promises with the secular aims of a just and sustainable earth. By applying these principles, public theologians can guide moral deliberation and inspire actions toward creating an equitable and environmentally resilient planetary society. Peters calls for bridging the gap between the Christian imperative to love and the concrete actions necessary to address the ecological crisis, asserting, “To love in our moment of ecological crisis is to strive for a just, sustainable, participatory, and planetary society dedicated to the common good” (Peters 2023).

Pamela Couture’s work represents a significant effort to bridge this gap. Both McLemore and McCarroll recognize Couture’s contribution, particularly her integration of the natural environment into her social ecological methodology for practical theology. Her social ecology of care is notable for emphasizing the natural environment as a crucial component, thereby enhancing the application of theological principles to ecological challenges.

Couture expresses deep concern about the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on vulnerable populations, such as children living in poverty. In her book *Child Poverty: Love, Justice, and Social Responsibility*, she argues that separating humanity from nature threatens human well-being. She notes, “When we destroy nature, we also destroy parts of ourselves” (Couture 2007, 111) and then calls for a renewed commitment to caring for the earth. Couture further states, “If we think of humanity as part of nature, and nature—as well as the universe—as having integrity as God’s creation, then children are also part of God’s good creation” (Couture 2007, 122).

This perspective underscores the connection between social concerns and ecological well-being, highlighting the importance of addressing problems in both human communities and the natural world.

Couture’s approach draws attention to the reciprocal relationship between social justice and environmental sustainability, and in so doing makes a valuable contribution to practical theology (Couture 1992).

Couture also points out the limitations of focusing solely on the intrapsychic world and the inner lives of individuals in pastoral care. She challenges practical theologians to address the sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural issues that significantly influence contemporary society. Couture argues for expanding the scope of practical theology to include not only individuals and microsystems (families) but also mesosystems (local communities), exosystems (government), and macrosystems (global economic and cultural values). She proposes seven dimensions of the social ecology of care: the individual, family, community institutions, government, culture, economics, and nature. Couture likens this framework to a camera that allows practical theologians to view and interpret the world more clearly, focusing on aspects that might otherwise be overlooked (Couture 1998).

Despite the growing recognition of ecological issues within practical theology, there remains a significant gap in the research in terms of addressing the full scope of the Anthropocene impact. Couture’s social ecology framework provides a valuable method for expanding practical theology to encompass these broader environmental and socio-political contexts, and in so doing, offers a comprehensive approach to contemporary challenges.

In response to these insights, I propose a multi-dimensional approach to the *banjiha* flood tragedy, informed by Pamela Couture’s social ecology of care. Practical theologians and the churches can engage with each dimension of the social ecology of care to address the implications of the tragedy. The following section outlines how they might do so:

The Individual

Practical theologians and the churches need to understand thoroughly the personal experiences and needs of individuals affected by the *banjiha* flood. They can then provide pastoral care that acknowledges these unique challenges and that supports people’s emotional and spiritual well-being.

Family

Families residing in *banjihas* often face compounded vulnerabilities due to their living conditions, so-



cioeconomic status, and limited access to resources. In light of the flood's devastating impact on such families, it is essential for practical theologians and churches to provide targeted support. This includes offering financial aid, counseling services, and spiritual guidance tailored to the needs of affected families. Additionally, churches can advocate for systemic changes that prioritize safe housing and disaster preparedness to prevent similar tragedies. By equipping families with tools for resilience—such as community networks and educational opportunities—churches and theologians can help them rebuild their lives and navigate future challenges more effectively.

Community Institutions

Effective collaboration with local communities is essential in supporting *banjiha* families impacted by the flood. It is important to explore how communities provide social capital by fostering connections among vulnerable populations. As a key community institution, the Church can play a significant role in providing support and care.

Culture

Examining cultural factors that exacerbate the suffering and isolation of *banjiha* families is vital. Korean cultural elements, such as *chemyon* (face-saving) and shame culture, may hinder individuals from seeking help and thus exacerbate their isolation. Conversely, positive aspects of Korean culture can aid in the healing and resilience of *banjiha* families. Practical theologians and the churches can work toward identifying damaging cultural attitudes and reinforcing beneficial ones.

Economy

The task of addressing the economic factors that contribute to the vulnerability of *banjiha* families includes advocating for equitable economic opportunities, ensuring access to essential resources, and promoting fair wealth distribution. These measures are crucial for improving the socio-economic well-being of affected individuals and families.

Nature

Practical theologians need to examine the impact of climate change, environmental degradation, and

the disproportionate environmental burdens borne by vulnerable populations, including those in *banjihas*. Advocating for policies that address ecological injustice, and engaging in environmental education and collaboration with environmental organizations are essential steps. This process may include joint research, community projects, and policy advocacy to promote environmental sustainability and social equity.

Governmental Policies

Evaluating existing government policies and proposing viable alternatives to support vulnerable populations residing in *banjihas* is essential. For instance, the Seoul Metropolitan Government's plan to eliminate 200,849 *banjiha* houses within a 20-year timeframe, by purchasing and repurposing them as non-residential facilities, has seen minimal progress. To date, only 72 households have been acquired, amounting to a mere 0.03 % of the total number of *banjiha* households. This policy fails to address the underlying issues, as many residents may end up relocating to similarly precarious housing options due to financial constraints. It is crucial to consider alternative strategies that more effectively meet the needs of *banjiha* residents and prevent their displacement to even more vulnerable housing situations, such as 옥탑방 [rooftop rooms], 쪽방 [small single rooms], or 고시원 [dormitory-style accommodation].

According to data from the previous year, out of a total of 1,669 households that moved into public rental housing through the housing promotion program in Seoul, only 247 households (14.8 %) were from *banjiha* units. The severe shortage of public rental housing makes it nearly impossible for *banjiha* households to secure these units. Consequently, policymakers need to address the rapidly escalating housing prices in Seoul and the metropolitan area, as well as the limited availability of public rental homes.

Conclusion

The 2022 *banjiha* flooding in Seoul illustrates the intersection of environmental crises and social inequity in the Anthropocene era. As demonstrated by the devastating impact of the flood on the vulnerable residents of *banjihas*—who are disproportionately from low-income, elderly, and disabled back-

grounds—the calamity is more than a mere environmental disaster. It is a profound reflection of systemic socio-economic injustices. The *banjiha* tragedy underscores how climate change exacerbates pre-existing social inequalities, thus highlighting the urgent need for a nuanced response that integrates both environmental and social justice perspectives.

Practical theology needs to evolve to confront these multidimensional challenges effectively. Pamela Couture’s social ecology of care offers a robust framework for this task, by advocating for a holistic approach that considers the intricate relationships between individuals, families, communities, and broader societal structures. By incorporating this framework, practical theologians and faith communities can engage in meaningful advocacy and support efforts that address the immediate needs of those affected, while also challenging the structural injustices that perpetuate their vulnerability.

Ultimately, confronting the ecological and social ramifications of the Anthropocene requires a concerted effort in promoting systemic change and fostering resilience among the most marginalized. Through compassionate engagement and proactive policy advocacy, we can work toward a more equitable and sustainable future, ensuring that no one is left to bear the brunt of climate-induced suffering alone. The *banjiha* flooding serves as a call both to theologians and society at large to recognize and rectify the systemic inequities that exacerbate the impact of ecological crises.

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Fractures in the Living Human Web: On the Challenge of Loneliness and Social Isolation in Individual Life, Society and Pastoral Care

Felix Roleder

This paper introduces the challenge of unwanted loneliness to the theory of pastoral care. It does so by first exploring the phenomenon of loneliness in close dialogue with the social sciences, particularly the psychology of loneliness, and then discussing the role that religiosity and pastoral care can play in addressing the complex challenge of contemporary loneliness. Social loneliness is portrayed as a painful gap in social relationships, defined as a discrepancy between existing and desired relationships as subjectively perceived by the individual. Its intense and chronic form has significant negative effects on well-being and health. Loneliness results from individual circumstances of biography, social cognition and behavior, as well as from structural exclusion through socio-cultural marginalization. In many cases, individual circumstances and structural factors interact to produce persistent loneliness. In responding to the complex challenge of loneliness, pastoral care must take into account this dual nature of loneliness as well as the resources and risks associated with religion. A multi-level approach to pastoral care—which integrates interventions at the micro level of individual care, the meso level of community and culture, and the macro level of public discourse and policy—in response to loneliness is proposed. In addition to a synthesis of the interdisciplinary loneliness research literature, the argumentation is based on original statistical analyses of diachronic loneliness trajectories in the Swiss population. Using representative data from the Swiss Household Panel, the empirical part of the paper identifies a typology of loneliness trajectories in individual biographies as well as risks and resources in coping with loneliness situations.

1. A Global Challenge: Fractures in the Living Human Web

Being alone is an ambivalent phenomenon. On the one hand, many of us desire the tranquility and independence that solitude promises (Coplan et al. 2019). Developmental psychology emphasizes the ability to be positively alone as an essential step in personal maturation (Winnicott 1990). On the other hand, in many societies around the world, there is growing concern that unwanted and chronic loneliness is negatively affecting the quality of life and health of parts of the population. From the United Kingdom to South Korea, governments have taken

public action to address loneliness in society. And, indeed, even after the social distancing of the Covid pandemic is over, trends of aging societies, persistent socioeconomic inequalities, individualization of culture, and ambivalences of digital technology suggest that the social challenge of loneliness is here to stay.

From a pastoral care perspective, the challenge of loneliness can be linked to the image of the living human web (Miller-McLemore 2018). This image highlights the understanding that “human subjectivity itself is deeply interconnected. Genuine care now requires understanding the living human document as embedded within an interlocking public web of constructed meaning. Policy issues that de-



termine the health of the living human web are sometimes as important as issues of individual emotional well-being” (Miller-McLemore 2018, 313).

Loneliness marks fractures in the living human web. The metaphor allows us to address the dual nature of the causes of loneliness. This paper argues that loneliness arises both from individual circumstances of biography, social cognition, and behavior, as well as from structural exclusion through socio-cultural marginalization. In many cases, individual circumstances and structural factors interact to produce persistent loneliness. Pastoral care must take into account this dual nature of loneliness, as well as the resources and risks of religion, in order to adequately address this global challenge.

This paper introduces the challenge of unwanted loneliness to the theory of pastoral care. It does so by first exploring the phenomenon of loneliness in close dialogue with the social sciences, and then discussing the role that religious resources and pastoral care can play in this regard.

The argumentation proceeds as follows: First, the individual side of loneliness is explored by introducing the psychology of loneliness. Then, the structural causes of loneliness are highlighted, leading to an understanding of loneliness as a result of structural exclusion. Against the backdrop of loneliness trajectories in individual lives, the contribution of religiosity in prevention and coping is discussed. The final section outlines an integrative approach to pastoral care for loneliness that includes interventions at the micro, meso, and macro levels of the social sphere.

In addition to a synthesis of the loneliness research literature, the argumentation is based on my own statistical analyses of loneliness in the Swiss population. Using representative data from Switzerland (Swiss Household Panel), I identify loneliness phenomena that are typical of modern, individualized societies. These empirical findings are also relevant to other contexts with similar social conditions.¹

2. The Individual Side of Loneliness: The Painful Delta in Social Relationships

This section introduces the psychology of loneliness. First, loneliness will be defined as a painful delta in social relationships. The section then will move on to discuss the cognitive model of chronic loneliness, which points to negative social cognitions and behaviors of social withdrawal among some individuals experiencing chronic loneliness. These behaviors can lead to a self-perpetuating process of loneliness and social withdrawal.

The *discrepancy model of loneliness* has become a standard in the psychology of loneliness. It defines loneliness in terms of the discrepancy between existing and desired relationships as subjectively perceived by the individual (Peplau and Perlman 1982). When current social relationships do not match desired social relationships, this gap leads to feelings of loneliness. The incongruence concerns the quantity and, even more so, the quality of social relationships.

The extent and intensity of unwanted loneliness range from a specific lack of certain types of relationships to a complete alienation from the social world (McKenna-Plumley et al. 2023, 18f.). As an unpleasant feeling, loneliness triggers an impulse to re-establish contact with others. With its impulse to connect socially, loneliness is a functional emotion. Most experiences of loneliness remain temporary and should not be pathologized. Chronic loneliness, however, is an aversive experience associated with stress, loss of meaning and devaluation (McKenna-Plumley et al. 2023, 5–12). At the heart of the lived experience of loneliness is a longing for meaningful belonging. It is typically accompanied by stress and worry due to lack of social support, boredom in daily life, and, at times, frustration and anger.

The Swiss Household Panel (SHP) asked respondents: “How lonely do you feel in your life, where 0 means ‘not lonely at all’ and 10 means ‘extremely lonely’?” Based on this survey, my analyses confirm a cluster of negative emotions and self-deprecation that forms around loneliness (Figure 1). The Pearson correlations are statistically significant and clear in their direction and strength. They confirm above average levels of depressive mood, sadness and worry associated with loneliness.

These findings from Switzerland are consistent with a recent meta-analysis across a variety of countries and social groups that confirms substantial negative effects of chronic loneliness on well-being

¹ The Swiss Household Panel is a publicly available longitudinal data set that is representative of households in Switzerland (Tillmann et al. 2022). It can be obtained here: <https://forscenter.ch/projekte/swiss-household-panel>, 26/09/2024.

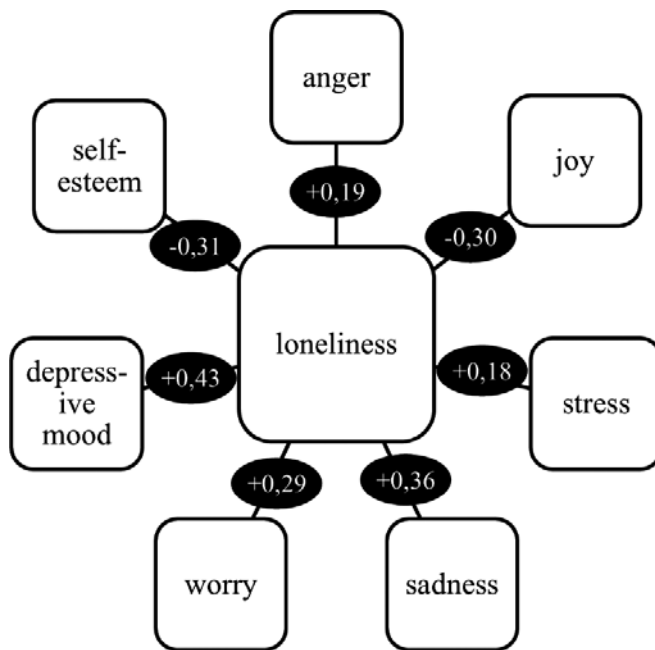


Figure 1: Emotional cluster and self-esteem related to loneliness emotions

Values of Pearson correlations, all statistically significant; representative of the Swiss population; $n \geq 7198$ adults; source: own calculations with SHP 2019 (SHP 2012/2013 for self-esteem).

as well as on mental and physical health (Park et al. 2020). This shows that social relationships play an essential role in human life. The experience of loneliness becomes problematic when the social needs of humans, who are constituted as relational beings, are not met.

According to the *cognitive model of chronic loneliness*, chronic loneliness impairs the processes of social perception and behavior (Cacioppo and Hawkley 2009). Chronic loneliness can cause a cognitive bias in the processing of information about social situations (Spithoven, Bijttebier, and Goossens 2017). The evolutionary conditioned preservation motive triggered by isolation leads to heightened sensitivity or even hypervigilance to potential social threats. Chronically lonely individuals are more likely to anticipate and interpret social situations negatively, in particular when these situations are ambivalent or neutral. This cognitive pattern expects rejection by others. Chronically lonely individuals are more likely to have negative impressions of themselves and others. Accordingly, chronic loneliness causes social trust in others to diminish. The cognitive distortions of social perception lead to counterproductive behaviors such as preemptive devaluation of others and social withdrawal. As in the case of a self-fulfilling prophecy, impaired perceptions interfere with the possibility of corrective social experiences that might alter the negative cognitive pattern. Overall, the cognitive model describes a circular process of self-reinforcing chronic loneliness through cogni-

tive impairment and its behavioral consequences (Skoko et al. 2024).

The psychology of loneliness offers two important implications for pastoral care. First, the *pain of unwanted loneliness* should make us wary of the theological heroization of being solitary—for example, as being before God—as has happened sometimes in theology. Self-chosen solitude can indeed yield valuable spiritual experiences. However, it should not be confused with unwanted and aversive loneliness, which is perceived by those who experience it as beyond their control.

Second, the cognitive model of chronic loneliness suggests that simply providing opportunities for social interaction may be an inadequate approach to intervention in certain cases of entrenched loneliness. While religious communities can be beneficial for many, negative social cognitions and patterns of social withdrawal can impede participation. In such cases, pastoral care must commence at a more profound level, *addressing patterns of social cognition and behavior* and gradually rebuilding social trust. This approach will be the subject of a more detailed discussion in the final section.

3. The Structural Side of Loneliness: Loneliness through Socio-cultural Exclusion

Loneliness must not be misunderstood as an exclusively individual and psychological phenomenon.



Rather, the inequality of loneliness highlights its structural causes. Socio-culturally marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by loneliness.

Among the multitude of structural risks, three central factors should be highlighted:

A. Stigma: Different types of cultural stigma and minority status act as risk factors. Stigma that causes loneliness is particularly related to poverty (Bower, Conroy, and Perz 2018), illness and disability (Lewis et al. 2024b), and sexual or gender minorities (Elmer, van Tilburg, and Fokkema 2022). Such cultural stigmata invite social discrimination, which leads to loneliness through social rejection. In addition, individuals internalize stigma as devaluation and withdraw socially. In other cases, individuals hide their stigma and suffer from loneliness in the midst of the social group because of this loss of authentic identity that they disguise. The latter has also been shown to affect sexual and gender minorities in religious communities (Escher et al. 2019). These structural risks of loneliness reflect the pervasiveness of dominant cultural norms—particularly heteronormativity, able-bodiedness, and economic meritocracy—that marginalize and exclude identities that deviate from these cultural structures.

B. Financial deprivation: In addition to the stigma associated with poverty, financial deprivation is an instrumental barrier that hinders participation in social activities that involve costs, such as recreational activities (Topor, Ljungqvist, and Strandberg 2016). Moreover, social relationships often imply a reciprocal logic of mutual generosity and support. Individuals from impoverished backgrounds lack the capacity to reciprocate and, as a result, are excluded from contact networks or choose to disengage (Offer 2012).

C. Exclusion from cultural discourse: Individuals in “exceptional” circumstances often perceive a lack of understanding from significant others who do not share their life experience. Loneliness is then a consequence of the recurrent inability to communicate and understand each other. This problem affects a range of life situations, from intensive caregiving (Vasileiou et al. 2017) to terminal illness (Lewis et al. 2024a). From a structural perspective, the failure to communicate and understand is partly the result of cultural structures that exclude such circumstances from social discourse. The seemingly individual situations in which words are absent are, in fact, determined by cultural discourses that define the boundaries of communication. For example, the experience of communicative loneliness in

the context of a diagnosis of a terminal illness is inextricably linked to the dominant societal discourse which maintains that illness is a controllable phenomenon and that life is ultimately curable (Lewis et al. 2024a).

I propose to refer to the structural dimension of loneliness with the term *exclusion*, as introduced by poverty and inequality research (Kronauer 2020, 27–45; Kronauer 2010). Processes of exclusion cut across multiple dimensions, such that exclusion in one dimension leads to exclusion in another. In the context of poverty research, the concept of exclusion originally focused on economic exclusion, which subsequently led to social exclusion. In the case of loneliness, the concept needs to be extended to the cultural level, as cultural exclusion also contributes to social loneliness.

The concept of exclusion identifies society as the structural subject of exclusionary processes. Concurrently, it denotes the individual consequences of exclusionary circumstances in the life experiences of the individuals subjected to them. These individuals *feel* excluded. In addition, the term articulates the illegitimacy of exclusion, thereby evincing a critical impetus.

The structural dimension of loneliness through socio-cultural exclusion underscores the need for a *political dimension of pastoral care*. To effectively address the challenge of loneliness, pastoral care must go beyond the lonely individual. Rather, political pastoral care seeks to support policies that address the structural causes of loneliness. Less social inequality and an effective welfare state have been shown to reduce the risk of loneliness in societies (Nygård, Nyqvist, and Scharf 2019; Wu, Zhang, and Fokkema 2022). Preventing loneliness also requires a well-developed public infrastructure, with public meeting places and an efficient and affordable public transport system (Lamanna et al. 2020). Political pastoral care will advocate for public policies that prevent and reduce loneliness in society.

Equally important, political pastoral care needs to challenge exclusionary cultural norms in order to break the stigmas that promote loneliness. Political pastoral care will advocate in public discourses for diversity and a positivity of vulnerability, with the intention of disrupting the norms of heteronormativity, able-bodiedness and economic meritocracy that promote loneliness. To effectively address the challenge of loneliness, pastoral care must become an agent of cultural change in this sense, including cultural change within religious communities.

4. The Diachronic Dynamics of Loneliness: Loneliness Trajectories and Coping Resources

In this section, individual and structural loneliness risks are demonstrated in two statistical analyses of diachronic loneliness trajectories in the lives of individuals. The temporal dynamics of loneliness are of paramount importance as they affect individual well-being. Occasional and transient experiences of loneliness are common in modern life and should not be pathologized. Conversely, prolonged social isolation becomes increasingly difficult to overcome and can have lasting negative effects. This distinction motivates a special focus on the temporal dynamics of loneliness.

Using the longitudinal SHP data, I track how loneliness changes in the lives of individuals in the Swiss population over a six-year period (2013 to 2019). From the three survey points, we construct six different types of diachronic loneliness trajectories (Figure 2).

This focus on the dynamics of loneliness reveals that most individuals manage and overcome loneliness situations in their lives. Loneliness trajectories are subject to considerable dynamics, most of which are positive. Individuals who experience high levels of loneliness at one point in time are more likely to experience a significant decrease in loneliness than

to experience it permanently (Figure 3). However, about six percent of the Swiss population experienced significant chronic loneliness over the course of several years, indicating prolonged, potentially especially burdensome and rigidified loneliness trajectories.

In a second step, we analyze which factors help to overcome severe loneliness and which factors increase the likelihood that loneliness will persist. More specifically, the next analysis exclusively includes the loneliest 10 % of the population in 2016 and investigates how their loneliness has evolved by 2019.

Using a multivariate linear regression model, I identify the factors that tend to perpetuate loneliness and those that support to overcome loneliness situations. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are provided in the Appendix. The linear regression uses loneliness in 2019 as the dependent variable, controlling for loneliness in 2016 as an independent variable, including only those individuals who were clearly lonely in 2016 (loneliness in 2016 ≥ 6 out of 10). The final model explains about 27 % of the differences in loneliness values in 2019 for those who were clearly lonely in 2016 (corr. $R^2=0.27$).

Model I in Figure 4 shows that loneliness situations tend to last longer in old age (age: $B=+0.12^{**}$) as well as in poor health (health status 2016: $B=-0.12^{**}$). As discussed in the previous section on

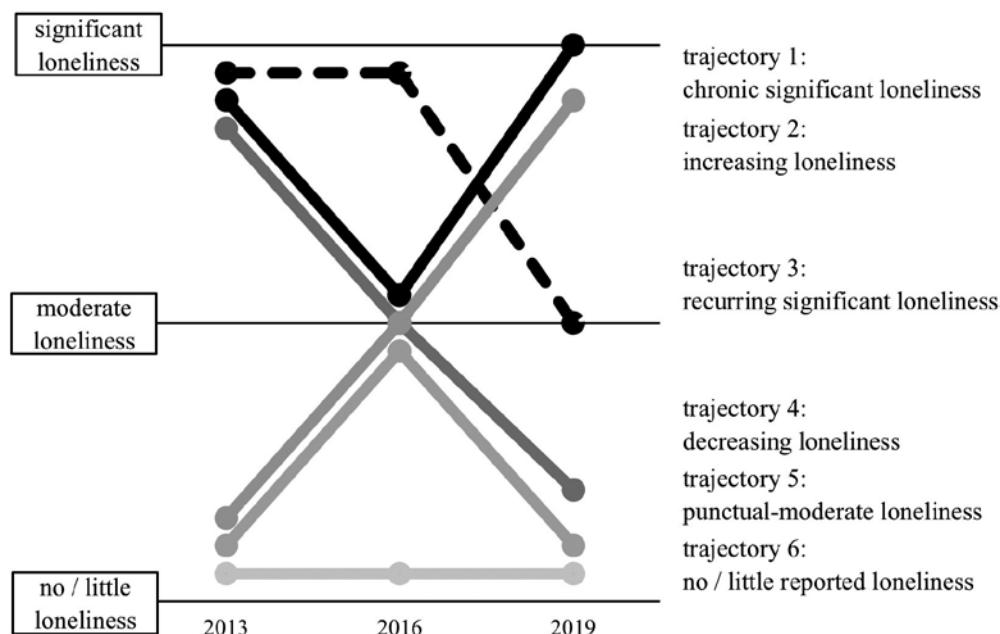


Figure 2: Six types of loneliness trajectories over a six-year period

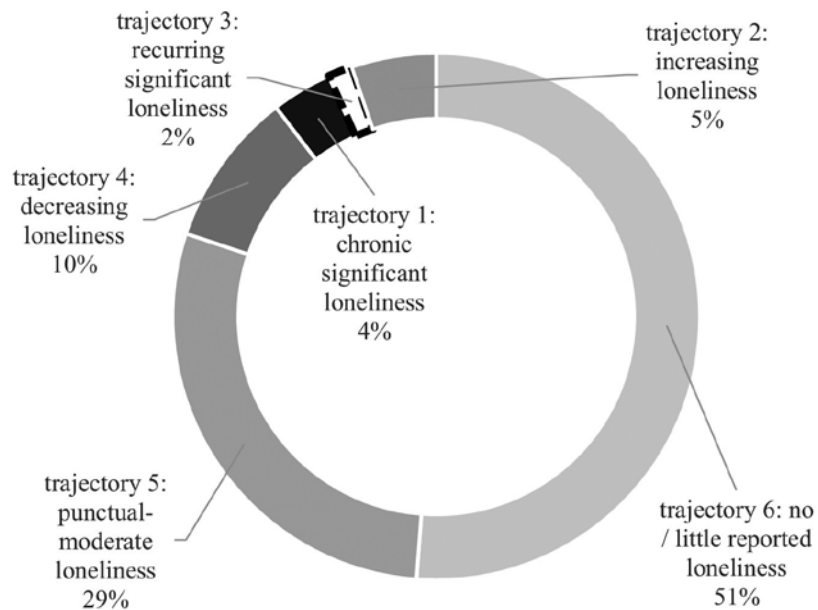


Figure 3: Six types of loneliness trajectories over a six-year period: Shares in the Swiss population
Shares in the Swiss population;
n = 4435 adults; source: own calculations
with SHP 2013–2019.

the structural side of loneliness, chronic illness makes social participation more difficult, and the cultural stigma of poor health promotes social withdrawal. Individual health is partly determined by socioeconomics, confirming a first structural factor of loneliness risk. Other structural factors are confirmed in Model II: individuals living in disadvantaged areas ($B=+0.07^*$) and individuals with limited access to transportation (no access to a car: $B=+0.08^*$) are somewhat disadvantaged in overcoming situations of loneliness in Switzerland. The statistical effects of these structural factors underscore the importance of the political dimension of pastoral care in addressing the challenges of loneliness.

Model I confirms that several subjective resources support the mitigation of loneliness situations. The most important factor is generalized social trust, which significantly supports the odds of reducing loneliness ($B=-0.17^{***}$). Conversely, a deficiency in social trust increases the probability of experiencing prolonged periods of loneliness. Generalized social trust signals a generally open and cooperative attitude toward other people (Uslaner 2018). Social trust is essential for forming and maintaining social relationships, thereby increasing the chances of overcoming loneliness. As discussed in section 2, however, that cognitive processes of chronic loneliness undermine social trust. Given the pivotal role of social trust and its susceptibility to erosion, a crucial aspect of pastoral care in the

context of loneliness is the incremental restoration of social trust.

In the extended Model II, we see that the development of loneliness is influenced by life events (new partnerships, relationship breakdowns). These relationship events are partly predicated on social trust (cf. the trust coefficients between Models I and II). The positive effect of social trust on loneliness reduction is mediated by its support for the formation and maintenance of social relationships.

In addition, the alleviation of loneliness situations is somewhat supported by a forward-looking attitude in coping behavior (“I usually find a way.”: $B=-0.09^*$), highlighting another subjective resource.

Finally, Model II points to the subjectivity of loneliness in the sense that feelings of loneliness clearly depend on one’s satisfaction with living in a single household ($B=-0.21^{***}$). Such satisfaction is likely to result from both a meaningful lifestyle and a subjective acceptance of one’s current life situation. Similarly, loneliness is reduced by satisfaction with social relationships in multi-person households ($B=-0.18^{***}$). These findings point to another important function of pastoral care: Loneliness interventions should encourage individuals to lead meaningful and socially connected lives, while also supporting the subjective processing of personal biographies and circumstances.

The next section discusses the role that religious resources can play in preventing and coping with loneliness.



		I		II	
		b	B	b	B
Initial situation	Loneliness 2016	-0.35***	-0.15***	-0.26**	-0.11
	Gender: female	+0.28	+0.05	+0.21	+0.04
	Age in years	+0.02**	+0.12**	+0.02*	+0.12
	Health status 2016	-0.47**	-0.12**	-0.42**	-0.11
	Disadvantaged residential area 2019	+0.50	+0.06	+0.58 ^x	+0.07 ^x
	No car at private disposal 2019	+0.45	+0.07	+0.57*	+0.08*
Subjective resources	Generalized social trust 2016	-0.20***	-0.17***	-0.09*	-0.08
	Attitude: Lying to others in own interest 2017	+0.10*	+0.09*	+0.09*	+0.09*
	Sense of control: "I usually find a way." 2015	-0.14 ^x	-0.09 ^x	-0.13 ^x	-0.08 ^x
	Sense of control: "I usually find a way." 2018	-0.15*	-0.09*	-0.09	-0.06
	Prayer frequency 2018	-0.14*	-0.09*	-0.12*	-0.08*
Life events, behavior, acceptance, and quality of social relationships	New partnership between 2017 and 2019			-1.48***	-0.14***
	Suffering from termination of a relationship 2018			+0.16*	+0.10*
	Suffering from termination of a relationship 2019			+0.21**	+0.13**
	Leisure internet usage more than 60 minutes daily: count 2016 to 2019			+0.25 ^x	+0.08 ^x
	Inviting friends home at least once a month			-0.41 ^x	-0.07 ^x
	Satisfaction with living alone 2019			-0.40***	-0.21***
	Satisfaction with living together in the household 2019			-0.36***	-0.18***
	Number of providers of emotional support 2019			-0.14*	-0.10*
corr. R2		0.14		0.27	

Figure 4: Linear regression for loneliness in 2019 with significant loneliness in 2016

Constants: I: +9.58; II: +8.15; ^x for $p < 0.10$; * for $p < 0.05$; ** for $p < 0.01$; *** for $p < 0.001$; $n = 541$ adults who were significantly lonely in 2016 (loneliness in 2016 ≥ 6 of 10); source: own calculations with SHP 2016–2019.

5. Loneliness and Religiosity: Religious Resources for Prevention and Coping

Regarding the *preventive potential of religiosity* and religious community, we must avoid the misconception that religious individuals are not lonely or that

religious community provides complete protection against loneliness. Neither is the case.

Nevertheless, a threefold effect of certain forms of religiosity in preventing some chronic loneliness is plausible.

A. My empirical analysis indicated that generalized social trust is a crucial element in the formation



and sustenance of social relationships, thereby serving as a mitigating factor against loneliness (as discussed in section 4, The Diachronic Dynamics of Loneliness). Recent decades have seen a considerable body of research on the relationship between religion and social capital (Traunmüller 2018). This research has frequently demonstrated that those forms of religion that emphasize the commonality of all people and thus promote universalistic social identities support the formation of generalized social trust (e.g., Hsiung and Djupe 2019; Roleder 2024). The religious reinforcement of generalized social trust occurs through religious teachings that espouse a universalistic anthropology, through religious rituals in which participants experience togetherness, and through social learning in religious communities. By promoting generalized social trust, such forms of religiosity plausibly provide some preventive resources with respect to chronic loneliness.

B. Another preventive function arises from the opportunities for social interaction that religious communities provide. However, the social culture of religious communities can vary significantly, ranging from more anonymous and socially distanced forms to those that are more contact-intensive (Edgell Becker 1999; Roleder and Weyel 2019).

C. Third, in some contexts, religiosity promotes empathic and supportive social relationships, which are important resources against chronic loneliness (Krause 2016).

In this threefold way, certain forms of religiosity partly counteract loneliness before it becomes entrenched.

However, religion as a whole is an ambivalent social force that can also be indifferent or counterproductive to the prevention of loneliness. Shyness and otherness inhibit social integration in religious communities (Shields 2016). The positive effect of religion on social support is confirmed by some studies but not by others (Roleder 2020, 175–94). A negative image of God that diminishes one's sense of self-worth or makes one distrustful of others actually increases the risk of loneliness (Schwab and Petersen 1990).

Similarly, the role of religion in *coping with loneliness* when it is experienced is not without ambivalence. Our analysis from Switzerland finds that prayer can sometimes be a helpful resource in loneliness situations, although the statistical effect of prayer frequency is small (Figure 3: $B = -0.09^*$). Otherwise, the few studies available suggest that a positive religious coping style can support successful

coping with loneliness (Yıldırım et al. 2021; French, Purwono, and Shen 2022; Gallegos and Segrin 2019). Positive religious coping includes a supportive image of God and a forward-directed attitude. However, negative religious coping, particularly feelings of abandonment by God, increase loneliness (Yıldırım et al. 2021). An equally negative dynamic occurs when feelings of social abandonment and despair in the midst of loneliness are projected onto the relationship with God.

Overall, the empirical evidence suggests both a certain preventive and a coping function for religiosity in relation to loneliness, while also acknowledging the social ambivalences of religion.

6. Summary: A Sketch of Practical Wisdom on Loneliness Interventions in Pastoral Care

The idea of the living human web can inspire an integral approach to pastoral care that embraces the multifaceted and complex nature of loneliness risks and burdens. This final section summarizes the implications of loneliness research for a multilevel approach to pastoral care that addresses loneliness at the micro, meso, and macro levels of the social sphere.

At the *micro level*, in the encounter with the lonely individual, pastoral caregivers should provide space for the expression and processing of the strong emotions associated with loneliness. For example, the words of Psalm 22 and Psalm 88 can be helpful in addressing the strong emotions of loneliness. Also, the stigma and shame of loneliness need to be addressed sensitively.

Pastoral care in theory and practice must take the psychology of loneliness seriously. In some cases, the cognitive vicious circle of loneliness requires work on the social cognitions and behaviors of those affected.² About half of cases of severe chronic loneliness have diagnosable mental health conditions that require medical and psychological treatment (Beutel et al. 2017).

² This is a perspective that is still in need of development. The empirical evidence shows that interventions targeting social cognitions and social behavior are effective (Seewer et al. 2024). This approach needs to be part of loneliness interventions. At the same time, it remains to be specified how social cognitions and social behavior can be effectively addressed in a pastoral care setting.

In situations of social hypervigilance and social withdrawal, individuals can benefit from low-threshold and outreach ministries that are accessible in the midst of their circumstances (such as visiting ministries, digital and telephone pastoral care).

In life situations where individuals are unable to socialize with others, it can be helpful to engage in productive and meaningful solitary activities, such as gardening or board games. There is empirical evidence that solitary activities can reduce some of the distress caused by loneliness (Gardiner, Geldenhuys, and Gott 2018).

As we have seen in section 5, the relationship between religiosity and loneliness is a sensitive one. On the one hand, religiosity can be drawn upon as a positive coping resource. On the other hand, the feeling of being abandoned by God in loneliness needs to be given space in the pastoral encounter. Pastoral caregivers should also be alert to and address those forms of religiosity that foster social distrust and thus increase the risk of loneliness.

At the *meso level* of religious communities, the religious cultivation of social trust through community life, celebration of rituals of togetherness, and universalistic anthropology can contribute to loneliness prevention. In addition, religious communities with their opportunities for socializing and a culture of social support can provide an “ecology of care” that draws on the social resources of religious communities (Gill-Austern 1995, 234).

The need for cultural change concerns religious communities themselves. They need to affirm a culture of diversity and the positivity of vulnerability to mitigate the loneliness risks of cultural stigmas imposed on those who deviate from the social norms of heteronormativity, able-bodiedness, and economic meritocracy.

Religious communities also have an opportunity to engage in media education and to address the ambivalent role of social media in relation to loneliness. On the one hand, digital communication enables contact and can thus alleviate loneliness. On the other hand, excessive use of the Internet has been shown to perpetuate loneliness (Figure 3: chronic excessive Internet use: $B=+0.08^x$).

At the *macro level* of public discourse, political pastoral care addresses the structural dimension of loneliness, which consists in the structural exclusion of marginalized groups (see 3.). Political pastoral care will advocate the implementation of public policies that mitigate structural risks of loneliness, especially policies that promote cultural diversity and a strong public infrastructure, and that counteract economic inequality. In addition, public education about loneliness can be helpful in increasing knowledge about loneliness and reducing the stigma associated with loneliness.

In these complementary ways, pastoral care may contribute to the formation of new bonds between the fractures in the living human web.



7. Appendix

	mean	sd	min	max
Loneliness 2019	3.85	2.72	0	10
Loneliness 2016	7.21	1.12	6	10
Gender: female	1.60	–	1	2
Age in years	56.91	18.07	18	91
Health status 2016	3.83	0.72	1	5
Disadvantaged residential area 2019	0.12	–	0	1
No car at private disposal 2019	1.20	–	1	2
Generalized social trust 2016	5.83	2.29	0	10
Attitude: Lying to others in own interest 2017	2.85	2.58	0	10
Sense of control: “I usually find a way.” 2015	7.58	1.65	0	10
Sense of control: “I usually find a way.” 2018	7.47	1.68	0	10
Prayer frequency 2018	2.77	1.76	1	6
New partnership between 2017 and 2019	0.07	–	0	1
Suffering from termination of a relationship 2018	0.46	1.72	0	10
Suffering from termination of a relationship 2019	0.45	1.66	0	10
Leisure internet usage more than 60 minutes daily: count 2016 to 2019	0.85	0.86	0	2
Inviting friends home at least once a month	1.44	–	1	2
Satisfaction with living alone 2019	-0.28	1.46	-7.55	2.45
Satisfaction with living together in the household 2019	-0.28	1.34	-8.48	1.52
Number of providers of emotional support 2019	3.66	1.93	0	9

Figure 5: Descriptive statistics for figure 4

n = 541 adults who were significantly lonely in 2016 (loneliness in 2016 ≥ 6 of 10); source: own calculations with SHP 2016–2019.

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Christian Climate Activism: The Wisdom of Urgency “In-Between”

Simon Linder and Michael Schüßler

Facing the human-made climate crisis of the Anthropocene, a new generation of activism emerged with resonance in Christian communities. The paper reflects from a German background the divide of mere individual and mere collective solutions and addresses the in-between of various levels of action and engagement in the Global North. Three local climate movements are described with regard to their Christian entanglement like Last Generation supporter Jesuit Jörg Alt or Christian grassroots activism against coalmining. The last part of the paper is about discovering the theological wisdom of urgency of being in-between. On the one hand, there are many opportunities for theological involvement with ecological and social transformation. On the other hand, there is an open discussion about how it should be done: by fostering at least green capitalism, or by more radical changes of Being-in-the-world toward interconnectedness with non-human agency and critique of Christian anthropocentrism and sovereignty. Even Practical Theology should be “staying with the trouble” (Donna Haraway).

Introduction

The ecological footprint shows how damaging an action is to the climate: A flight from Frankfurt to Seoul and back emits 2.8 tons of carbon dioxide per person—that’s over four times as much as a person should emit in an entire year. Are we going to fly to the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT) conference in Seoul or not?

The invention of the idea that everyone should be able to calculate the climate impact of their own actions can be traced back to the oil company BP (cf. Kaufman 2020). The company’s interest is to shift the responsibility for the destruction of the planet onto individuals: If you (and many others with you) had not flown to Seoul, the world would look different today!

The argumentation follows a classical theological framework about sin and is thus compatible with religious narratives: Every human being commits minor and major (climate) sins and can soothe their bad conscience by compensating for them. A few

centuries ago, this theological framework would have been called “indulgence.” Collectively it is not enough at all, as can currently be observed: This text is being written while the outside temperature in Tübingen (Germany) is 37 degrees, following some of the hottest days worldwide since the beginning of weather records (cf. Roeloffs 2023). The year 2023 turned out to be the hottest globally since records began (cf. Umweltbundesamt 2024).

This development demonstrates that the world has not yet found a solution to the climate crisis, and that the shift of responsibility to individuals, supported by religious motives, only benefits the oil companies. Does practical theology have to, or can it, react to this? If so, how?

In this article we outline a possible approach, situated in a German and Catholic theological context. In a first step we explore how the dichotomy between individual and collective could be overcome; in a second step we examine the practice of climate activism in Germany; in a third step we propose a theological reading of climate activism.





1. What (not) to Do? The Individual, the Collective, and the In-Between

There are generally two approaches to solving the climate crisis.

The first approach is the Individual Approach, which asserts that everyone must change their personal lifestyle. According to this view, in order to avoid contributing carbon emissions, no one should fly from Frankfurt to Seoul for an IAPT conference. However, this approach denies the fact that we live within a system that makes ecological action both very difficult and expensive. For example, organic food is more expensive than conventionally produced food; electric cars are pricier than combustion engine cars, and for many products we as consumers are not even aware of the carbon footprint. Thus, focusing on individual actions is insufficient to address the problem.

The second approach calls for policymakers to change the entire system. This is the Collective Approach. Since none of the participants at the IAPT conference hold political power to implement the changes needed to limit global warming, one could argue that this conversation is not needed, nor are many conversations preceded by a smaller or larger amount of emitted carbon dioxide. This approach forgets that change never occurs without pioneers. Looking at the problem solely collectively doesn't work either.

Climate activist Greta Thunberg says, "The answer to the question of whether we should focus on individual or systemic change is yes, absolutely. You can't have one without the other. We need both" (Thunberg 2022a, 356). Perhaps we need not only both, but also something different that emerges from in-between the individual approach and the collective approach. What might this be? How could the dichotomy between the individual and the collective be overcome to combat global warming more effectively?

But isn't this rather a topic for the natural sciences and maybe for the social sciences? What does practical theology have to do with it? According to Rainer Bucher, pastoral theologian emeritus at the University of Graz, practical theology seeks to engage in "the creative confrontation of the Gospel with current individual and collective existence" (Bucher 2010, 20). Given that the climate crisis is recognized as probably the most existential of all problems of this world, practical theologians must deal with it. On

one hand, this aligns with the content tradition of the discipline; for example, through the option for the suffering people in poverty are least to blame for global warming (cf. Thunberg 2022b, 4), but suffer the most from its consequences. On the other hand, it necessitates unlearning the Christian "tragedy and illusion of our belief in human and divine sovereignty" (LaMothe 2022, 1), which has brought us into this mess in the first place.

A Time before Global Warming

But now let us return to the question of the Western dichotomy between the individual and the collective: How did this come about in the first place? To clarify this, it is helpful to travel back several centuries to a time prior to global warming and, above all, before individualization.

During that period, it was clear that sons would follow their fathers. If your father was a farmer, you would become a farmer. Daughters followed—in a similar manner—their mothers. Their "profession" was to be mothers and housewives. Almost every child was predetermined at birth regarding their future occupation. Hartmut Rosa describes: "For example, as far as the life cycles of families as economic units or 'households' are concerned, the ideal-typical family structures in agrarian societies tended to be stable over a long chain of generations: the change of generations left the basic structures untouched and, as it were, only replaced the individual position holders" (Rosa 2016, 179). In such a world, talents were not considered decisive, and people—at least from today's perspective—could not be perceived as individuals. Simultaneously, the individual has a high responsibility for his or her own survival. If you don't go to the fields, you have nothing to eat. *Others* were responsible for political processes and the solution of overall social problems (because there was often not even a right to vote, but monarchs or higher classes decided on politics). This changed culturally in the Renaissance (cf. Dinzelbacher 2008, 34) and was further transformed by Industrialization for the broader population. That is how the climate crisis begins—continuing to intensify until today (cf. Umweltbundesamt 2023; cf. Rahmstorf 2017).

Sociologist Jürgen Gerhards observes a development in Western societies in the 1960s: "The rights and claims to inclusion of the laity [not in the ecclesiastical sense, M.S. & S.L.] have increased in relation to authority roles in almost all areas, the reduc-

tion to a rather selective role assignment has softened, citizens are speaking out as persons, an uprising of the public has taken place” (Gerhards 2001, 167). Gerhards cites satisfaction of material needs and a long period of peace as reasons for this social change (cf. Gerhards 2001, 180). The effects of this “uprising,” through which customary social patterns were broken, would probably be perceived by many people today as fundamentally positive. As an individual I gain greater freedom—where I live, what I do for work, whom I marry (or if I marry at all): these are all my personal decisions—but at the same time there is pressure to take responsibility for my life. What is crucial for us today is that this change dissolves the separation between the sphere of the individual and the sphere of the collective: There are no longer those on the political stage who decide and just the audience—but these spheres are mixing: School students become a political factor.

2. Glue with a Clue: Climate Activism in a German Context and Its Christian Resources

In the following section we examine climate justice activism in Germany and its Christian resources more closely. First, we recall three important movements in Germany.

a) *FFF*: Since Greta Thunberg started her “School Strike for Climate” in 2018, the “Fridays-for-Future”-movement (FFF) had a significant impact in Germany, too. Large networks—like “Parents for Future” or “Scientists for Future”—emerged. They could be characterized by four aspects: First, the protest is rooted in what is sometimes described as climate fear, or genuine worries about the future of the planet and the future of the young generation. Second, these concerns are based in scientific research: “Say the Truth” and “Listen to Science” (Soßdorf and Burgi 2022) are fundamental. Like empirical studies say, “they can indeed be called alternative science communicators,” because they “use scientific knowledge to back their claims and integrate this knowledge into their work as activists” (Soßdorf and Burgi 2022, 12). Third, the demands of FFF are neither utopian nor against the state. In contrary, they want the government to comply with the Paris Climate Protection Agreement and the German resolutions. Fourth, to achieve these requirements, FFF are using a weak form of civil disobedience like “school strike” and

legal protest events to mobilize the power of civil society.

b) *Coalmining and Lützerath*: For many years there has been a more specific form of protest the last German coal mining areas in the Rhineland—a quite symbolic struggle against the extractivist capitalism “at home.” The Rhineland has historically been the largest area of brown coal mining and the largest source of carbon dioxide emissions in Europe. At the beginning of 2023, the small village Lützerath has become quite famous. This old village has been torn down because the existing coal mine is to be extended for one last time.

Many climate activist movements occupied Lützerath to protest against the burning the 280 million tons of brown coal under Lützerath: “Keep the coal in the ground,” otherwise Germany will fail to meet its climate targets. At the same time the situation was complicated, because it was the government, including the Green Party, who made a deal to stop coal mining in 2038 while permitting continuing extraction in the interim.

The primary form of protest was occupying the territory. Ethnographer Stine Krøijer calls this kind of “living with trees” a “Slow Activism,” a new form of “sustainable activism” by “immersing oneself in the forest and developing and assembling these more-than-human subjectivities that are following a different temporal rhythm” (Krøijer 2019, 170). Krøijer distinguishes this kind of “experimenting with alternative, sustainable livelihoods” in nature from the more heroic activism “to stop the expansion of lignite mining” (Krøijer 2019, 166) like the more apocalyptic agency of the Last Generation today.

c) *The Last Generation*: The Last Generation is a group of climate activists advocating for a more radical set of nonviolent methods, including illegal practices of civil resistance. They choose their name to signal that the planet is approaching climate tipping points, referring to a tweet of Barack Obama in 2014: “We are the first generation to feel the effect of climate change and the last generation who can do something about it.”

The initial action was a hunger strike of a small group in Berlin’s government district a few weeks before the German elections in 2021 (Eichler, Jeschke and Alt 2023, 68). After that, the group used further dramatic methods of civil disobedience. In Potsdam, they threw mashed potatoes onto a Monet painting. None of the artworks they attacked were damaged. In 2022, the group performed 276 road blockades in Germany, intensifying in 2023, espe-



cially in Berlin. In Germany they are called “Climate Gluers” because they glue themselves to the road. These street sit-ins have resulted in some drivers lashing out. Countless social media videos show outraged drivers screaming at activists or using force to remove them from the streets. The activists themselves are trained in remaining calm and explaining their climate motivation (reaching the 1.5-degree target) in a stoic and almost ascetic manner. Many reports observe this as nearly religious practices in a secular society, noting the apocalyptic worldview and the heroic actions, which could provoke martyrdom. While their actions get intense public attention, they also polarize. In 2023, the urgent actions of the German climate movement were answered by an increasing criminalization of the acts by the authorities. Non-violent protest was recognized by the criminal authorities as a threat to public safety or even as a formation of a criminal organization. In May, raids on the Last Generation took place and several activists were sentenced to prison terms. In February 2024, the group announced an end to the road blockades. Since the beginning of 2025, they no longer call themselves the Last Generation, but the New Generation.

Christian and Theological Support and Engagement

One of the most popular Catholic supporters of climate activism is Jesuit Fr. Jörg Alt. He has known the leading young people of Last Generation for a long time (cf. Eichler, Jeschke and Alt 2023). Nevertheless, he disagreed until recently with the radical strategies of civil resistance like highway-blockades and gluing themselves to the streets. But his perspective has since changed. Jörg Alt says a letter of Jesuit colleagues from the Global South changed his mind:

Although we in Sub-Saharan Africa account for only a tiny fraction of global greenhouse gas emissions, we are among the countries most affected by the climate crisis [...]. The climate crisis on this continent is already measured in lives lost, communities abandoned, and families malnourished; all the result of consumption patterns we have neither contributed to nor benefited from. Germany and the European Union must take urgent action. Our lives depend on it. The young people blocking German roads today are standing up for us. We hope that the German public and government will follow suit.

Fr. Charles Chilufya S.J., Director Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar, Justice and Ecology Office (Eichler, Jeschke and Alt 2023, 110).

In October 2022, Jörg Alt glued himself onto a road in central Munich, collaborating with other activist scholars from university (“Scientist Rebellion”), and thus blocking traffic for several hours. Alt explained that he has been engaged with social and climate justice for thirty years—beginning with the ecumenical “Conciliar Process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation”—but as the situation gets worse and time falls short one has to act with more insistence. Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudate Deum* acknowledges “the actions of groups negatively portrayed as ‘radicalized’ [...] But in reality, they are filling a space left empty by society as a whole, which ought to exercise a healthy ‘pressure’, since every family ought to realize that the future of their children is at stake” (*Laudate Deum* 58).

In a similar way, Christians inspired by the Political Theology of Johann B. Metz or Dorothee Sölle have become involved in the networks against further coal mining. Movements like “Keep the church in the Village” and “Church at the Abyss” have emerged. Benedikt Kern, one of the Catholic activists rooted in liberation theology, explains:

People are involved for a variety of reasons: they want to preserve the churches as cultural assets, but they also want to stand up for the integrity of creation and for global climate justice, i. e., the living conditions of future generations and of people living in different parts of the world. [...] A Christian perspective within the climate justice movement is not as self-evident today as it used to be in the peace movement or the anti-nuclear movement, in which decidedly Christian actors have always played a role. At the same time, Christians do participate in the climate justice movement, even if they are not necessarily visible as such in it (Kern 2022, 14).

In her qualitative empirical master’s thesis, Katharina Jauch conducted interviews with three Christian activists—each representing one of the three movements previously mentioned—including Jörg Alt (Jauch 2023). Their crucial finding is: “Hope comes from action.” Theological arguments are found to be nearly irrelevant, while religious practices such as carrying a cross as symbol of hope and solidarity or political night prayers in the tradition of Dorothee Sölle are experienced as a source of power. The Church as institution seems as absent as academic theology, except some open letters and petitions from and with theologians. Julia Blanc reached a similar conclusion in her qualitative research on ecological engagement in churches (Germany and Switzerland): “The enviro-ethical debate [...] seems to have little effect on environmental engagement”

(Blanc 2023, 127). Even there the “interviewees were very careful not to use religious speech when speaking about their engagement in the first place” (Blanc 2023, 124).

What can also be observed is a gap between the spiritual resources in current Christian climate activism that are mostly absent or rooted in traditional political theology or ecological ethics from the twentieth century and the Planetary Turn of Anthropocene/Capitalocene in theory (cf. Elias and Moraru 2015; Chakrabarty 2021). The de-anthropocentric perspective and a symmetric entanglement of human and more-than-human agency (Latour 1993) still has little impact on German practice-based eco-theology. As Stine Krøijer discovered, many activists that had occupied the threatened forests by living there and dwelling in trees show “a careful avoidance of religious and spiritual vocabulary to describe their experiences and political projects as well as a deliberate attention on steering clear of the tree symbolism and romanticism of the Third Reich” (Krøijer 2019, 167). They would not want to be accused of naïve or reactionary animism (Laack 2020). However, this does not mean that spiritual or religious practice was not present. Instead, there is a need for further research on the relation between academics and activism.

By now, what can practical theology learn from the activism of the Last Generation or from the FFF movement founded by Greta Thunberg? Thunberg states about her protest: “When I talk about individual action, I mean that we as individuals should use our voice and all the platforms available to us to become activists and communicate the urgency of the situation to the people around us” (Thunberg 2022a, 359).

3. The Wisdom of Urgency “In-Between”

Overcoming the dichotomy of individual and collective

Herein lies a clue as to how the dichotomy of individual and collective can be overcome: Individual action derives its value from generating maximum pressure on those individuals who hold decision-making power for the collective. Thus, individual action against the climate crisis should be directed toward the collective changes that are urgently needed. Stuart Capstick and Lorraine Whitmarsh write:

Those who focus attention on two extremes—individual and systemic—overlook the vast realm in between. Yet it is in this realm that we are able to interact with people in our society and contribute to change by helping to shape societal expectations and create shared realities (Capstick and Whitmarsh 2022, 360).

This then requires acknowledging that activities in this area remain mostly imperfect. For instance, it may be considered reasonable to fly from Frankfurt to Seoul for a conference to talk about these problems, even if carbon dioxide has to be emitted to do so; but it can also be viewed differently.

The form in which action should be taken in the space between the individual and the system can and must be debated. School strikes like Fridays for Future were one attempt, street blockades another. That politicians can react quickly to pressure to act is a fact. Germany, for example, succeeded in reducing gas imports from Russia to zero within half a year after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, despite its great dependence on it in the last decades (cf. Sabin 2023). Consequently, the goal of climate activism must be to generate a similarly high level of civil society pressure on policymakers resulting in short-term changes in action, not (as has often been the case to date) merely in long-term target agreements.

It should be noted that “individual” and “collective” do not always have to mean the same thing. Individuals can join forces and become active together (as a collective). The addressed collective, in turn, does not necessarily have to be the nation-state; it can just as easily be a region, a city, a diocese or a parish, each of which can become active as an actor at another level. One could imagine, for example, that a parish finds a way to become climate neutral and from that point on exerts pressure on the diocese to encourage such an approach in other parishes.

There are numerous opportunities for practical theological research projects at the interface with the natural sciences and social sciences: What theological explosive power lies in the injustices that the consequences of global warming entail, especially for people in poverty? What steps must a parish take to become climate neutral? In answering these questions, the approaches taken by representatives of the field may be very different, or entirely different questions may be raised.

The Wisdom of Rupture and Interconnectedness

In conclusion, we now want to examine the narratives and patterns within climate activism. The cli-



mate justice movement is sometimes explicitly framed as an apocalyptic cause. It's all about forcing the required ruptures of a global Western system that destroys the earth. Time is short—and day-by-day time is growing shorter to stop reaching tipping points of no return. This is why apocalyptic thought is so nearby in a theology of climate activism, especially as political theology. Recall the German political theologian Johann B. Metz and his emphasis in his "Thesis on Apocalypics" (cf. Metz 1980): Religion serves as interruption; it is apocalyptic rupture in the flow of time by seeing and remembering the cry of the victims and their suffering.

Climate change is not only unjust in destroying non-human life and biodiversity, but it's also an aspect of global injustice. Global South, which has contributed least to global warming, is worst affected by it. Most responsible are people in the Global North with consumption-driven lifestyles and an economic system predicated on growth and extractivism. And both, Stefan Silber points it out, "responsibilities and sufferings entertain relationships with racialized, gender, and postcolonial issues. Hence, climate injustice must be approached by interdisciplinary and intersectional means" (Silber 2022, 249).

The German climate movement develops an apocalyptic approach, because it's us in the Global North who have to interrupt our imperial lifestyles and the fossil and extractivist economic system, including the scientific and religious narratives that justify them (cf. Taxacher 2022). But what interruption toward what kind of different conditions of life? The most common answer is the even difficult transformation toward Green Capitalism. But is it wise to interrupt the destructive dynamics with countermeasures from our same modern and Western mainframe? While many hope this approach can guide the whole society toward transformation, some are worried this could not be sufficient. "The analytical rationality of the West caused this crisis but is unable to deal with it. Because of this, it is necessary for Western thought to listen to alternative discourses, life praxes, resistance, and wisdom, and accept their criticisms" (Silber 2022, 250). That's what the IAPT Conference in Seoul suggested, "to call on sources of practical theology beyond the bound of the West—and logos-centered theological traditions. In reconnecting the relationship between the earth and the human, can we find different frameworks in traditions of diverse localities to build practical theology?" (<https://www.ia-practicaltheology.org/conferences/2023-seoul/>).

A younger generation of theological scholars in Germany like Julia Enxing are critically analyzing how the Christian tradition itself has to change. Calling humans "crown of the creation" and having incarnation in the human Jesus Christ as a core belief call for a strong critique of anthropocentric power relations. As Enxing points out, even the stewardship model, used in the encyclical *Laudato Si* (2015) and Catholic ecological thought, seems too limited: It installs the humans as the good and the caring "lords of creation." But is the Kingdom of God not about getting rid of lords and patronizing power relations? "If the lord mutates into a shepherd or a steward, this is still a long way from achieving a change in thinking. If creation theology was to focus not on human beings but on the earth, i. e. the whole of creation, the preservation of the functioning of the biosphere would have ethical priority" (Enxing 2021, 168).

In order to preserve a planet that is habitable for the whole creation by "doing climate justice" (Collet et al. 2022), theology must no longer be epistemologically based on humans alone, but on the dynamic interconnectedness of all different beings. With Claire Colebrook the climate crisis provokes a kind of "epistemological climate change" (Colebrook in: Braidotti 2014, 86), moving from pure rupture and anthropocentric heroism to fragility and interconnectedness. That's why Donna Haraway's "staying with the trouble" hits the crucial point even in theology (Haraway 2016). Even Pope Francis reminds in his latest letter on climate crisis *Laudate Deum* the "interaction between human beings and the environment, as occurs in the indigenous cultures" (*Laudate Deum* 27) and quotes Haraway to call for a "situated anthropocentrism" (*Laudate Deum* 67). In a recent Catholic-based volume, the editors emphasize the political-ethical contribution of such a theological perspective for climate justice: "Doing justice theologically, then, implies taking the risk to move beyond a framework or attitude of calculation, planning and—thus—domination. Instead, the risk is to enter a space of vulnerable openness. However, wouldn't this risky movement allow us, on a very fundamental level, to cultivate relationships towards other human and non-human lives, relationships that pay attention to the dignity and worth of all beings?" (Collet et al. 2022, XII).

For Practical Theology in a European context the wisdom of "In-Between" leads to solidarity with the apocalyptic urgency of climate activism as well as to the self-critical transformation of religious thinking

and worldmaking from sovereignty to the wisdom of interconnectedness.

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Nomadic Ecclesia Praxes as an Eschatological Movement in, with, from the Margins of Oppression: A Practical Theology of Freedom and Justice

Gordon Ernest Dames

This paper seeks to advance the notion of nomadic ecclesia praxes as an inherent eschatological movement as enacted by Jesus Christ. The underlying premise is to depart from the conventional theology of the church as an institutional system. Western theological traditions are re-examined in the light of an African context to envision an eschatological model for nomadic praxes. The aim is to draw on indigenous cultural praxes to redress cultural conformity of the church. Proverbs and artefacts of the First Nation People of South Africa serve as a critical theological source. Their nomadic living realities, their natural spirituality, and their continuous movement resonate with Christian eschatology, a subversive revolutionary praxis. The objective is to illuminate and advance the eschatologically “not-yet” nomadic praxis of Justice and Freedom.

Background and Introduction

I am a practical theologian in the Reformed tradition. My parental and childhood roots stem from the Anglican and Lutheran traditions. In this paper, references to the church pertain to the universal or ecumenical Christian church.

Reduced societal influence, and spiritual impoverishment characterize the contemporary institutional church—resulting in members seeking their own spiritual journey (Gibbs and Coffey 2001, 10–11). De-churched people are leaving the church due to spiritual persecution (Packard and Hope 2015, 15). The continuing conversion of the church is therefore quintessential (Guder 2000, 150–151). No wonder that C.S. Lewis coined the notion “mere Christianity” and defined the Christian church as deep church—a redress of historical and Trinitarian orthodoxy (in Walker and Parry 2014, vii–viii). The Catholic theologian Izuzquiza proposes a form of *radical ecclesiology* to counter institutionalized practices by advancing a true contextual Christocentric community (2009). The aim is to avoid cultural conditioning and the consequent reduction of

the gospel—the root of the institutionalization of the church (Guder 2000, 194).

Emerging churches are a response to the institutionalization of the church to dismantle self-serving cultural church praxes (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 29). Cultural identity, if de-constructed, lies at the core of an authentic Christian contextual theology (Bevans 1992, 25). Appropriation of indigenous culture as a critical theological source is, therefore, crucial for a more representable church (Bevans 1992, 26). Bevans pleads for “a strong but realistic cultural identity” for doing theology (1992, 27). For example, theology in African villages should engender cultural identity through African proverbs and artefacts (Lewis-Williams 2015). Meylahn (2010, 7), therefore, holds that the African philosophy of ubuntu, calls us into *a continual and whole be-ing becoming*.

Methodological Footprints

It is presumptuous to prescribe a methodology for the purposes of this chapter. I reject quick fixes for



any church. Church transformation should be a never-ending process (Keifert 2006, 39–48). The missiology circular praxis could prove instrumental to enhance process-orientated change (Bosch 2005). Bosch (2005, 424) proposes Nietzsche’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” to disarm Western science, -philosophy and -theology. Furthermore, a new epistemology is required to redress the notion that the world is a static object to be analyzed and explained with abstract ideas. Torres argues for commitment as a precursor to doing theology with and for the poor and marginalized: “*Vox victimarum vox Dei*—the cries of the victim are the voice of God” (in Bosch 2025, 424). Practical theologizing should first work *with* the marginalized and suffering, by employing a hermeneutics of action. Building on Segundo, Bosch (2005) opts for contextual theology by applying a hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle begins with the praxis of marginalization, culminating in reflection as an act of theology to unearth intersubjectivity (Bosch 2005, 424–425). Keifert’s (2006, 61) missional methodology grounded “within the life of the trinity” offers insightful and practice-based ways of operationalizing change in churches.

Following Bevans (1992, 77–78) and Meylahn (2010), I locate contextual theology in ethnic paradigms of thought and cultural practices. Westernized practices of individualization and personalized

theologies should be challenged (Ward 2017). Consequently, this ever-present reality of cultural conformity makes indigenization and continuing conversion of the institutional church a spiritual necessity (Guder 2000, 147).

An illustration of an indigenous culture pertains to the first nation people in Southern Africa, as espoused by Vetkat’s artifacts (Weinberg and Tomaselli 2014). The second illustration focuses on the story of the *Karretjiemense* (the Donkey Cart People) of the arid Karoo flatlands in central districts of South Africa (De Jongh 2013). With reference to Zimmerli, parallels are drawn between Jesus’ nomadic ministry and Israel’s Exodus from Egypt (1984).

First, Vetkat captures the significance of an ancient nation’s religious awareness of God (Weinberg and Tomaselli 2014). His artifacts serve as a source to recount the meaning and affirmation of indigenous people’s culture through decades of colonial and neo-colonial praxes. His art demonstrates that indigenous expression is lasting (Weinberg and Tomaselli 2014). From his art, the following theological features were apparent:

Vetkat’s spirituality demonstrates a deep sense of respect and value for the ecology. Daily encounters with nature and humans are being shared, reflected upon, celebrated, or mourned with adults, youth, and children. He depicts the oppression of a first nation people in South Africa; his incessant pray for the provision of God in the basic needs of the [Khoisan] nation; their longing for God’s restitution and liberation of the Khoisan to regain their identity, culture, political rights, and wellbeing as a recognized nation (Weinberg and Tomaselli 2014).

Drawing on Hopewell (1987, 17), we can assert that the first illustration reveals that Christ was already present in the existential struggles of the Khoisan nation. Ward (2017) supports this perspective as encapsulated by the mission of the apostle Paul. Paul discovered new Christ-like places and -peoples (Ward 2017, 7).

Furthermore, Hardy maintains that the concept “sociality” defines the action of God in the world (in Ward (2017, 5–7). Sociality, or the social life of indigenous people, shapes humanity in how it enacts the purpose of God in the world. These social life forms are precursors to where the Trinity engages people. Human society and indigenous nations’ language symbols and culture are contingent in nature. Sociality is hence “a dynamic shifting and complex reality. This complexity finds its origins in the Trinitarian life of God” (Ward 2017, 5–6). I argue, thus,



Image 1: Portrayal of the Circle of Indigenous Khoisan life, by Alma Jean Stockenstroom (2000). Permission granted by artist.



Image 2: Karretjie people: First Nation people of South Africa, by Anthony Noble (2025). Permission granted by artist.

that the Khoi and San nation's living experience is a dynamic, form of sociality in and through symbols of meaning and transformative power undergirded by life in the Trinity (Ward 2017, 7).

Similarly, churches draw their meaning from Christian and non-Christian sources (Hopewell 1987, 8). If it fails to appreciate its own culture it devalues its identity in God (1987, 9). Moreover, symbols and rituals are central to the religion and existence of the Khoisan—defining their indigenous culture, language, and identity (Lewis-Williams 2015, 206).

The *Karretjiemense* are constantly drifting throughout the Great Karoo. Ironically, they remain oppressed, complete strangers and excluded from political, economic, and social power, despite being first nation people of South Africa (De Jongh 2013, 1). Their entire existence—a “shifting home”—is a constant movement to nowhere (De Jongh 2013, 1).

Natural Nomadic Spirituality

The contributions of scholars such as Boff (1986), Bosch (1979, 2005), Botman (2004), Castro (1985), Gutiérrez (1984, 2004), Bevans and Schroeder (2004), Taylor (2005), and Verkuyl (1993) are used to support the notion of nomadic spirituality. In the lifestyles of the two indigenous groups dis-

cussed, an inherent, natural spirituality reflects their engagement with the environment, society, and God (Lewis-Williams 2015, 205). Obe Phillips, a minister in the Reformed tradition, reflects on a century-old tradition of the Khoi people caring and feeding to infuse a newborn baby. A special fire burns in their hut to symbolize the sacredness of the space. After the prescribed period of isolation, mother and child are ceremonially introduced to the community. Their bodies are anointed with the aroma of boegoe and rich animal fat which bear the meaning of protection and blessing (2024). This is one example of how indigenous communities practiced their Godly inspired spirituality as a natural phenomenon.

I would like to draw parallels between this indigenous “natural” spiritual practice and the way Jesus and his disciples practiced theology beyond the institutional church by moving from place-to-place teaching with parables, engaging in natural resources and impacting on church and society (Luke 10, 1-12; Wimberley 2020, 129). I agree with Goppelt that Christology was exemplified through Jesus' nomadic ministry in Jerusalem, Galilee, and Samaria (1983, 14, 24). Jesus' nomadic ministry captured by Gutiérrez (1984, xviii) who posits that to those who ask, “Where do you live?” Jesus answers, “Come and see.” Those who followed him became wanderers, nomads in strange and familiar places (Gutiérrez 1984, xviii).



Image 3: Karretjie people: First Nation people of South Africa, by Anthony Noble (2025b). Permission granted by artist.

I maintain, therefore, that the notion of nomadic praxes such as the Karretjiemense and Vetkat¹, their natural spirituality and constant movement, have eschatological implications. Their seasonal demographic shifts characterized by a grassroots spirituality resonates with the wanderings of Jesus and his disciples who avoided institutional Jewish praxes (Goppelt 1983). Reminiscent of a disengagement with conformity to the Empire and reengagement with the indigenization and continuing conversion of Christian spirituality (Guder 2000).

Zimmerli (1984, 216), reflects on Isaiah 55:12-13, Isaiah 40:3-5 to depict Israel's joyful exodus. In Isaiah 40:9-11 Yahweh is portrayed as the victorious shepherd, which Zimmerli (1984, 216) views as a nomadic event of a 'new exodus,' with greater depth and meaning than the Egypt exodus. Several nomadic lifestyle examples are found in the Old Testament (cf Numbers 24:5; Job 5:24; 9:27). Niringiye speaks of a dual dwelling—God dwelling among His people, and they dwell in Him (2014, 197):

... God dwells supremely in our midst through Jesus—the Word who became flesh, tabernacling with us (John 1, 14). Jesus... makes the church a dwelling place in which God dwells through his Spirit (1 Cor 3, 16). ... The

ultimate tabernacle/temple remains future (Rev 21) (Harper and Metzger 2009, 28). The church is a trinitarian community. [... an] eschatological community of the Triune God (Harper and Metzger 2009, 14).

Dwelling in the desert and desert practices demonstrated the spirituality of the Qumran Community of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and his disciples. God's people were always associated with nomadism or being pilgrims in the world (Zimmerli 1984, 893). I draw a parallel between Jesus' nomadic ministry and Israel's exodus from Egyptian slavery. Nomadism advanced "the need for mobility and hospitality for the traveler" (Zimmerli 1984, 893). Is this not how the fellowship of brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ should exist (Berkhof 1983, 384)? The Christian Qumran community as reflected on by Matthew, Luke, John the Baptist, and Jesus through their grassroots movement focused on metanoia and repentance as an eschatologically motivated movement (Luke 13:34-35; 6:22; Matthew 11:18-19). Christological belief was understood as the fulfillment of faith, grace, and salvation (Schillebeeckx 1983, 11, 117, 407), and human dignity (Botman 2004).

The Jesus movement was a renewal movement within Judaism as transition from its institutionalized praxis, according to Theissen (in Botman 2004). Theissen defines this movement as "a deep-seated crisis, a deep-seated change in terms of role, structure and fundamental change" (in Botman 2004,

1 "A human group which changes its area of residence seasonally within a larger domain which is its home territory. The patriarchal period was largely a time of nomadism for God's chosen remnant (Douglas 1977, 892).

510). Hence, the Jesus movement evolved from a crisis of renewal in Palestinian Jewish society into a mutual community between the Jesus movement and Jewish society (Boman 2004, 510). At the heart of the Jesus movement lies the principle and praxis of “living as if the status quo is not an eschatological imperative” (Botman 2004, 513).

Drawing from the discussion thus far, I maintain that there is a relation between nomadic indigenous spirituality and the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, undergirded by the writings of several scholars (Zimmerli 1984; Botman 2004; Gutiérrez 1984).

Theoretical Framework for Nomadic Spirituality

Gutiérrez (1984) locates the pastoral spiritual journey of Christians in Latin America within “a deep, personal experience of the living God in the midst of the struggle for justice and peace (xv).” The spirituality of liberation touches every dimension of life (Gutiérrez 1984, xv). His Christ-centered spirituality is quintessential for a spirituality of liberation—a dynamic spirituality of the continually new movements of the Spirit among the suffering and poor people of God (Gutiérrez 1984, xix).

Bosch (1979, 13), on his part, holds that spirituality resonates with being the sending embodiment of Christ “into the heart of the city and its turmoil,” such as Mother Theresa in Calcutta: “Touching the poorest of the poor, she says, means touching the

body of Christ” (1979, 13). In 1952 the Lund meeting of “Faith and Order” reminded the church that it is perpetually “called out of the world and sent into the world” (Bosch 1979, 15). I posit that the church should resemble nomadism because it should, according to Bosch, “be a stranger and at the same time at home in another place” (1979, 24). Bosch (1979, 58) undergirds my point of the nomadic nature of the church as he defines the true nature of the church as “moving from one culture, ethnic, linguistic, or sociological reality” as supported by Illich’s view that the church should move “beyond its social boundaries; beyond linguistic boundaries” (in Bosch 1979, 59).

Although Bevans and Schroeder (2004, 121) use the concept *peregrinatio pro Christo*, wandering for the sake of Christ, to depict an ascetic ideal of pilgrimage inherited from Irish monks. It nonetheless shows a similarity with my notion of a Christo-nomadic-praxis. Moreover, Nouwen (1984) portrays the spirituality of the desert with the notion of “flight.” The desert fathers and mothers perceived it as a way of disengaging with conformity to the world (Nouwen 1984, 13–15).

Boff (1986, 26, 69), from a perspective of a preferential option for the poor, coins the concept *Christ-Spirit-Church* as an innate dynamic divine movement and presence within and beyond the church. The imperative of being sent with a prophetic witness to reinvent churches and reconfigure new social realities is at the heart of the mission of the whole church (Boff 1986, 27, 32–33). Castro (1985, x)



Image 4: Nomadic spirituality, by Anthony Noble, 2016. Permission granted by artist.



encapsulates a futuristic dynamism of how the church should advance “Christian freedom from the perspective of the Kingdom of God” by opting for a preferential praxis for the poor. He calls, for example, on churches in Korea to share all the gifts of the church with the poor (1985, 8). Furthermore, Oduyoye, as cited by Castro, calls for the revolutionization of African Christianity through African spirituality. Building on African spirituality, Dickson, as cited by Castro, points to a “continuity between the Old Testament and African life and thought,” as exemplified by the Exodus story and Jesus’ earthly ministry (1985, 12). The role of the nomadic church community becomes even more imperative in the diaspora.

Following Gutiérrez (2014, 36–37), we can concur that African spirituality can inspire a new Christendom in search of a just society. In so doing, I concur with Congar, as cited by Gutiérrez, that the “church fulfills her mission to be the soul of human society.” The church is in essence a subversive nomadic movement with revolutionary intent (Gutiérrez 2014, 75). Church is only true Christo-praxis church if it touches the poor (Matt 5:23-24; 25:31-45 Gutiérrez 2014, 132).

Verkuyl (1993, 369) argues that the church of Jesus Christ will only mature when the Kingdom of God is fully revealed. Neither is it limited to one nation. There is a “cross over to the nations of the world... realized from nation to nation, culture to culture with a continuous breakthrough” (1993, 370). Following Martin Luther, as cited by Verkuyl (1993, 416), the church is consistently being cared for and carried by Jesus Christ. The essence of the church is a nomadic fellowship continuously on route to the kingdom of God (Verkuyl 1993, 416). In the final analysis, Anglican theologian Niringiye (2014, 197) concurs that the metaphor “journey” defines the character and nature of the people of God.

Nomadic spirituality can be grounded in what the postmodern scholar Taylor (2005, 81) coins as “spiritual tourism as a built-in craving for spirituality” and “images of God with a relational magnet that pulls us towards wholeness with the Divine.” Based on research of Hay, Taylor undergirds a relentless quest for spirituality by those on the periphery and beyond the church (2005, 81). He accentuates this quest with the metaphor of a home fire, *ahika*. It attracts tourists across the globe “gathered around it, yarning, sharing their pilgrim tales” (Taylor 2005:163). Home fires are indicative for nomads: “Keep the home fires burning, so loved ones

will always return” (Taylor 2005,163). Being called out of the world and sent again into the world is to be simultaneously a stranger and at home on foreign soil (Bosch 1979, 46). The apostle Paul’s traveling in the world was a constant rediscovery of Christ (Ward 2017, 7).

Thus, faith communities should be nothing short of being nomadic Christopraxes—reconstructing and mobilizing the world in the struggle for liberation of the poor (Botman 2000, 208–209). A case in point is how Vetkat portrays an indigenous model of spirituality of a people conscious of their own fallibility and God’s existence and providence. Christo-praxis is in essence a spirituality of liberation (Gutiérrez 1984, xviii). I wonder whether the established institutional church, particularly the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, will ever reach out to embrace Christ in the wandering lives of the indigenous people to redress historic and contemporary injustices.

New Ecclesia Praxis: Repudiating Westernization and Colonialism

The house of the Lord, the tabernacle, was built with His direct instructions (Exodus 25:9; 26-27). The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle throughout Israel’s journey from slavery to freedom (Exodus 40:34-38). Based on 2 Samuel 7:2-13, I contend that the church is established in God, not human, religious praxeologies, which are futile and finite exercises (cf. Hebrew 8:2; John 2:19, 21; Mark 14:58; Revelation 11:19a). The Old Testament nomadic tabernacle symbolized God’s continued divine dwelling among His people.

God by His Spirit is the dwelling place of the people of God. A community in the Spirit, a dwelling of God in God. “Through the Spirit—the church became the dwelling place of God. An authentic Christian community on the journey itself” (Niringiye 2014, 116, 197).

The New Testament tabernacle in Jesus Christ became an embodied nomadic journey toward its ultimate culmination in the second coming of Jesus Christ. The New Testament church began as a movement without social influence operating from the margins of society (Gibbs and Coffey 2001, 226). Jesus did not write a book or church doctrines; he established a community of friends (Newbigin 1995, 89). Therefore, the conventional church, in my view, is a colonial Western institutional construct—the

capturing of the first-century Christian movement's mission and values for political, economic security, and social interests (Dulles 1983, 31ff). The Enlightenment consequently forced theology and the church to recognize institutions as futile, fallible, and relative (Hodgson 1988, 52): "Institutional or structural aspects will never be sufficient to constitute the Church—instead it would become a dead rather than a living body; an inauthentic sign of insignificance" (Dulles 1983, 64).

Hence, the call on the church to simulate Jesus' own ministry by transforming maintenance-minded churches into missional communities (Gibbs and Coffey 2001, 212). The church ought to be a mission-driven eschatological, trinitarian community of "the communal and co-missional God who reigns and dwells in its midst as the one to whom the church belongs" (Harper and Metzger 2009, 20).

The church, therefore, basically means "gathering into community," centered upon the reality of and presence of Christ. The church is an eschatological provisional pilgrim or nomadic reality (Hodgson 1988, 24; Berkhof 1983, 322; Dulles 1983, 97). Hodgson (1988, 13) refers to "new ways of dwelling humanly in the world," of experiencing the reality of the kingdom as present, although not yet finally realized (Hegstad 2013, 33).

If we are mindful of church history, then we will recognize that the church failed God's will as it sided with the powerful for its own benefit (Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Modise, 2017). It compromised the radical nature of its missional call by embracing injustice. From a Lutheran perspective, the true church should, or must, embrace an eschatological imperative to redress racism and injustice, in particular, culturally captured church praxes (Hegstad 2013, 38–39).

Bevans criticizes Christianization as being equal to Westernization and enmeshed with colonialism (1992, 76). I sense a similar awareness in Hopewell's (1987, 4) intention to create "a loose fellowship," based on intimacy, fellowship, and service. His objective may resonate with a search for the rebirth of the ecclesial community from below and beyond established structures (Boff in Hodgson 1988, 51–52). The driving force for such a quest should be informed by humanity's symbolic struggles (Hopewell 1987, 4). Hopewell was struck by the similarities of this "loose fellowship" and the bonding features he saw in African villages. Churches can only exist by developing a subculture—a complex network of signs and symbols and conventions (1987, 4–5).

Hopewell (1987, 5) concludes that faith communities are deeply enmeshed in symbols and signals of the world, gathered, and grounded in the church's own understanding and experience. Creeds, organizing structures, and programs do not constitute the essence of the church (Hopewell 1987, 5).

Thus, the basic church community introduces a new ecclesiological reality in building a living church en-route to liberating humankind rather than building structures (Boff 1987, 1,4). The church emanates from the people and should oppose institutionalism (Boff 1986, 8–9). For instance, clericalization is crucial to restore the church through a new praxis (1986, 32). Boff calls for a reinvention of the whole church from its foundations (1986, 32–33). Similarly, Hodgson proposes a new vision of ecclesia as non-racial, emancipatory, and transformative (1988, 52).

In a similar vein I concur that communion ecclesiology is only possible if it is based on justice (Doyle 2000, 126). Hopewell's missionary and ecumenical engagements on the African continent prompted an awareness of injustices perpetrated through colonialism. Local faith communities should therefore particularize their religious behavior and concretely express their faith (1987, 3). Faith communities encapsulate thick, meaning-laden stories which inspire their unique religious identity (1987, 3). This is only plausible through the eschatological gift of salvation and an imperative for freedom and justice (Hegstad 2013, 38).

Mukdani's notion of not "overemphasizing colonialism as a cultural or epistemic phenomenon" and not to "waste energy to challenge the legacy of colonialism" (2013, ix), impoverish our cause to rid society of the pervasive nature of colonialism. Human suffering in the world is so severe that none of us can claim to be innocent. The crisis of humanity is due to the legacy of past theological projects and Christian ministries (Jennings 2013, ix).

For instance, Antonio (in Maluleke 2022, 6) posits that Black Theology highlights numerous crises in Christian theology, namely the discursive structure of theology in terms of the social location of Black humanity regarding Black experience (Weinberg and Tomaselli 2014). African theology and Black Theology have indeed exposed these crises in crafting Christologies from the lived experience of the suffering and oppressed (Maluleke 2022, 3). The severity of pervasive systemic injustice ravishing Black communities, as well as first nation peoples such as the Khoisan, and people across the world, leaves practical theology in a crisis (Maluleke 2022,



6; Adonis 1982). The need for the deconstruction, of particularly Western theology, is critical if we are to build a theology fit enough to deal with the severity of the challenges of the oppressed and marginalized (Dames 2014).

Schreiter, therefore, challenges conventional theology in terms of how *context or circumstances* shape the response to the gospel. Localization, contextualization, indigenization, and inculturation of theology are methodologies which shape our response to the gospel as concrete and lively (Schreiter 1981, 1). In addition, Midge refers to a social linguistic process through which the inspirational and orientational traits of the Holy Spirit are defined as a metaphorical, articulated whole of Scripture (2013, 23). This process is grounded in human communities of justice, peace, and love (Midge 2013, 23). It holds the promise of a new living reality. Schreiter (1981, 3) calls for a new kind of Christian identity in terms of context and history—prioritizing contextual analysis and not conventional theology. Theological meaning-making within a cultural context should be grounded in indigenous theology. Contextual theology, the attempt to understand the Christian faith in terms of a particular context, is an imperative (Schreiter 1981:4–5). It is, in essence, practical praxis theology. Thus, the need to deconstruct conventional theologies which support institutional praxes and values.

Deconstructing Western Theology Tradition

In his thesis, *Political Eschatology from the Under-side*, Jennings (2013, xiii) undergirds Mukdani's eschatological-political notion of Christian hope. In so doing, he avoids Westernized notions of "progress" or "civilization." These notions were exposed for what was held for centuries as the ultimate of human achievements. Covid-19 laid bare the fallibility of such beliefs. Christian hope, however, is essentially grounded in the "yearnings of the lowly, the disinherited, and the marginalized" (Jennings 2013, xiii-xiv; Hegstad 2013, 38–39).

Deconstruction of Western theological traditions was quintessential. The synthesis between Western cultural progress and the core of Christianity was shattered (Jennings, 2013). The kingdom of God brought about the collapse of all structures of the world (Jennings 2013, xiv): "Christ is the crisis of civilization, of culture, of religion, even of what is

called Christianity" (Jennings, 2013, xv). However, the church became a pyramidal power structure (Guder 2000; Jennings, 2013, xv-xvi). The fourth century brought the church to a devastating reality of departing from Christ's example, a biblical movement of community by embracing a hierarchical Roman pattern and structure (Paget-Wilkes 1981, 50–51; Guder 2000, 6–9).

Advancing Constantinian institutionalization prompted the end of Jesus Christ's nomadic movement. Christ, I contend, is the crisis of any ecclesial praxis—the crisis of practical theology itself, particularly when millions suffer—while the church exists as an institution with multimillion rands of church buildings and bank accounts (Dames 2014). The cross of Christ bears implications for the church so imperative that it can never be discarded:

The true church to the gospel of Jesus Christ is grounded in the *missio Dei*. But the identity of the church is forged as a crucible to which it is called in discipleship as *ecclesia cruxis*, the coming of the cross. Sinfulness of the church recognized the church as the *peccatrix maximus*, the greatest of sinners in failing to honor its calling (Jenkins 2003, 180).

The church remains oblivious to how it serves and supports the wealthy instead of the poor. It is "in bondage to capitalism" and fixated on "cultural and religious individualism;" operating as "the buyer's market" for entertainment and marketing—national churches even "equates citizenship with church membership" (Niebuhr 2008, 24–25; Jinkins 2003, 181, 185).

Such churches value a morality of economic worth instead of values such as justice, humanity, and freedom (Niebuhr 2008, 25). However, a different view of the church offers a totally new perspective. Wimberley (2020, 129) illustrates how different it is to live in a village-based community. He coins the concept *relational refugees* to highlight the struggle of people in alienating, consumerist cultures who become isolated, separated from nurturing and positive relationships.

We should remember that hope is grounded in a theology of historical transformation (Jennings (2013, xvii). Therefore, Christian hope is true hope grounded in the suffering of Jesus on the cross as a historical-imminent event of the crucified God (Jennings 2013, xvii). Hence, the notion of a theology of the cross as a political messianic theology for the collapse of the Empire (Jennings 2013, xix, xxi). The kingdom of God signals a collapse of the status

quo, and the imminent transcendence of new life and cosmic wholeness—subverting any institutionalist church motives and praxes (Jennings 2013, xxi–xxii). Eschatology, therefore, is in essence political eschatology of Christian hope (Jennings 2013, xiii).

Dismantling Conventional Ecclesial Praxes

Hence, Christendom is nothing less than unacknowledged hypocrisy, a dangerous compromise between Christianity and the world (Niebuhr 2008, 4). Western Christianity consistently removed from its theology Jesus' own renunciation of human power (Guder 2000, 195): "Ministry is theology's polygraph, its infallible lie-detector test, revealing the truth of what the church believes and the identity of whom she worships—the God of the cross or the false deities of her cultural ideology" (Jenkins 2003, 196). Hence, political eschatology is a performative process, a subversive act in ecclesial praxes (Niebuhr 2008, 13). Therefore, a contextual ecclesial praxis presupposes the inclusion of the oppressed and marginalized (Mukdani 2013, 3–4).

From a Charismatic perspective, the Anglican theologians Walker and Parry (2014, 4) propose a structured ecclesia. I view it as a misrepresentation of the ecclesia, as it could promote the conventional institutionalized church. As a solution, the notion of networks could offer a new concrete contextualization of ecclesial theology. Church growth could be advanced through networks as sets of interconnected nodes (Castells in Lord 2012, 95). It could enhance the concretization of a new ecclesial praxis. My use of the term "ecclesia" does not refer to the conventional concept "church," which refers to an institutionalized church structured according to denominational tradition (Niebuhr 2008, 4). The term "ecclesia" here refers to a nomadic movement of Christians always en-route toward the eschaton. Hence, advancing de-colonialism can only profit the cause of those on the fringes of society (Kwok 2005). Therefore, the need to deconstruct religious heritages and conventional theology (Mukdani 2013, 4–5).

The South African Context

In South Africa, the contributions of African, Black, Liberation, and Feminist theology have sought to challenge white colonial domination (Maluleke

2022, 3,5; cf Oduyoye in Maluleke 2022). These theologies sought to redress injustices in class, religion, ethnicity, race and economic inequality (Maluleke 2022, 4; cf Ackermann 1990, 21, 28). These theologies often developed from a liberation of solidarity with the oppressed, exposing oppressive colonial theologies. It was a theology of critical thought and praxis as reflected in a theological cycle of reciprocal action and reflection (Ackermann 1990, 28–29).

The advancement of Black Theology by South Africa theologians was a defining period to subvert oppression. Contextual Theology became prominent and the reviving of African and South African Black Theology, materialized (Maluleke 2022, 5). Black Theology functioned from a crisis perspective of Christian theology, advanced discursive practices; centering social context in theology; and embracing the meaning of black humanity by challenging the systemic and pervasive genocide of Black people (Antonio in Maluleke 2022, 6). As such, Black theology subverted and redressed traditional western theological thought (1977, 122). Black theology advanced total liberation of all people in and through Jesus Christ (Boesak 1977, 12).

Following the discussion above, I suggest redressing conventional Christian theology by discarding any form of theology that oppresses and marginalizes people (Mukdani 2013, 5). Because of the pervasive political and economic power of white colonialists and Black neo-colonialists, this is an indictment for both the new political dispensation and colonial-oriented theology in South Africa.

Marginalized or voiceless indigenous people such as the *Khoisan* nation are an expression of "the kingdom of God" (Mukdani 2013, 6). As an ecclesia of freedom, it dismantles hegemony and institutionalized injustice (Mukdani 2013, 6). Truth-seeking justice is critical to transform society and liberate creation and the oppressed (Wolterstorff 2002; 2004). This is attained by dismantling and reconstructing a Western interpretation of doctrine and Scripture and elevating marginalized cultures (Mukdani 2013, 6–8). The praxis of missionaries was a typical colonial project maintaining Western interests and power over indigenous communities. Such missionary ecclesial traditions cannot claim to represent the kingdom of God (Mukdani 2013, 8–9,12). A new *kairos*-Church dawned with Covid-19, seeking to be missional, relevant, contextual, and liberating, dismantling centuries of being trapped inside Christianity's own walls (Beukes 2020, 1, 3).



However, racism remains a Eurocentric-colonialist virus (Mukdani 2013, 11). It is for this reason that Mukdani (2013, 13) argues for an intellectual border-crossing methodology. His notion of border crossing should also include the colonial cultural enclaves. A persisting crisis in some church circles is the practice which informs and structures the lives of Christians through Western experience and religious creeds, whereas Christianity in its core is a multi-nonracial praxis (Mukdani 2013, 14). Therefore, the prophetic church should prioritize local ecclesiological contexts in seeking “traces of God in their own history,” by designing new theologies from their cultural grassroots (Mukdani 2013, 14–15). For example, Vetkat’s artifacts demonstrate the Khoisan’s awareness of God’s providence. In addition, the insistent movement of the Karretjiemense may correlate with the eschatological reality of the “not yet” reality—a liberation praxis against western oppression and suspect missionaries (Berkhof 1983).

Goeiman (1998, 12) observed a cultural spirituality of apathy in two congregations where he ministered during the 1980s and 1990s. This spiritual culture of submissiveness and powerlessness is a direct result of historical oppressive, institutionalized missionary praxes (Goeiman 1988). As a minister it dawned on me that not all the congregants I ministered to were convinced to be converted or ministered to in terms of Reformed dogma, institutionalized norms and structures. Theirs was a distinct indigenous spirituality, vested in their own indigenous cultural experiences. Many of these members ultimately became either refugees from the church, de-churched, or spiritual seekers of communities which resembled their own indigenous idioms, language, and culture (Dames 2014, 60–120). Ultimately, institutionalization in these reformed traditions culminated in the loss of self-worth and identity among indigenous Christians such as the Khoi and San (Dames 2016, 72; Adonis 1982). No wonder the emerging church became a form of revised ecclesia, beyond traditional ecclesiology captured by Western culture. It is a concrete process of reclaiming the ecclesia movement as embodied by Jesus Christ (Mukdani 2013, 18). The Gospel and Culture Network may very well be an indication of how ecclesiology practitioners are reclaiming the ecclesia movement (Bevans 2005; Taylor 2005; Keifert 2006).

Eschatological Christo-Praxis: Embracing Nomadic Praxes

Christianity is in essence a religion of freedom—an ecclesia of freedom (Hodgson 1988)—an eschatological ecclesia of unity and justice (Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Modise, 2017). Therefore, eschatology is the essence of a renewed humanity and a new eon—a continuum of the renewal of human culture, humanity, and creation (Berkhof 1983, 319, 321, 323). This renewal is a performative action of the Spirit—a participatory event, intervening in history in an emphatic, holistic new way (Berkhof 1983, 328; Hegstad 2013, 39; 48). It is a historical power which touches us, transforms us, and enlists us for service in the continuing work of Jesus Christ (Berkhof 1983, 238). Hence, König broadens conventional Christology through a pneumatological eschatological perspective, “Jesus Christus die eschatos” with its tripartition (in us, for us, and with us) and the embodying of the eschatology (in Berkhof 1983, 523). Following Berkhof (1983), I hold that the eschatology is already present and observable in the culture(s) of the first nation people such as the Khoisan (Weinberg and Tomaselli 2014; De Jong 2013). Institutionalism of the church and colonialism and its destructive influences do not resonate with eschatology nor with the *eschatos*.

The vision and missional praxis of ecclesia is eschatological hope (Mukdani 2013, 19; Greenwood 2002, 43) that speaks of the lived realities of oppressed people (Wolterstorff 2002). Eschatological hope is the deconstruction of western societal power and the reconstruction of a counter society with an inherent counter-cultural consciousness (Mukdani 2013, 20). Vetkat envisions a harmonious society in equilibrium with fellow human beings and nature (Weinberg and Tomaselli 2014). To realize counter-cultural consciousness and harmonious societies, we need to enhance contextual theological praxes as politico-eschatological praxis engendering non-racialism (Mukdani 2013, 20). Politico-eschatological praxes seek concrete socio-cultural and ethical-political transformation (Mukdani 2013, 20–21). Vetkat’s equilibrium methodology is a silent yet revolutionary act for truthful transformation (Weinberg and Tomaselli 2014). This is the missional call of the church Jesus Christ envisioned and modelled.

The church is life, a shared praxis towards freedom and a new humanity (Giussani 2001, 5, 234). It

is the Holy Spirit that can inspire and orient God's eschatological new creation (Mukdani 2013, 23). Renewed faith in the invisible church remains at the core of Christianity as a continuing dialectic movement toward God and the world as commissioned by Jesus Christ (Niebuhr 2008, 50–51): "The Church is the continuity of Christ... a mystery of the community of believers" (Giussani 2001, 5, ix).

Eschatology, therefore, inspires a new way of reflection on the "church" as a grassroots faith community in continuous transit. As such, it is eschatologically grounded based on a non-institutionalized model (Mukdani 2013, 22–23). The church is the consecrated catalyst for a restored humanity (Dulles 1983, 98). It is a sign of recreation and redemption of creation from corruption (Hegstad 2013, 32). It calls for a collective response to resist oppression and totalitarian tendencies and practices (Hegstad 2013, 25). Human existence is characteristic of fragmentary, ambiguous histories of freedom (Hegstad 2013, 27–28). Indigenous nations (Weinberg and Tomaselli 2014; De Jong 2013) signify this ambiguity in their existence as vulnerable and marginalized people on the periphery (Mukdani 2013, 18). An ecclesia of freedom should therefore be nothing less than a context in which humanity enacts a mutual obligation for justice (Mukdani 2013, 29). Hence, ecclesial praxis is a performative ecclesiology which espouses the eschatological concretization of, for instance, indigenous cultures (Mukdani 2013, 20–29).

The objective of faith communities should be to advance Jesus' eschatological dream for a new humanity through the praxis of the kingdom of God (Newbigin 1997, 153). Therefore, the "church" should exist on the margins, always engaged in the reconstruction of theology (Mukdani 2013, 33). The entire existence of the *Karretjiemense* (De Jong 2013) is on the margins between fenced-off properties of farmers and provincial roads. How does this serve as a critique of economic, political power, and public theology? Perhaps a robust reconstructive contextual theology should prioritize the voice of these voiceless communities (Mukdani 2013, 33–34).

Therefore, Mukdani's notion of an ecclesia of freedom can advance justice-seeking, truth-seeking praxes. It requires a shift from ecclesial-centered to people-centered realities (2013, 37; Wolterstorff 2002). It is a shift from pastoral and ecclesial authority to a public missional ecclesiology beyond church walls (Van Gelder 2009, 95, 97–98). The eschatologically inspired formation of churches should be

shaped by indigenous cultural realities (Mouw 1999, 11–12). True people-centered ecclesial communities are characteristically non-racist (Mukdani 2013, 33). The *Confession of Belhar* refers, in this regard, to God who opts to stand on the side of the oppressed (Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Modise, 2017). However, I argue that the White cultural and economic interests of the Dutch Reformed Church diffused the radical witness of the *Confession of Belhar* with its toxic institutional vested interests. Resulting in the economic, moral, and ministerial disempowerment of a once vibrant, dynamic, and radical Christo-liberating church. It may very well remind us of the divide and rule tactics of the former apartheid regime (Botha 2009). I call on marginalized churches in Southern Africa to rediscover and regain that which is unique to them: their indigenous culture, identity and creativeness. We should perpetually redress racism if the church is to become a truly revolutionary reality (Mukdani 2013, 37).

Conclusion

Practical theology should advance the well-being of human beings toward God's preferred future—a futuristic nomadic church (Mukdani 2013, 40), "the eschatology as a continuum of renewal" (Berkhof (1983, 319). Hegemonic institutional church practices, which are at the root of the oppressive experiences of indigenous first nation Christians, should be dismantled (Mukdani 2013, 41;42). The two illustrations of indigenous culture reflect that life is not a fixed, structural reality, but a pilgrimage (Newbigin 1979). Jesus did not intend to establish institutional churches (Berkhof 1983). The church should embody and advance eschatologically, "not-yet," nomadic praxes of justice and freedom.

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Mutual Care Based on Earth-Centric Empathy in the Living Ecological Web

Heilim Choi

When efforts to address the environmental crisis are solely motivated by human-centric fears of threats to human life, there is a risk of overlooking damage to the Earth that does not threaten humans yet contributes to environmental degradation. This paper aims to shift the perspective from human-centric to Earth-centric, attempting to listen to the voice of the Earth based on a mutual relationship, and to seek practical theological wisdom arising from empathy toward the Earth. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of two case studies, the possibility of listening to and empathizing with the Earth is explored. Practicing such interspecies and Earth-centric empathy enables the reformulation of humanity's roles in addressing the climate crisis, creating a path for mutual care within the living ecological web. This process leads to a theological imagination of the eschatological Kingdom of God and ultimately constructs an Earth-centric practical theology.

Introduction

Listening is the primary task of both practical and pastoral theologies. Can we also listen to the voice of the Earth? This is an important question to consider as we face the ever-increasing urgency of the climate crisis, which threatens the livelihood of all living beings on Earth. Perhaps this is a radically different consideration from what practical and pastoral theologians have focused on. In Korea, for example, pastoral theology has mostly attended to individual care and support (Chung 2018, 254–257; Jeong 2018, 251–252). However, listening to the voice of the Earth responds to the invitation found in Bonnie Miller-McLemore's metaphor of the "living human web" (Miller-McLemore 1993). By expanding the scope of the web to all beings, the Earth becomes the central player in a new theological metaphor, the "living ecological web," which powerfully highlights the interdependence and interconnectedness of all creatures and the world.

In the metaphor of the living ecological web, the lived experience of the Earth is an important starting point for practical theological reflection. Lived experience assumes specific situations and contexts,

enabling empathy that can embrace complexity. Therefore, listening to the voice of the Earth in her lived experience is an appropriate starting point for constructing an Earth-centric practical theology.

Such Earth-centric practical theology critiques environmental discourses that call for action based on a sense of crisis for humanity. Efforts motivated solely by the idea that the environmental crisis is a threat to humans are human-centric and should be reconsidered, as this underlying motive implies that it would still be acceptable to damage the Earth if the crisis were not a threat to humans.

This paper deploys an interdisciplinary framework to present a practical theology of intersubjective and interspecies Earth-care. It first builds a conceptualization of what I consider an act of listening to the voice of the Earth. Then, through an analysis of two case studies, it explores and describes Earth-centric empathy as an essential human quality. Finally, it proposes the roles of humans in mutual care based on Earth-centric empathy within the living ecological web. This process invites us to imagine the ultimate eschatological Kingdom of God.

Listening to the Voice of the Earth

The spiritual care and counseling paradigm has moved away from its former psychoanalytic paradigm, where the therapeutic process heavily relied on the interpretations of experts. Today's relational counseling paradigm values the subjectivity of both the counselor and the client, believing that clients are the experts on their problems (Greenspan 1995, 57–69, 263–269; Cooper-White 2004; KimMin 2013, 18–22). Pastoral methods based on this kind of intersubjective relationship, according to Pamela Cooper-White, “can generate more openness to the shared wisdom that is generated at both conscious and unconscious levels” and “ultimately open greater possibilities for empathic listening and liberatory pastoral praxis” (Cooper-White 2004, 81).

This paradigm shift from the expert-patient relationship to intersubjectivity is lacking in human-Earth relationships. The Earth has been treated as an object to control under the technological, industrial, and development-focused paradigm. However, the relationship between humans and the Earth should not be viewed through the expert-patient paradigm either. The Earth is the expert on her problems and possesses excellent resilience and capacity to repair herself (Cho 2019, 55–57). Therefore, if we think we can take care of the planet unilaterally, it would be as arrogant as the modern idea that the planet is manageable. The Earth is neither an object of exploitation nor of one-sided care. We must begin to see the Earth as a subject in a relationship of mutual equality.

When the Earth is regarded as a subject in a relationship, we must start to listen to the Earth. However, can humans truly listen to the voices of beings who speak different languages and belong to different species? South Korean biologist Jae Chun Choe, who identifies as an advocate for animals who “cannot afford to hire a lawyer,” states in his opinion columns “Defense for Migratory Birds” (Choe 2007) and “Defense for Wild Boars” (Choe 2019a) that people often perceive migratory birds and wild boars as sources of infectious diseases like Avian Influenza (AI) and African Swine Fever (ASF). However, Choe notes that, contrary to human perception, humans play a crucial role in transmitting these viruses through the distribution of animals and feed. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the lack of genetic diversity in domesticated animals and factory farming practices contribute to the rapid spread of these viruses, for which humans are re-

sponsible. He argues that the practice of culling animals to eradicate viruses, a form of genocide, is never justified. Instead, he asserts that coexistence, rather than eradication, is the way forward (Choe 2007, 2019a). Choe further explains that animals communicate a clear message to humans. He cites cases such as a dolphin caught in fishing lines and a fox trapped in a glass bottle, who approached humans for help to release themselves from the traps, and an orangutan clinging to forklifts to protest against the cutting down of trees in their habitat. Possibly the mass animal casualties at festivals like the Hwacheon Sancheoneo Ice Festival¹ and the Hampyeong Butterfly Festival² leave a visceral message that humans need to heed (Choe 2019b). Through these examples, Choe endeavors to listen to their messages by interpreting their lived experience in their specific situations, their suffering caused by human treatment, and their gestures and requests. This leads to the question: Is it possible for us to listen to the voice of the Earth?

What is the voice of the Earth, and what would the Earth's voice sound like? Increasingly unpredictable climate change, natural disasters, viruses from animals, and all the changes on the planet can be seen as clear signs, expressions, and voices of the Earth's suffering. Just as the symptoms of one person's reaction to another's violence can be devastating but contain a clear message, the changes on the planet that threaten humanity contain the reproaching voice of planet Earth, maybe screaming in pain. Understandably, since the Industrial Revolution, the Earth has been exploited at an increasingly accelerated pace and colonized by the endless pursuit of economic profit and growth, driven by capitalism and neo-liberal rationality. The human actions that

1 Sancheoneo is a species of trout farmed in various areas and released into the frozen rivers around Hwacheon in January. During the festival, hundreds of thousands of people flock to Hwacheon to try ice fishing and bare-hand fishing for sancheoneo (Park, Chung 2021, 182–185). According to San-Ha Kim, director of the Biodiversity Foundation, around five hundred thousand sancheoneos are released and killed during this period (Kim 2018).

2 Scheduled for late April to early May, near family-related holidays, the Hampyeong Butterfly Festival attracts large numbers of visitors. Visitors can interact with butterflies released in the region. However, as the butterflies are artificially hatched in advance and are not native to the area, they barely survive the festival period and are discarded after the event (Kim 2018).



ignore the living ecological web have destroyed the Earth, harmed humans, and pained God.

Can hope be found? If humanity's actions are so harmful, wouldn't it be better for the planet if humans were to become extinct? From the perspective of the Earth, would there be a rationale for preserving humankind to coexist with and on the Earth? In the following, I will attempt to answer these questions and explore what human qualities are required, using Earth-centric empathy to find the answers.

Earth-Centric Empathy as an Essential Human Quality Navigating the Living Ecological Web

While biologist Edward Wilson is concerned about the rapid extinction and endangerment of many animal species since the advent of humans, he also notes that international policies and laws are changing environmental attitudes and practices for the better (Wilson, as cited in Choi et al. 2020, 278–282). This implies that there are increasing instances demonstrating humanity's success in caring for the planet. Therefore, in the following section, I will explore the concept of Earth-centric empathy as an essential human quality through two examples.

1. The Lesson of the Mass Reindeer Carcasses: The Work of the Ecosystem

One aspect of Earth-centric empathy is humble respect for the Earth without making intrusive judgments or actions. Such respectful regard has been exercised in Hardangervidda National Park in Norway. In 2016, 323 wild reindeer were struck dead by lightning in the high mountains of the park. Many insisted on removing all the carcasses, claiming that they would degrade the ecosystem by increasing rodent populations and that they were aesthetically unpleasant. However, the national park management chose to leave the carcasses in place, arguing that lightning is a natural phenomenon and that humans should not interfere with the ecosystem (Im 2020).

Their respectful trust in the ecosystem was rewarded with the opportunity to witness the beautiful unfolding of natural processes. Over two years, Shane Frank and his colleagues found that the carcasses attracted scavengers such as ravens and foxes, providing a pulse of nutrients and that rodents strongly avoided the area during the first year, likely

due to the high predation risk associated with the abundance of ravens (Frank et al. 2020). In another study, researchers mentioned that scavengers concentrated their activities around reindeer carcasses, dispersing plant seeds toward these nutrient-rich cadaver decomposition islands. This process potentially contributes to plant growth and generates diverse plant life. They concluded that anthropogenic manipulation can disrupt the ecosystem's cycling mechanisms by removing ecological functions from some plants and animals (Steyaert et al. 2018). In other words, excessive human intervention in the natural functioning of an ecosystem can destroy its abundance and virtuous cycle.

This exemplifies how humans have successfully practiced empathy for the planet by stepping back from excessive intervention. We must actively and radically reduce humanity's negative impact on the planet. It means relying on the resilience of the planet and humbly admitting that there are some things we cannot do.

2. The Community Model of Green Asia Network

The second example reveals a more complex exercise of Earth-centric empathy that enlists cooperative work. It involves both intraspecies and interspecies empathy. Starting in 2000, the Korean NGO Green Asia Network went to Mongolia. By that time, due to climate change, many parts of Mongolia had become deserted; livestock had died, and numerous groups of people had become environmental refugees. Ki Chul Oh, Chief Executive Officer of Green Asia Network, stated that Mongolia is the only country in the world, excluding the Arctic, where temperatures have already risen by 2 degrees Celsius (Oh 2017, 58–59). He also explained that people in non-industrialized countries like Mongolia cause the least damage to the planet yet suffer the most devastating effects of climate change; the resulting poverty in such areas can only be addressed by revitalizing the land (Oh 2017, 48, 111). Therefore, they spent three years planting 10,000 trees in a Mongolian village to rebuild the lives of the local people. However, the trees planted by Green Asia Network barely survived. To Oh's surprise, the reason for this failure was that the villagers, whose priority was to save their livestock, secretly allowed their animals to graze on the leaves of the trees. Therefore, their second attempt needed to address issues beyond planting trees (Oh 2017, 212–214).

In 2003, Oh and Green Asia Network began paying unemployed villagers a monthly stipend to plant and care for the trees. Also, guided by a local environmental teacher, six hundred students came on a field trip, chose their own trees, and continued to visit and look after the trees. Oh started envisioning a model in which people and land could be restored and grow together (Oh 2017, 210–211, 214–216). Here, his empathy operated in his analysis of the lived experiences of three main actors—the land, the trees, and the people—which I interpret as deep listening. In his first attempt, he heard the messages of the trees that died after being eaten by livestock; in his second attempt, he heard the messages of the trees that gradually came back to life with proper care. This made him realize that he needed to connect the needs of the land and the trees with the direct actions of the people. He examined the land's features and the people's perceptions and culture and then accordingly planned his next attempt. Knowing that NGOs would one day be gone, he focused on people's self-reliance and the relationship between the land and the people (Oh 2017, 214–216).

In 2007, Green Asia Network rented land in the devastated Bayannur area and asked the villagers to work on it. At first, the villagers were not invested in the task. They said, "Even if we work hard, the government officials, rich people, and foreigners like you will take everything away." Oh explained that "Their products have always been taken away. So, the idea of 'there is no point in working' and 'there is no tomorrow' is ingrained in them" (Oh 2017, 218–220). In understanding this, the villagers' frustration became Oh's through empathic listening to the history of the community. However, instead of simply accepting the feelings of hopelessness, he recognized these feelings as information about the villagers' situation. This frustration was addressed at the time of the potato harvest by transferring the decision-making power to the villagers: "Nobody who has not worked on this land can take a single potato. You have to decide for yourselves to whom you will give the potatoes" (Oh 2017, 220). He also invited and empowered the villagers to have a meeting to decide for themselves whether to plant potatoes again next year, how much of the harvest would be left for use as seeds, how to divide the potatoes for winter food, and how much would be given to the elderly and disabled. Furthermore, by elevating the hopes of the villagers and providing them with ongoing professional training, Oh got the villagers to form a community to plant trees and look after the

land themselves (Oh 2017, 221–226). Thus, the project developed into a community-building initiative that empowered the people to be self-reliant while nurturing them into the people the land needed.

In 2012, he organized a community meeting to set standards for acceptable absences, lateness, and workload, and he let those unwilling to improve leave the community. Some activists said, "You are imposing strict standards on poor people." However, Oh argued, "We are not here to help poor Mongolians out of pity. We are here to take responsible steps to counter climate change. They are not objects of charity, but they are our partners. This relationship requires them to take responsibility as well" (Oh 2017, 226–228). His comments reflect a desire for an equal and mutual relationship rather than one of just one-sided giving. Based on this relationship, he suggests a community model that restores not only the forest there or the lives of local people but also the relationship between the people and the land. In 2014, Green Asia Network's community model was recognized by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) as a sustainable land management model and received the 2014 Land for Life Award. It has also been recommended as a model for other countries suffering from desertification (Oh 2017, 208–211).

3. Earth-Centric Empathy as the Righteousness that God Calls for

Oh's account of his experience in Mongolia reveals an interesting theological point. He noted that when a tenth of the village area was forested, sandstorms disappeared and desertification stopped in that area. He also explained that one forest could protect ten times its own area (Oh 2017, 223). If so, this could be a case where the restoration of a part of an area leads to the protection of the whole area. The disaster sites of the climate crisis are haunted by a biblical account of the destructive crisis seen in Sodom and Gomorrah, overthrown as sulfur and fire rained down, where the whole city could have been saved if there had been ten righteous people. This is not, of course, to argue that natural disasters are God's punishing act upon the disaster site. Biblical scholar Ohyun Kwon claims that the focus of the Sodom and Gomorrah story is on God's search for righteous people and God's salvation rather than on God's judgment. Kwon interprets the passage as God's command to become the ten righteous people that this society and history need (Kwon 2005, 95,



222). Thus, what is the righteousness that the text calls for? Who are the ten righteous people that God is looking for? Furthermore, what are the implications of this righteousness for environmental issues?

When God informs Abraham of God's plan of judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, God says, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know" (Gen. 18:20–21 NRSV). There was a cry from Sodom and Gomorrah. Kwon observes that, just as God responded to the cries of the Hebrew slaves in ancient Egypt, God's salvation comes in response to a cry (Kwon 2005, 149). Ee Kon Kim also explains that the cry of agony forms the foundation of Israel's salvation history (Kim 1999, 528, 534, 550). Therefore, it is important that such cries are assigned to identifiable agents. Strangely, however, this text does not clearly identify the agent of the cry. In the absence of the agent, Kwon claims that there was no one to cry out to God except Lot and tries to prove that Lot was the only righteous man there (Kwon 2005, 152, 206–211). Later writings about Lot testify that he was righteous, as in the second letter of Peter: "and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard)" (2 Pet. 2:7–8 NRSV). However, there is no such description of Lot in the Old Testament, unlike Abraham or Noah, who are explicitly called righteous. As a result, scholars disagree about Lot's righteousness and why he was saved. Besides, Lot does not appear to have been in an abusive situation in Sodom and Gomorrah that would lead him to cry out. Critically, if Lot had cried out, the Bible would have stated so, just as it does in other contexts. Thus, who is the agent of the cry that is not written in the text?

I argue that it was the land that cried out and thus caused God to perform an act of salvation. Directly linking today's environmental degradation to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah that caused the land to cry out may have its limitations. Scholars describe the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah as abject moral and social decay, along with disregard for fundamental order and human rights (Kwon 2005, 151). However, it should be noted that the Hebrew Scriptures testify to the suffering and responsive Earth, reacting not only to the sins that humans commit against God but also to the violence and sin

among humans (e.g., Gen. 4:10–12, Gen. 6:11–12, Lev. 18:27–28, Joel. 1:10). The Earth suffers and cries out in response to the rebellion against God, violence among humans, and the direct exploitation of the Earth. Thus, the task of the righteousness that God called for in Sodom and Gomorrah may have been to listen to the cry of the Earth, to empathize with her, and to ease her pain.

Meanwhile, Kwon lists the commonalities of the righteous in the Pentateuch and mentions that one of the commonalities is that the righteous inherit the land from God (Kwon 2005, 122, 125). In this case, the righteous can inhabit fertile land, but when we shift from the human-centric perspective to the Earth-centric one, we see that the land receives the righteous as gifts who will neither violate her nor make her cry out. In other words, God is not for humans alone but for the whole created world. Thus, God hears and moves in response to the cries of the Earth.

In this sense, the Green Asia Network's community model can be seen as a righteous success and a case of stopping the cry of the land by empathetically listening to and caring for the land and rebuilding the relationship between the people and the land. The Norwegian national park's decision about the reindeer carcasses was also a successful case of empathy toward the Earth's ecosystem. Therefore, based on Earth-centric empathy, we should listen to the Earth and determine whether to back off from human interventions, as in the case of the reindeer, or to actively look for ways in which humanity and the land can restore a relationship of harmonious coexistence, as in the case of Green Asia Network. In discerning the possible action plans, we should also contemplate the roles of humanity in each of the two cases.

The Roles of Humans Practicing Earth-Centric Empathy for Mutual Care

1. Humans as Co-Creators: Providing a "Holding Environment"

First, humans can provide a holding environment where Earth-centric empathic listening can happen. In process theology, God's creation is not a one-time event but an ongoing process of mutual influence between God and the world of interdependence. God continues to create by persuading toward the highest possibility and well-being of all, and the

world responds to God's aim by emerging. Humans can choose whether to respond and participate as co-creators in God's work or deviate from God's aim. God co-experiences the results with the world (Suchocki 1995, 56–64). In the Green Asia Network's community model, humanity's role was to work with God as co-creators.

Donald Winnicott's "holding environment" can be a valuable concept to explain the role of co-creators. It refers to the good enough care provided by a primary caregiver who adjusts and adapts to the changing needs of a child. Winnicott recognized that mental disorders could result from critical deprivation of an appropriate environment. Thus, he mentioned that the therapeutic act in counseling should include providing a holding environment that is supportive, consistent, and safe enough to facilitate the client's growth (Winnicott 2000, 60–102, 351–355). This concept of holding environment is now understood as a vital factor that needs to be provided not only in counseling but also in all forms of pastoral care. Therefore, as co-creators, we need to listen to and empathize with the voice of the Earth and strive to provide a holding environment for the Earth.

2. Humans as Co-Creatures: Hoping for a "Holding Environment"

At the same time, we are also co-creatures. Despite our best efforts, we cannot fully understand and empathize with the planet, so we should humbly acknowledge our limitations. Just as in the case of the national park that left the reindeer carcasses unattended, there are times when humanity needs to step back. Now, as co-creatures, we rely on the power of creation and the resilience of God and the Earth, hoping for a holding environment. However, when it comes to the pain and suffering that could be caused by the Earth, already reaching the limits of her resilience, we need to cry out in solidarity, hoping for the Kingdom of God, where neither humans nor the Earth needs to cry out.

3. A Hopeful Vision for Earth-Centric Interspecies Empathy

Earth-centric empathy is a complex and abstract concept. It constantly requires us to listen to the voices of other species. Can we put this into practice in our daily lives and perform the roles for mutual care? A glimmer of hope that species differences

may not be a barrier to empathy can be found in the recent popular Korean drama *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. Young-woo Woo, a female lawyer with autism spectrum disorder and exceptional intellect, faces various forms of discrimination because of her differences from others. She possesses a special love for and knowledge about all kinds of whales and listens to their sounds through her headset on the subway to calm her nerves. Whales swim and leap in her mind when she gains insightful perspectives on her cases. She even engages in dolphin liberation protests on her days off.

Choe explains that whales are unique in the wild for actively caring for other disabled or injured individuals. Since whales breathe through their lungs, they risk sinking entirely in the water when injured or exhausted. However, other whales would carry them on their backs to help them breathe. Choe speculates that this may be why Attorney Woo has a particular affinity for whales and suggests that "The world she envisions is a world of whales" (Choe 2022). Of course, Choe is addressing intraspecies care in this context, drawing a parallel between the whales' care for other disabled individuals and the issue of disability discrimination in human society. Nevertheless, the consistent acts of care among whales, Attorney Woo's active involvement in dolphin liberation protests, and the love and concern shown by people for the extraordinary Attorney Woo may signify that we are capable of listening to other species and demonstrating empathetic behavior towards different species.

This kind of symbiosis, based on interspecies knowledge and empathy, is often described as the eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God. In the first Kingdom of God, there is a scene in which Adam names all the animals in the Garden of Eden. Cha Yong Ku argues that Adam's act of naming the animals does not imply human dominance over them; instead, it suggests an intimacy between animals and humanity (Ku 2015, 213–215). Additionally, as in Isaiah, where "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11:6 NRSV), the Kingdom of God we ultimately seek is a kingdom of interspecies empathy. Therefore, Earth-centric empathy is not a mere choice but an essential quality for those who seek the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, the expansion of practical actions based on Earth-centric empathy can be an experience of the Kingdom of God in the world.



Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to construct an Earth-centric practical theology through an interdisciplinary analysis. I have argued that humans need to listen to the voice of the Earth in the living ecological web and play roles in mutual care based on Earth-centric empathy. Earth-centric empathy at times involves seeking ways for humanity and the Earth to coexist while working as co-creators to provide a holding environment for the Earth and all living beings. At other times, Earth-centric empathy requires us to step back from excessive human intervention on the planet, hoping for a holding environment as co-creatures. This kind of interspecies empathy invites us to envision the Kingdom of God. In that kingdom, there will be no more cries of the Earth, no more cries of anyone like those heard in Sodom and Gomorrah. As is declared in the book of Isaiah: "I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress" (Isa. 65:19 NRSV).

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Revitalizing Ecological Vocation: Transformative Ecological Practices in South Korean Churches

Eunjin Jeon

This article examines the role of the Protestant church in addressing the environmental crisis in South Korea. The predominant evangelical church—with its focus on the prosperity gospel and neoliberal values such as capitalism, individualization, and privatization—often hinders the development of practices that promote social change, including ecological justice. This article argues for a theological reevaluation of human vocation as represented in Genesis 1 and 2, advocating for a revitalization of human vocation as stewards who integrate ecological faith and recognize humans as part of nature. By examining the Beautiful Presbyterian Church as a model, the paper suggests three ecological practices for all churches: sustainability, mutual living, and earth justice.

Introduction

Over the past three years, South Korea has experienced a significant surge in its annual average temperature, increasing by approximately 2 degrees Celsius, according to data reported by Statista Research (EDGAR/JRC 2025). The rapid economic growth following the Korean War (1950–1953), often referred to as “The Miracle on the Han River,” has created fiscal opportunities and substantial environmental challenges. The heightened levels of pollution have resulted in severe environmental repercussions, including deforestation, the degradation of wetlands, a decline in agricultural productivity, climate change, and a reduction in water supply. These environmental issues underscore the complex interplay between economic development and environmental sustainability in South Korea.

Amid South Korea’s escalating environmental crisis, a study conducted by the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission in July 2021 revealed that 98.8 % of respondents perceived environmental pollution as either severe or very severe. Conversely, only 2.2 % of respondents considered environmental pollution not to be severe (Anti-Corruption 2021). This data evinces how South Koreans are keenly aware of environmental crises. Despite the heightened environmental awareness and con-

sciousness among the public, including various congregations, Korean Christianity appears to deprioritize the climate crisis. In other words, congregational practices do not seem to be interconnected with environmental issues, which contrasts with the public’s high awareness of environmental pollution in South Korea.

Instead, the Korean faith community, particularly evangelical churches, tends to emphasize personal spiritual growth and the communal development of their congregations through evangelical practices. For instance, a visit to a typical Korean Protestant church during its Sunday worship service, or participation in congregational activities, will likely reveal sermons focused on themes such as the life of faith, spiritual disciplines, the good news, and communal aspects of church life. Church activities often include Bible studies, prayer meetings, community volunteering, and various religious initiatives aimed at evangelization. However, it is challenging to find sermons or religious practices that address ecological crises as common elements within the general ecclesial context, despite the public’s high level of concern regarding the ecological crisis in South Korea.

This article addresses this critical question: “Why have Korean Protestant churches focused predominantly on the evangelical growth of individu-

als and communities rather than addressing the ecological crisis in the Anthropocene?” In examining this issue, the article critiques Korean Protestant churches for their negligence of the climate crisis, despite heightened social awareness of environmental pollution.

By analyzing the historical development of the Korean Protestant church into its current evangelical form, this paper reveals how its explosive growth was accompanied by the adoption of neoliberal values, including capitalism, individualization, and privatization. These values were often pursued at the expense of addressing environmental concerns. Consequently, the Korean Protestant church frequently fails to become a life-giving community for all creation, including non-Christians and the natural environment. “God in Christ promises abundant life for all creation” (Bass and Dykstra 2008, 1). The Korean Protestant church is poised to become a life-giving community, serving as an agent of God to lead all of creation to an abundant life.

The evangelical Korean church, which prioritizes the promotion of the prosperity gospel aligned with neoliberal values such as capitalism, individualization, and privatization, is unaware of ecological justice, and this lack of awareness is prohibiting it from becoming an agent of ecological justice. Addressing this imperative necessitates a theological reflection on the human vocation as portrayed in Genesis 1 and 2—specifically as priests and farmers—a concept that has long been integral to Christian practice. Rediscovering stewardship as the human vocation, particularly within the context of the Korean Protestant church, enables it to cultivate an ecological faith that emphasizes coexistence and mutual living with all creation. Drawing on practical wisdom gleaned from the Beautiful Presbyterian Church as a teaching model through qualitative research, this paper explores three ecological practices: 1) sustainability, 2) mutual living, and 3) earth justice.

Environmental Implications of the South Korean Evangelical Church

The South Korean church focuses on each individual’s spiritual growth, referred to as Christian spirituality, and the quantitative growth of congregations through evangelical practices. As for South Korean Christianity, it has adopted an evangelical approach rather than engaging in social change.

Helen Jin Kim, a historian of Christianity, explains that South Korean Christianity grew from less than 5 % to nearly 20 % of the population by 1980 during the Cold War era, reflecting the long evangelical influence on Korean Christianity (Kim 2022, 16). Kim analyzes how the term “evangelical” in South Korea is defined in opposition to social engagement and emphasizes “individual conversion as a means for social change” (Kim 2022, 157). The evangelical practice of the churches predisposes congregations to respond to ecological crises that can have detrimental effects on the environment in the Anthropocene.

The evangelical Korean churches have not acted as stalwart agents for ecological justice, but instead have promoted the prosperity gospel, based on neoliberal values such as capitalism, individualization, and privatization. Riding the train of rapid economic growth, the evangelical Korean churches often prioritize the quantitative growth of the church community.

These churches have aligned themselves with the logic of global capitalism (Lee 2007, 394). For practical reasons, the primary measures of ministers’ quality and the integrity of their proclamations are based on quantitative factors, such as church membership growth, the number of church attendees, and the physical size of church buildings (Lee 2007, 394). Ministers are required to ensure the quantitative growth of the congregation as well as the size of the church. Upon reflection, my effectiveness as a minister was often assessed based on the number of congregation attendees and the growth of the educational ministry under my leadership.

Within the capitalistic framework of church ministry and alongside the evangelical prosperity gospel, the church practices and encourages congregations to pursue individual well-being and material wealth. South Korean theologian Kyu Tae Son argues that South Korean churches have become exceedingly conservative and deeply immersed in a capitalistic, success-oriented, and prosperity gospel mindset (Son 2010, 202). Consequently, most South Korean churches have focused exclusively on spiritual salvation, often neglecting community solidarity, social responsibility, and service (Son 2010, 202).

In its pursuit of neoliberal values, the evangelical church in South Korea often focuses primarily on its own congregation while neglecting broader concerns for all of creation, including non-Christians, animals, and the biosphere. Hochul Kwak high-



lights that, from an ecological perspective, many churches in South Korea do not prioritize environmental considerations during construction, often opting for less sustainable building methods due to financial constraints (Kwak 2019, 13).

An illustrative example of this lack of environmental consideration is the widespread practice of installing red neon crosses on church towers ostensibly for evangelistic purposes and driven by a competitive desire to outshine other churches. Unfortunately, this practice inadvertently contributes to problems such as light pollution and unnecessary energy consumption. The financial investment in such evangelistic efforts in South Korea exceeds 1.0 billion won monthly, nearing 20 billion won annually, just for illuminating these crosses (Lee 2011). While many non-Christians argue that these red neon crosses disrupt their well-being, such as their sleep quality, evangelical churches assert they are not liable for any such disturbances, as the cross remains a fundamental symbol of their faith.

As South Korea is prone to powerful typhoons, these neon crosses can pose public hazards. In 2019, steeples from several Protestant churches, including some in Changdong City, Dobong Province, collapsed due to strong winds and obstructed streets and caused localized power outages after falling onto power lines (Hyun 2019). Despite these dangers and ecological concerns, the majority of churches continue to install red neon crosses on their towers for evangelistic purposes.

Last but not least, individual Protestant churches, especially megachurches and similar well-established ones, have taken the lead in constructing numerous retreat facilities in remote mountainous and rural areas. These retreat centers and churches are often established with a strong emphasis on privatization, justified by the pursuit of salvation and personal blessings (Lee 2007, 397). Unfortunately, the evangelical approach to practicing faith in Korean churches, influenced by the teachings of the prosperity gospel and the pursuit of neoliberal values, has inadvertently worsened environmental issues in these rural and mountainous regions.

Theological Reflections on Human Vocation

Theological reflections on human vocation have the potential to address the inadequate response to ecological issues in the evangelical churches during the

Anthropocene era. The Korean church has traditionally interpreted human vocation primarily through the lens of priesthood, as depicted in Genesis 1. Specifically, Genesis 1:28 grants “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth,” and this has shaped the theological assumption of unilateral human dominion over creation, both in theory and practice. Biblical theologian Theodore Hiebert argues that the image of human dominion and distinctiveness in Genesis 1 reflects Israel’s self-understanding as a priesthood (Hiebert 2000, 138).

Undeniably, the idea of human dominion over nature as a primary human vocation can be traced back to the Judeo-Christian tradition and has been widely accepted. Lynn White Jr. argued that the Judeo-Christian tradition was the main factor behind the contemporary environmental crisis (White 1967, 1250–55). Building on this renowned argument, the prioritization of human vocation as a form of priesthood gave humans the authority to “have dominion” over the earth and its inhabitants, leading to exploitative practices that have resulted in our current ecological crisis. In particular, the South Korean church, embracing neoliberal values, attributes authority and human power to justify itself as a priesthood, thereby asserting Christian dominance over all creation. This interpretation of the human vocation as a priesthood allows the South Korean evangelical church to cultivate an anthropocentric faith, emphasizing dominion over nature, as previously discussed regarding the environmental implications of the South Korean church.

In addition, the priesthood as a human vocation, prevalently embedded within the Korean evangelical church, may inadvertently contribute to the exploitation of nature and the formation of dualistic perspectives: church versus world, evangelicalism versus social change, sacred versus profane, Christian versus non-Christian, and human versus nature. These dualistic perspectives, already prevalent in traditional Christian theology influenced by Greek philosophy, have been further entrenched by Korean evangelism. This entrenchment has led to detrimental effects, including environmental degradation, as the emphasis on church growth and expansion has overshadowed a holistic view of all creation, including non-Christians and nature as sacred. Korean evangelical activities aimed at increasing the quantitative number of congregations hinder the interconnection and intertwining of their faith with the ecological crisis. Furthermore,

in the context of South Korea, which features a multi-religious landscape, the church scarcely works in solidarity through ecumenical and interreligious dialogues toward ecological justice.

All of God's creation is deemed sacred (Moore 1998, 145), encompassing not only humanity, including non-Christians, but also the biosphere. It is incumbent upon the evangelical Korean faith communities to acknowledge this sanctity and to live out a faith that fosters the flourishing of all life. As an initial step toward this end, this paper proposes a rediscovery of the ecological vocation of humans as farmers, framed within the concept of stewardship. The other metaphor of human vocation as a farmer, as presented in Genesis 2 and 3, has frequently been overlooked and insufficiently represented within the Korean church. In the Anthropocene era, it is crucial for the Korean church to rediscover and embrace the human vocation as farmers.

In Genesis 2 and 3, the Yahwist's depiction of human vocation, with a distinct emphasis on God's name as Yahweh, offers a unique perspective compared to the priestly image in Genesis 1. Here, human vocation is portrayed as that of a farmer, situated within the specific context of the Mediterranean highlands (Hiebert 2000, 139). In this narrative, human beings are not set apart from other forms of life but are intimately linked with them. Plants and animals are not created separately but emerge from the same arable soil from which the first human was formed (Hiebert 2000, 140). This understanding of human vocation as a farmer is further underscored by the task that God assigns to the first human: to till and cultivate the soil of the garden (Hiebert 2000, 140). When viewed through an agricultural lens, human vocation takes on the role of a servant rather than a master of the land.

However, the concept of stewardship needs to be evaluated to determine whether it reflects a human-centric worldview. Recognizing humans as an integral part of nature underscores interdependence with the earth rather than dominion over it, as emphasized by Pamela McCarroll:

Until the living web of humanity can be conceptualized within the larger living web of creation, our research and practice cannot help but serve human-centric ways of being in the world. The methodological emphasis on humans at the center eclipses paradigms and sources of knowledge outside a human lens and ultimately re-inscribes and normalizes human-centricity, the fundamental cause of the environmental crisis (McCarroll 2020, 36).

Pamela McCarroll underscores the notion that humans maintain a reciprocal relationship with the land, endeavoring to work in harmony with it while acknowledging their interconnectedness with the natural world. The development of stewardship, involving roles as stewards, custodians, and cohabitants, can be fostered through a theological framework that positions humans as integral components of nature, transcending a solely anthropocentric view. By recognizing their intrinsic connection to nature, humans can align their actions to meet the requirements and honor the limitations set by the overarching natural system that encompasses all its constituents. Consequently, humans are compelled to assess their activities in the light of the vitality of the broader biotic community to which they belong (Hiebert 2000, 151).

In proposing an ecological response for the Anthropocene era, Hye Ran Kim introduces the concept of "sang saeng" (相生), which translates as mutual life or co-living. This term signifies a deeply interdependent mode of existence (Kim-Cragg 2018, 84). The concept of sang saeng provides practical wisdom for Korean churches by encouraging them to critique and move beyond androcentric religious practices and worldviews. Instead, it promotes a path toward coexistence and mutual living with all aspects of creation.

Rediscovering the human vocation as a farmer to care for nature and recognizing that humans are a part of nature is crucial. Recognizing humans as an integral part of nature underscores interdependence with the earth rather than dominion over it. We, as Christians, must minister with the Earth to reestablish "an independent and intersubjective relationship between the human family and the rest of creation" (Moore 2022, 9).

Cultivating Ecological Faith: Beautiful Presbyterian Church as a Teaching Model

In the context of the evangelical church in South Korea, there is a renewed emphasis on the ecological vocation of farmers, aimed at reestablishing a profound connection between congregations and ecological faith. Jennifer Ayres, in her book *Inhabitant*, delineates ecological faith and proposes its cultivation for the faith communities. Ecological faith is defined as:



A faith that turns on the capacities necessary to inhabit God's world well. It is a way of life seeking to becoming loving, just, and responsible members of God's household. Defining and contextualizing ecological faith thus requires attention to three dynamics: the location and architecture of the ecological household in which humans belong; meaning of human life in this habitat; and the art, disposition, and practice of inhabiting this household. The way of ecological faith is, in short, faithful and responsible inhabitation. (Ayres 2019, 10)

Building on Ayres' insightful perspective of ecological faith, ecological practices within evangelical Korean churches necessitate a reevaluation of their place and role within the ecological framework to which Christians are intrinsically connected. Amid the climate crisis, these practices should evoke a profound sense of urgency, compelling the South Korean church to address such challenges with compassion and respect for nature, acknowledging its interconnected existence and moving beyond neoliberal ideologies. These endeavors should encompass community engagement, collective action, collaborative initiatives, and cooperative ventures aimed at preserving shared resources locally and globally, guided by the tenets of agrarian faith (Wirzba 2022, 22).

Given the church's central role in cultivating the human vocation as farmers and guiding congregations toward ecological formation and transformation, collaborative and communal practices of faith play a pivotal role in fostering ecological faith and practical ecological wisdom. These efforts should serve not only to educate, nurture, and transform church pastoral leadership and the congregation but also to promote coexistence with all creations, including non-believers, and the non-human elements of the natural world. Additionally, practical wisdom can be derived from ecological perspectives found in diverse religions such as Buddhism and Donghak, as well as from the indigenous practical wisdom of our ancestors. Although these insights may have receded from prominence, they still have the potential to contribute significantly to the flourishing of all creation.

In the pursuit of an ecological church in South Korea and the rediscovery of its ecological vocation, the Beautiful Presbyterian Church located in South Korea serves as a teaching model for what an ecologically focused Korean congregation might emulate. This church stands out as a faith community that actively integrates ecological principles, anchored in the cultivation of ecological vocation for

mutual living with the Earth. To investigate this church, I conducted an interview with the senior pastor, Gu Teak Jeon, visited the church in 2023, and reviewed articles and reports related to this church's ecological justice initiatives.

The Beautiful Presbyterian Church in Gimpo City is situated near Seoul amid an agricultural landscape and diverges from mainstream churches by emphasizing the cultivation of ecological faith. Unlike counterparts driven by neoliberal principles—capitalism, individualism, and privatization—aimed at congregation growth, this church prioritizes cultivating ecological faith within its community. The active engagements of approximately 1,400–1,500 congregants underscore the cohesive and committed community dedicated to advancing the church's ecological mission.

In my interview with Senior Pastor Jeon, he emphasized the theological motivation behind the construction of an ecological church by citing John 3:16. According to Reverend Jeon, "For God so loved the world" reflects God's love for all creation, including nature, insects, and the universe, as articulated by Craig Dykstra, who emphasizes that "God in Christ promises abundant life for all creation (Bass and Dykstra 2008, 1)." This theological framework laid the foundation of the mission of ministry focusing on ecological practice of faith, aiming to remind the Korean church of its responsibility as human vocation rather than solely on Christians. Reflecting this ecological vision, the congregation demonstrates its commitment through three main practices: (1) sustainability, (2) mutual living, and (3) earth justice.

The Practice of Sustainability

The Beautiful Presbyterian Church exemplifies a commitment to architectural sustainability through its construction practices. The development of the church was marked by a meticulous and patient dedication to sustainable principles, as evidenced by the two-year construction period and the intermittent expansion approach employed, wherein additional construction occurred as funds became available (Na and Choi, 2021).

The church's interior design reflects eco-friendly principles, incorporating innovative techniques such as cement panel flooring integrated with cultivated microorganisms to mitigate heavy metal emissions. The installation of strategically placed sliding windows further enhances natural ventilation, thereby improving the building's overall ener-

gy efficiency. This approach to architectural sustainability serves as a significant counter-narrative to the traditionally anthropocentric perspectives often associated with the construction of conventional churches in South Korea.

Furthermore, the Beautiful Presbyterian Church actively integrates sustainable practices into its daily operations and extends a welcoming gesture to individuals of all faiths. Notably, the church has installed a food waste collection bin in front of its gates, available to both congregants and local residents for the purpose of composting. This initiative exemplifies the church's commitment to sustainability and reflects a broader stewardship of the environment. The church's inclusive approach also serves as an invitation to non-Christians, underscoring its dedication to environmental responsibility while fostering a sense of community beyond religious boundaries.

The Practice of Mutual Living

Using the cost savings achieved during the church's construction, the congregation established an environmental center designed to serve as a hub for ministering with the earth. The center features raised gardens and a greenhouse, providing congregants with opportunities to cultivate herbs and vegetables, thereby nurturing their ecological faith. It also includes a dedicated hydroponic cultivation area for more advanced agricultural practices. The center is also home to a substantial population of over 1,200 chickens, demonstrating a commitment to sustainable food production.

The ecological ministry of the Beautiful Presbyterian Church extends beyond teaching farming skills; it also advocates for a profound shift from the human vocation of priesthood, which is ingrained in an anthropocentric worldview, to an ecological vocation as stewardship emphasizing the importance of an agrarian faith that coexists with nature, and even becomes a part of nature.

In line with this approach, many congregants actively engage in urban agriculture. This practice involves multiple generations, with the third generation continuing to nurture their ecological faith, which is rooted in love for others, respect for nature, and reverence for all living creatures. The organic harvest from the farm is regularly shared with non-Christians, and the farm's organic products are sold at affordable prices. Reverend Jeon noted that this initiative has even encouraged local Buddhist

monks to purchase organic food, thereby fostering potential interreligious dialogue.

The Practice of Earth Justice

The Beautiful Presbyterian Church actively engages in restorative environmental intervention. For the past seven years, the congregation has consistently put effective microorganisms (EM) mixed with baseball-sized dirt clods in the upper reaches of the Geyang Stream on a weekly basis. Reverend Jeon has spearheaded research and the use of EM, a group of beneficial microorganisms that are harmless to humans and animals. This ecological intervention aims to foster coexistence with the earth and integrate into the natural environment. As a result of these efforts, the water quality in the river has significantly improved to Grade 3 levels (Jin 2021). The church's unwavering commitment to environmental justice not only contributes to the restoration of polluted environments but also nurtures their ecological faith in alignment with their ecological vocation.

Their active engagement in ecological justice has not only impacted the city but also brought about a transformation within the church community. It has reshaped their perception of the church, contrasting it with evangelical churches that prioritize neoliberal values. Active participants within the congregation have undergone a transformation that mirrors the lessons learned from nature. Rather than attempting to dominate nature, humans should embrace the role of caretakers and stewards by recognizing their responsibility as an integral part of the biosphere.

Conclusion

In the Anthropocene, the evangelical churches in South Korea need to reimagine their practice of faith to encompass all creation that promotes abundance. Despite the challenges faced by evangelical churches in terms of their growth, an ecologically grounded reimagining of the practice of faith can offer an alternative path for their congregations, non-Christians, and nature. Shifting away from the established patterns of values and lifestyles associated with neoliberalism is no easy task. However, along with humility and consistent efforts on earth justice, rediscovering human vocation as stewardship in the contemporary world, the evangelical Ko-

rean church can be a transformative agent as a stewardship itself into an active embodiment of Christ for all creation.

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This book presents essays from transnational and multireligious contexts on how practical theology engages in multidisciplinary analysis of ecological crises and responds by integrating cultural, ethical, and spiritual perspectives into frameworks for sustainable Earth and human community. These peer-reviewed essays were written by participants in the 2023 biennial conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology in Seoul, South Korea, under the theme “Practical Wisdom in the Living Web of the Anthropocene.” The concept of the living human web serves as an implicit guiding metaphor, illustrating the intricate and interdependent nature of human connections, and emphasizing the relational ties that bind individuals, communities, and broader ecological and social systems. The contributions in this volume demonstrate communal and global effort to address environmental and social crises. Practical theology is framed as a resource for promoting not only analytical depth but also actionable responses rooted in justice, sustainability, and solidarity. Envisioning a practical theology of hope and justice, the essays present a rich tapestry of insights, questions, and aspirations, weaving together diverse strands of practical wisdom. The cover design of this volume was inspired by Jogakbo (조각보), a traditional Korean fabric patchwork technique symbolizing resourcefulness and unity. Just as small fabric pieces form a larger textile, the design reflects the global and communal effort of practical theologians from diverse backgrounds in addressing the environmental crisis and offering hope and justice.



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