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## **Ecology and Christian education: how sustainability discourse and theological anthropology inform teaching methods**

**Chad Rimmer<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction to the connection between sustainability discourse and religious education**

**T**heologians have been working for decades to build bridges between theology and the natural sciences for the sake of our common goal to care for our common home. The impact of climate change has layered this pursuit with a sense of urgency to build synergies between scientific knowledge and the wisdom and cosmologies of faith traditions. In particular, parallels between environmental ethics and ecotheology point to possibilities for bridging sustainability discourse and religious education. This paper will sketch the theoretical synergies, and point to pedagogical implications of some of the connections between sustainability discourse and a Christian ecotheological approach to religious education. The paper concludes with examples from Christian, Jewish, Muslim and interfaith contexts.

But first, we begin with a story. I completed my doctoral research at the University of Edinburgh. During that time, my family and I were members of St. Columba's by the Castle, a parish of the Scottish Episcopal Church. There was a man named Matthew who frequented the parish. He was a resident at the nearby homeless shelter, after having come to Edinburgh from shepherding in the Highlands. And as all good shepherds, Matthew was accompanied by his sheepdog named Patch. Matthew would always come to church and sit in the back with Patch. Finally, the goof members of St. Columba's convinced him to participate more fully in worship, and even become a communion assistant.

Around that time, the parish found itself in an interregnum, and by the grace of various communion agreements between Lutherans and Episcopalians, I was asked to be part of the clergy team. It was my pleasure to preside at the table that Easter Sunday morning. That happened to be the first day that Matthew was on the rota to serve in worship. It was the practice of communion assistants to bring up the elements of bread and wine, and stay standing in a circle around the table, as part of the priesthood of the baptized when the meal was consecrated. And so, Matthew came up the aisle with the bread, and Patch followed. I received the bread, and Matthew took his place beside me at the altar, with Patch sitting right by his side. And there, as we celebrated the cosmic inbreaking of the Lord of Life, in the context of this highest, holiest day of pronouncing the good news to all creation, there sat Patch, participating in the liturgy.

Weeks later, the congregation had begun its search for a new vicar. The process required the completion of a parish profile. Wanting the children to participate in the self-

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study, the vestry included the children's responses to each question. The first question was demographic. "Who are we?" To my joy, the official response began with the children's answer, "We are a lot of good people and one dog."

The point of this story follows Augustine's notion that we love what we know. The poet Walt Whitman reminds us, in the poem, "There was a child went forth", of the psychological truth that children identify with that which they come to know through play or wonder. And to know a thing is to love a thing. This is the pedagogical importance of liturgical worship and religious education. A child's identity, or intersubjective belonging expands beyond the boundaries of the rational or individuated self. A child incorporates the things that are included in pro-socially formative experiences such as worship, or education. To identify with the other non-human other, as self, is to love it. There are myriad possibilities for religious education to nurture a bio-social identity, and transform the egocentric into the ecological self. "We are a lot of people and one dog." What else can a child learn to love, care for, and sustain through ecologically oriented religious education?

A recent Innovating Pedagogy Report from the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities highlighted ten emerging didactic trends:

1. Learning with robots – *to assist with teacher assessment*
2. Drone based learning – *to get new visual and systemic perspectives*
3. Action learning – *problem-posing education that addresses real problems*
4. Virtual learning – *extends learning through modelling*
5. Making thinking visual – *mind maps*
6. Learning through wonder – *provoke curiosity of normal phenomenon*
7. Developing roots of empathy – *for example caring for a baby to teach empathy*
8. Place based learning – *extend learning to other environments*
9. Decolonising learning – *challenging normative voices and biases in education*

This list of pedagogical trends points us to several didactic connections between sustainability and religious education that will be revisited later in the paper.

### Conceptualizing the connection between science and theology

Because the relationship between sustainability and religious education rests on a more fundamental question about the relationship between theology and the natural sciences (*or faith and reason*) we need to begin with a more fundamental meta-observation about the way we think. Every philosophy (*e.g., educational philosophy, political philosophy, economic philosophy, ecological philosophy*) is rooted in an anthropology. Our way of knowing is shaped by our way of being. Or to say it the other way around, our belief about what it means to be human affects the way we define the function of a government, the nature of society, or the task of education. Think of the differences between the politics of Plato, Thomas Hobbes and Mahatma Ghandi. Their different political philosophies are not divergent, in the sense that they arrived at different conclusions about the role of the state to its people. On the contrary, they began from quite different definitions of human nature, which prejudiced their answers about the purpose and power of government. Like launching two boats in separate rivers, your starting place affects the outcome. So, any interdisciplinary attempt to relate pedagogical methods between sustainability and religious education, must be aware of the theological anthropology assumed in our questions.

Every theological question about God involves an anthropological question: *Who am I?* In this way, theology is more than philosophical questions about who God is. Theology is a faithful search to understand that which has been revealed about who God is for me. Every spiritual desire to connect in a meaningful way with the world around us begs the question, who am I as a creature in relationship to God (*coram deo*) and in relationship to the earth community (*coram mundo*).

In this way, theological questions are questions about our being-in-the-world. Both natural sciences and theology have wisdom to offer that is cosmologically significant. The natural sciences offer proximate questions about how we are in the world, while theology asks questions about the ultimate significance of our being in the world, or why we are in the world. There are those, like Stephen Jay Gould who hold that science and religion are in conflict, because they are simply non-overlapping magisteria.<sup>2</sup> This model upholds a strict fact/value distinction in which there is simply no possible synergy between natural sciences and religious education. But following Ian Barbour's four-fold typologies of the relationship between science and religion, there may be a certain independence, but they can certainly dialogue about the impact of our human being in the world, and perhaps integrate the nature of our being in the world with its ecological significance.<sup>3</sup>

Phenomenological experiences matter to both scientific enquiry and spirituality, as there is no purely rational or "scientific" mode of knowing. There is always an inductive experience and a psycho-social implication to the formation of our religious identity as it is for our ethnic, social, sexual identities. The Psalmist stood in wonder pondering the heavens, asking, what is a human that God is mindful of us in the midst of this universe? This seems like an anthropocentric question. But I want to suggest two things. First, it is not anthropocentric, because it asks the question of human nature in relationship to the cosmos around us (*coram mundo*). Secondly, this is the same question that non-human animals wonder about themselves, *coram mundo*. Evolutionary biologists use the term "agency detection" to describe an animal's ability to interpret its status in relationship to another being.<sup>4</sup> For an animal, as it was for early humans, this capacity to accurately interpret that relationship to another animal or the environment the difference between life and death. For example, one time when I was placing wood for a fire in the Appalachian Mountains, a black bear wandered into the property within 10 feet of me. My capacity to accurately interpret the disposition of the bear towards me was the difference between peaceably sharing space and escalating a conflict. So, seeking to understand my cosmological status in relationship to another being is not inherently anthropocentric. Phenomenological modes of field perception privilege relationships as data. I need the other to understand myself, which is deeply theological and ecological.

What does make a difference, as illustrated above, is the anthropological basis from which we seek the answer our questions, whether it is the cosmological question driving our religious pursuit, or the ecological question driving the natural sciences. What is the human being's relationship to creation? The answer largely depends on whether we begin with the

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<sup>2</sup> Gould, Stephen Jay *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2002, and "Leonardo's Mountain of Clams and the Diet of Worms", p. 274, Jonathan Cape, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Barbour, Ian. *Religion in an Age of Science*. Harper One, New York. 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Anthropologist Barbara King discusses the evolutionary and spiritual significance of agency detection in *Evolving God: A Provocative View of the Origins of Religion*. New York: Doubleday, 2007.

belief that the human being exercises a will-to-power-over in order to dominate or exploit, or whether humans exercise power-with other creatures in this open system called the cosmos. Science and religion have always had this in common. Whether scientists and theologians recognize it or not, theology, philosophy, faith, reason, natural/social sciences, and technology all operate with both of these different understandings of human being, and they both have the capacity to teach a sustainably oriented anthropology – or not.

### The problem of our theological anthropology

With that in mind, it should be no surprise that there is an anthropological question at the root of the sustainability crisis, and the current climate emergency. In 1969, Lynn White wrote an essay that claimed the roots of our ecological crisis lies in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which interpreted human vocation in terms of domination-over creation. There is no doubt that greed, gain, unhinged domination, will-to-power over creation, consuming and producing beyond our weight are “de-creating” and “running Genesis in reverse”, as Bill McKibben has conceptualized it. Today’s global political economy teaches our children that to be human is to contribute to a limitless economic growth curve of production and consumption. An anthropology of domination exercises patriarchal power-over (*I resist saying masculine power-over, because I believe that is not true masculinity, but rather patriarchy that distorts faithful models of true masculinity that also exercises human power-with*). It is true that Christians have supported, and even spiritualized this exploitative, economic concept of human dominion with theological justifications for usury, privatization of the land and the exploitation of the creatures as means to create personal wealth.

I fully agree with White that the root of the ecological crisis is anthropological. However, I disagree with White’s reading that the Judeo-Christian creation narrative is the cause *per se*. Rather I believe that the problem is the departure from the Hebrew creation and wisdom tradition about the true vocation of human beings. In other words, the creation-oriented wisdom of the tradition helps us properly answer the cosmological question. Our departure from that tradition has led to the kind of distorted human self-understanding that led to our wilful ecological destruction.

The second Genesis account (in addition to the Bible’s creation tradition in Psalm 8, Proverbs 8, Job and Colossians) is clear that the human being was placed in the midst of the web of creation. From that biosocial perspective, the second creation account in Genesis 2 reads that the primary human vocation is to till and to keep, or to cultivate and safeguard. From the creation and integration into a cosmological order, the rest of the Genesis narrative describes increasing levels of disintegration. First, humans separate or dis-integrate from one another (*the shame of nakedness*), then from other creatures (*fear and enmity between them in the post-deluvian story*), and from the garden itself (*the expulsion from Eden*). While Genesis is not intended to be a psychological or ethical explanation of human experience, it is certainly aware that being disintegrated from meaningful relationships results in a distorted sense of self, and therefore, a distorted will-to-power over fellow creatures and creation itself. This is Sin. All of our exploitative and violent domination of other creatures and the Earth that results from this disintegration is Sin.

Louk Andrianos, of the Institute of Theology and Ecology at the Orthodox Academy of Crete affirms that our current ecological crisis relates to the sin of greed. Over-consumption and over-production at the personal and structural level have led us well beyond the

sustainable greed line.<sup>5</sup> Andrianos reminds us that the Greek word for greed is *aplistos*. The prefix *a-* signifies the opposite of *plistos*, which means integration. In other words, greed (*aplistos*) is the dis-integration, or dis-location of the self from its inter-subjective relationship to creation. Mutuality is a virtue of integration. True human being is found in an integrated relationship to God, the other creature and the land itself. Greed is a vice ushered in by dis-integration. When we are disintegrated from our proper location in creation, our understanding of what it means to be human is distorted. Anthropology becomes, as Luther said, *in curvatus in se ipsum*, turned in upon itself.

Being separated from the land causes significant problems on many levels of wellbeing. Physical health related to diet, nutrition and exercise, and the mental health effects of being separated from communing with creation all cause individual and social pain. However, there is another long-term, generational consequence of this dis-integration that Larry Rasmussen points to in his book, *Earth Honoring Faith*. Separating people from the land is a systematic tactic that we see operate in nearly every instance of colonialism, from the Native Americans, the Amazonian peoples, Aboriginal, Aeotorean, to Sub-Saharan African. One tactic that colonizers use to dehumanize and disempower people is to separate them from their land, and therefore a primary location of self-understanding and meaning making. When people are separated from their land, as is the case for the Cherokee nation in my home state of North Carolina, people are dis-integrated from the sources of knowledge to sustain their livelihood, culture and economy. Once disintegration is achieved, it is a short step to domination over a people and the land.

This tactic is repeated, albeit in more subtle ways, in the logic of mature, neo-liberal capitalism that exploits working and economic classes of people, and women. Disintegration allows for all manner of anthropocentric, economic and political narratives to colonize our sense of self, and distort our understanding of faithful dominion into domination; synergistic power-with into internalized power-over. When people are separated from their cultural and traditional knowledge, rooted in a relationship to the land and other creatures, the gap will be filled by any theory that claims to have explanatory power, or mere power-over. Economic or ethno-political narratives will be used to colonize a disintegrated human being's self-understanding.

Where discourse is colonized by economic or political narratives, destruction of the land will follow. Karl Marx saw this connection long before it was possible to see the ecological consequences that we experience today. Marx anticipated this connection between colonization and ecological destruction when he wrote that progress in the union of agriculture and industry "is progress 'in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility.' It saps 'the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the labourer. The more a country starts its development on the foundation of modern industry, like the United States, for example, the more rapid is this process of destruction".<sup>6</sup>

As this paper is being written, the Trump Administration has authorized the seizure of lands in Arizona's Organ Pipe National Forest, in order to raze the land and build the

<sup>5</sup> Andrianos, Louk, "Economy of Life Index and Greed Line as Alternative Concepts of Sustainability", *Kairos for Creation, Confessing Hope for the Earth*. 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Rasmussen, *Earth Honoring Faith*, 63

border wall between Mexico and America. The UN had designated the forest as an international Biosphere Reserve. Dynamiting the site destabilizes the delicate Sonoran Desert ecology, including the habitats and migratory paths of countless desert species, and the underground aquifers that nourish life in this precious biome. But in addition to the loss of habitat, it is the land of the O’odham People, who refer to this piece of land as Monument Hill, because their ancestors buried warriors from their rival Apache tribe. This serves as a perfect icon of the point. Colonialism first separates a people from their land, so that both land and people can be colonized by economic and ethno-national narratives that lead to the destruction of the land and the non-human members of the Earth community.

Of course, even if non-human species are not the intended target of the destruction or commodification, the destruction of the land creates results in a disintegration of ecosystems and habitat loss. The subsequent loss of biodiversity and minerals creates unsustainable negative feedback loops. The most recent Global Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) estimated that 1 million species are currently under threat of extinction, precisely because of the disintegration of habitats due largely to land misuse and change in use.

But there is hope. If the disintegration of our human identity from the web of life is part of our sustainability crisis, then integration can be part of the repair, or healing process.

### Moving from Disintegration to Holistic Sustainability

Louk Andrianos reminds us that in the same way that there is no single contributing factor to disintegration, or greedy, non-sustainable living, there is also no single technological, economic or political solution to sustainable reintegration (*although concrete and effective schemes such as Green Faith’s Living the Change Program that focuses on dietary, transportation and energy choices are clearly part of the pathways to sustainability*). Andrianos affirms that identifying pathways to sustainability requires a kind of fuzzy logic. To say it positively, pathways to sustainability require a unified matrix of right economic, political, social, ecological relationships.

The concept of indivisibility is a key characteristic of the Sustainable Development Goals. Agenda 2030 affirms an indivisibility, or integrity that binds the 17 Sustainable Development Goals as parts of one single agenda if we are to achieve sustainability. Poverty, education, peace and good governance, healthy forests and waters, etc. are each necessary for the sustainability of all. In this synergistic systems approach, the whole is more than the sum of individual parts. The concept of indivisibility resonates with *plistos*, or the integrity of the ecological, ecumenical whole.

Here I use the term ecumenical to reflect the theological concept of *oikos*. *Oikos* is the Greek word for “household”. While Barbara Rossing has rightly cautioned that the usage of this concept may have a Roman imperial history, theologically it describes the holistic, or holonic nature of life on Earth.<sup>7</sup> Sustaining the health and peace of the *oikoumene* (whole inhabited earth) depends on sustaining right relationships within each *oikos* (household or nation), a just *oikonomos* (economy), in a way that integrates a balance of life within the limits of the *oikologia*, the logic of the *oikos*, or ecology). An *oikoumene* in which the holonic,

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<sup>7</sup> Rossing, Barbara, “(Re).claiming Oikoumene? Ecumenism, Ecology, Empire”, *Churrasco: A Theological Feast in Honor of Vitor Westhelle*, edited by Mary Philip, John Arthur Nunes, Charles M. Collier. Wipf & Stock. 2013

indivisibility of social, economic and ecological relationships were integrated would be truly sustainable.

### **Ecotheology as sustainable relationships**

The Christian tradition roots this affirmation of the integrated, sustainable relational nature of creation in its confession about the very nature of the Creator. The Trinitarian Christian creedal confession is rooted in a fundamental trust (*faith*) that right, loving relationships create and sustain life. According to the definition of Celia Deanne-Drummond this concept is the proper scope of Ecotheology. Ecotheology is not simply concerned with the status of creation. Rather, ecotheology is a theological approach to critiquing power, and restoring right relationships across the whole earth community (*social, economic, political, interpersonal, cosmological*) in order to sustain the conditions to ensure life can thrive. Ecotheology is a hermeneutic lens for critically and prophetically reflecting on all systems and relationships, whether related to gender, economy, culture, or politics. All of these relationships are derivative of our primary identity as creatures, and therefore, facets of what must be an integrated holistic approach to transform sustainable relationships across the whole inhabited earth.

This ecumenical approach is reflected in the most recent IPBES Global Assessment. The report outlines the various sectors that must be engaged if we are going to find the pathway to transformation that is needed. The IPBES called for new definitions of growth, and new partnerships to be established between technology, religion, science, and values, which relates to spirituality. It is interesting to me that this report which follows a methodology of natural sciences effectively results in an ecumenical, ecotheological perspective about interdisciplinary integrity. In pedagogical terms, the notion of transformation provides a robust connection to the aims of religious education. As an educator, when I hear transformation, I start to think in terms of transformative pedagogy. And when we think of transformative pedagogy, we begin with Paulo Freire.

### **Transformative pedagogy and de-colonizing education**

Paulo Freire's methods of transformative pedagogy begin by the reconnecting learners to their own sources for learning and making meaning, in order to develop critical and creative skills to read world and their place in it. This is the anti-colonial move. Transformative pedagogical methods avoid banking models where information is deposited from outside experts, and promote contextual learning so that the learner is not separated from the land. This method resists colonizing narratives, and honors the existential realities of the learner. So, for our purposes of thinking about religious education, this transformative, anti-colonial approach brings us back to the fundamental anthropological question, how does a child learn?

Inductively, we know that a child's spiritual identity is formed in the same way a young child experiments with the laws of natural and physical science and experiences the theories of social belonging to families or communities. A child learns through wonder, play and exploration. There is an epistemic unity during early childhood development. Before children are taught to distinguish between fact and value, and therefore theology and the natural sciences, everything that a child experiences teaches them something about who they are in relationship to the human or non-human other, and their role within society. There is value in every fact, and every fact communicates some truth or wisdom.



A child will naturally discover an answer to the question, “who am I?” The early, formative experiences in childhood shape the answer to that question, for better and for worse. Violence and abuse create traumas. Some children respond with resilience and strive for wholeness, and sadly some will do what was done to them. Here lies the nexus between spirituality and ethics. Children learn to make choices based on their answer to the question, “who am I?” To whom do I belong, and with whom do I have a significant relationship? The being on the other end of that inter-subjective relationship will be the object of care and identity. A child loves what they know.

For that reason, part of the goal of transformative education, religious or otherwise, is to reconnect children to a web of community that help them create meaning, and form their identity in relationship to beings with perspectives beyond their individual self. In order to decolonize education, religious education should seek to narrate life with a diversity of voices to help children resist colonization, and answer that anthropological question in the most faithful way possible. Religious educators should be critical about what voices become normative sources of knowledge. Transformative pedagogies strive to learn with different voices – women, indigenous, and perspectives from marginalized and affected communities, as ways to empower the learner to expand their definition of self and belonging, and to empathize with the pain and power of the other. This is an important cultural and linguistic way to decolonize education. This transformational goal of reconciliation or integration is also the proper role of theology, and particularly, as we have seen, ecotheology..

Transformative pedagogy will not only critique normative voices and sources of knowledge. Transformative pedagogy aims to humanize learning by focusing learners on the pressing problems and situations that exist in life. This is one of the theses that was mentioned in the survey at the beginning of this article. By engaging lived problems, the learner can make meaning in a way that honors the learner’s cultural knowledge and the context in which they make meaning.

Part of de-colonizing education, and promoting post-colonial transformative pedagogy is to reconnect or re-center children (*and adults*) in their land. The land and other creatures are teachers of wisdom, care and self-understanding, through the facts of natural science, and the value of theological and spiritual wisdom. The local ecology can be perceived as an other-mother whose care and suffering are epistemologically and morally significant for developing empathy and extends a child’s inter-subjective identity that extends beyond the individual and beyond the human family. Reconnecting or integrating a child’s learning in their ecology as a location for place-based learning, builds a child’s critical skills, which create resilience to economic, and culturally or politically anthropocentric discourses that seek to define their identity in economic or anthropocentric terms. Place based learning reconnects children with creation as a location for a re-integrated identity, and source of knowledge. Equipping children with an ecological hermeneutic can be a vehicle for the ecological *metanoia*, the great biosocial turning that is necessary to teach sustainability through the natural sciences and religious education.

If we abandon the rationalist and constructivists educational philosophies of a century ago, and turn towards educators like Nell Noddings and constructionists like Seymour Papert, we see the way to teach the natural sciences is to let children build and test systems. In the same way, the way to learn about ecology is to let them explore their local environment, model and design gardens and grow things. I led sessions with my son’s

preschool class in Edinburgh, Scotland. The class would come to our flat to learn about gardening, and these lessons fulfilled requirements of both science and religious education related to character ethics of communities and caring. This is the formative aspect of placed based learning in scientific, environmental and religious education.

Integrating sustainability discourse and religious education is a way to decolonize education and reintegrate our self-understanding within sustainable, transformative, ecological relationships. If Genesis describes the fall and sin as dis-integration, then this kind of re-integration must be part of our salvation. Ecological and ecotheological re-centering can help our children develop a non-anthropocentric anthropology that resists the colonizing discourses that seek to pervert human vocation from its primary role as caretaker of creation and all creatures.

### **Teaching sustainability that compliments the anthropology of the child**

Now we can apply these transformative methods of developing a recentered, non-anthropocentric anthropology to methods of teaching sustainability.

Returning now to the report on pedagogical trends, the report reflected the epistemic unity between experiences, wonder, joy, and learning that is at the heart of a child's spirituality and intellectual life. This is the epistemological and methodological link between religious education and the natural sciences. In the first place, educators in the natural sciences, environmental educators and religious educators should not convince children that religion or theology is teaching them something fundamentally different from the natural sciences. We ought, rather, to teach them what the trends in the Report on Education demonstrate – that all of life is an exercise in learning who we are, what we are, who the other is to me, and what we need to do with each other to thrive. Those questions are deeply scientific, and they are deeply moral and spiritual. Matthew Fox reminds us that before the renaissance period, the term spirituality did not exist in theological writings, precisely because there was never a distinction between the natural sciences, various theological disciplines and the religious practice.<sup>8</sup> Every pursuit of knowledge is a spiritual pursuit because there is a cosmological and therefore ethical significant to learning. Whether we locate our proper self and self-understanding in the universe via inductive discovery of natural science or deductive discovery through revelation, we are learning truth about what it means to be a human *coram deo* and *coram mundo*. As Jurgen Moltmann reminds us, the study of science and theology are the right and left hands of God – truth and faith seeking understanding. Even Luther, who is often interpreted as being critical of reason in matters of salvation, claimed that reason is fundamental for discerning how to love and care for the neighbour. Today, we would interpret neighbour as every member of the Earth community. As the educational report suggests, recognizing other creatures as neighbour requires empathy that can be developed through problem posing learning, place-based modelling, exploration and wonder.

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<sup>8</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe. 1983.

## The pro-social promise of transformative pedagogical methods

Kenneth Kaye has done a great deal of research on the way that new-born babies form inter-subjective identities with their mother.<sup>9</sup> Babies alternate physical contact and eye contact during breastfeeding. A baby will suckle, often with eyes closed, then pause to look to the mother's face before continuing to nurse. This reassuring cycle is pre-verbal, phenomenological communication long before the possibility of verbal association. These kinds of pro-formative relationships are fundamental aspects of care ethics. Darcia Narvaez and Colwyn Trevarthen have demonstrated the ways in which inter-subjectivity and the opportunity for children to feel cared for and to care in return (*for a pet or sibling for instance*) affect the neo-cortical formation. This pro-social formation is positively correlated to a child's capacity to express empathy and make empathetic choices to care for the needs of the other.<sup>10</sup>

This suggests the psychological importance of nurturing a child's relationship to the Earth community, specifically within their local ecology and creatures in that environment (living and mineral). A child, particularly from a young age, can perceive their inter-subjectivity as a knowing, caring relationship. Children perceive the world with wonder and joy and that communicates a sense of being cared for by the world and belonging to it. In early childhood development, there is no epistemological difference between play, learning and contemplation. Every experience is a source of knowing. A child who engages their natural environment learns how they are cared for by non-human creation. In so doing, their identity, and moral identity expands to include the other.

But this phenomenological eco-social formation is also theologically significant. An experience of the care of creation helps a child form a kind of cosmology that develops their trust that life is sustained through relationships of mutuality (*as opposed to competition*). Faith is "trust". And in this way, place based learning in their local ecology can create a relationship of trust and care that incorporates the earth community into a child's theological, relational cosmology. In other words, if a child feels cared for by creation, they are more likely to care for it, and trust in this life giving mutuality.<sup>11</sup> Pedagogical methods that keep this goal in mind promote pro-social and sustainable learning.

## Sabbath as a pedagogy of resilience and restoration of sustainable rhythms

Finally, I want to suggest that the concept of Sabbath can be used as a pedagogical key to liberate children to be their true human selves and resist colonizing narratives. At its heart, the Sabbath and sabbatical laws related to rest, restoration and jubilee is a gift that liberates our moral imagination from the unsustainable demands of ceaseless rhythms of

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<sup>9</sup> Kaye, Kenneth, *The Mental and Social Life of Babies: How Parents Create Persons*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1984.

<sup>10</sup> Narvaez, Darcia. "Triune Ethics: The Neurobiological Roots of Our Multiple Moralities." *New Ideas in Psychology* 26 (2008) 95-119, Narvaez and P.L. Hill. "The Relation of Multicultural Experiences to Moral Judgment and Mindsets." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 3 (2010) 43. Colwyn Trevarthen, "The Self Born in Intersubjectivity: The Psychology of an Infant Communicating." *The Perceived Self: Ecological and Interpersonal Sources of Self-Knowledge*, ed. By Ulrich Neisser, 121-73. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Littledyke, M. "Primary Children's Views on Science and Environment Issues: Examples of Environmental Cognitive and Moral Development" *Environmental Education Research* 10 (1994) 217-35.

production and consumption.<sup>12</sup> SDG 12 describes Responsible Consumption and Production in a way that resonates well with the concept of Sabbath. Both resonate with many aspects of the post-growth, or de-growth movement, and especially in the wake of the far-reaching, cross-sector effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sabbath grants the permission to the human to be a finite creature for one out of seven days and live within the natural limits of production and consumption. The limits offer the safe space to experience the result of trust. If you have the courage to restore right relationships, resist the will to demand or consume too much from the earth and other creatures, you will be cared for, and the earth will be able to heal itself so that it can continue to care for you. In fact, this was Aldo Leopold's definition of conservation. If children learn to trust creation by practicing Sabbath, (even with the natural pain of predation, disease, accidents, etc.) we will nurture their fundamental faith in their identity as a creature who bears the image of God. This act of trust re-centers us among the garden of Genesis chapter 2, which reconnects us to our divine vocation (Genesis 2:15) to till, keep, cultivate and safeguard, by a faithful (feminine) power-with that is mutually sustainable.

This restoration and re-storying becomes resilience against the divorce of knowledge, fact and value that occurred in the scientific revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. But it also equips children with the knowledge that the natural sciences and theology have practical and spiritual import, because they help us locate ourselves within the cosmos, in sustainable webs of mutuality. If disintegration is part of our systemic power structures of sin as described by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, and economic, social and political narratives continue to colonize our lives, then the pedagogical synergy between ecotheological, place-based religious education and environmental education are surely part of our resilience and reintegration, and therefore the Earth's salvation and sustainability.

### Examples of Place-based ecotheological formation

Pedagogically linking sustainability to ecotheological concepts such as the Sabbath or within liturgical context of faith communities affirms the interdisciplinary wisdom of sustainability. Where the natural sciences and theology rhyme in this way, we can call that resonance Wisdom. Wisdom inspires us to imagine the *oikoumene* as a web of indivisible relationships and humans serving their rightful role within it. Nurturing that faithful and ecological understanding of human vocation would be transformative. Helping children form that kind of cosmologically integrated, non-anthropocentric anthropology calls for methods of transformative pedagogy to decolonize learning and liberate children to make their ecotheological turn. This was the vision of the Tblisi Declaration as the integrated scope and purpose of environmental education.

The climate crisis is the most pressing problem of our day. And while it is obvious how scientists can pose problems for contextual learning, religious educators, too, can point to problems that communities and ecosystems face within the experience of the parish or congregation. Like a local garden, the parish can become the laboratory for connecting religious education and ecological sustainability. Outdoor, place-based education has been thriving since the days of the Tblisi Declaration, particularly in Scandinavia where outdoor *vuggestuer* and *børnerhaver* have been thriving for years. While this paper has focused on religious education from a Christian theological approach, I want to conclude with a few

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<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *Sabbath as Resistance, Saying No to the Culture of Now*. Westminster John Knox. 2014.

examples of place based religious education, from Muslim, Jewish, Christian and interfaith contexts that I have experienced.

In the West African country of Senegal, pre-Islamic and pre-Christian rites of initiation occurred in forests that were known as bois sacré. While some Sufi traditions assimilated and maintained these initiation rites, Christianity did not. Coming of age rituals and initiation rites were divorced from their natural settings, at during colonial times, many of these sacred forests were stripped bare and exploited in the colonial ground nut scheme. But today many of these forests are being reclaimed in attempts to halt the advancing Sahara, mitigate climate change and restore agricultural land to the country. But along with care for the forests is a recovery of these bois sacré, where you see more and more young people studying, praying, and coming of age again as Muslims and Christians in rooted in their land and their proud, peaceable culture of life affirming hospitality.

Urban Adama and Eden Village in Sonoma, California is an outdoor ministry, for children of the Jewish faith. The can come to this urban setting to learn sustainable gardening and organic food growing. While gardening, the children learn about their faith tradition and prepare meals together. Through the spirituality of growing, harvesting, cooking and eating together, these camps teach the Jewish faith by creating sustainable communities of gratitude and generosity.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, Bishop Shoo instituted a program where planting a tree is part of the baptismal rite. This is an excellent example of reconnecting faithful vocation to cultivating the earth. Baptism is the central sacrament that orients the Christian's vocation in the world. And what better way to reconnect the primary faithful vocation to care for the earth than to bind the rite to an act of earth honouring such has planting a tree. It is a place-based, problem posing, humanising, and wonder-filled way to incarnate the fact that through baptism, the Christian is called to tend, to keep and to care for the garden.

Many churches have national and diocesan programs of green church certification that not only requires churches to reflect on their own practices of sustainable living, but must consider the impacts on their local environment. The Northern Church in Germany, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark, the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway are examples. And the Espoo diocese of the Lutheran Church in Finland has been hosting camps that teach a green confirmation, through a curriculum that takes an ecotheological approach to teaching the Lutheran Catechism.

The ecumenical Season of Creation lasts from 1 September (Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation) until 4 October (Feast day of St. Francis). It is an liturgical season of the Christian church year, that invites Christians to engage in a month of prayer, symbolic acts in and on behalf of local ecologies, and campaigns to give thanks for creation and renew our human vocation to care for it.

And finally, Tent of Nations in Bethlehem. Tent of Nations is a camp that invites Jewish, Muslim and Christian youth to learn sustainable farming practices as a means to cultivate peace on a little hill outside of Bethlehem. At the end of your stay, the host, Daoud Nassar invites everyone to plant a tree that will hold and nourish the land, while it stands as a living sign of peace.

## Conclusion

This paper sketched the certain synergies between sustainability and religious education, and shared examples where ecologically oriented religious education utilize teaching methods that build on a child's natural capacities to build bridges between sustainability and religious education. The good news for educators is that children grasp this holistic connection in their being. Wisdom resonates through aesthetics, music and the arts, and non-verbal perceptual fields. Wisdom is accessible to all people, including pre-verbal children and people with cognitive disabilities who can eat with people of other faiths, worship outdoors under a tree, go on a night saunter, or an ecological study in order to pray an ecosystem's needs for restorative justice.

Reintegrating religious education with interdisciplinary curricula, and the land itself increases the likelihood that a child will develop a sense of self that empathizes and identifies with creation and builds resilience in the face of the racial, economic and gender-based injustice of climate change. It also build's a child's capacity to resist prevailing economic, political and religious narratives that threaten to colonize and disintegrate a child from creation at the very moment in life when they are receiving input to their question about human vocation, "who am I".

Integrating religious education in the local ecology is part of our ecotheological return to our original human vocation. The human vocation is not one of domination, but sustained mutuality, marked by open systems of power-with. Salvation, in this cosmic and ecological sense is about being re-integrated or embedded in life giving relationships. If the normal process of de-centering colonize our sense of self to the point that we lack empathy as adolescents and adults, then, as Gregson has suggested, an ecological re-centering into concentric circles of society is part of our ecological *metanoia*. As a person of faith, I trust that helping a child develop that cosmology and wonder of being held within the care of creation will help them perceive the presence and promise of the Divine. Along the way, the child will form a pro-social, intersubjective identities, and learn to perceive symbiosis, care, peace, mutuality and sustainability as a fundamental part of human nature, and our human call to till, to keep, to sustain life in God's garden.