

Article

What Else Is New?: Toward a Postcolonial Christian Theology for the Anthropocene

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Abstract: Although there are many reasons for Christian skepticism regarding climate change, one reason is theological in nature, and therefore, requires a theological solution. This essay explains the theological grounds for climate change denial and for a compromised understanding of the power and creativity of human agency. Drawing inspiration from the ecotheological implications of postcolonial poetics, it seeks to offer revised conceptions of the atonement and the fall and of what it means to read both scripture and nature. The aim is to offer a more resilient Christian theology that can inspire agential creativity in the age of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: ecotheology; novelty; postcolonial ecocriticism; Derek Walcott; theodicy; poetics; wonder; eschatology; Noah; Adam and Eve

“We can understand nothing about the politics of the last 50 years if we do not put the question of climate change and its denial front and center.”

Bruno Latour

Assuming geologists do indeed decide that we have enough evidence in the record to mark a new geological epoch shaped by human activity, the Anthropocene marks a novel turn from the earth’s history shaped merely by natural forces to one now shaped also by human agency. It is not news that many conservative Christian communities in the United States have struggled to come to terms with the novelty of climate change. Although much scholarly attention has been given to the psychological, political, and economic grounds for inaction,¹ less attention has been given to the theological justifications conservative American Christians often invoke for their skepticism. Although such justifications are no doubt often post-hoc and theology alone is unlikely to solve the problem of denial, theology should still be taken seriously, as this essay does, as both an obstacle and a vital potential motivator for action on the climate. Because research shows that appeals to core values can motivate behavioral and attitudinal changes,² the impetus of the work of ecotheology to mine and revise tradition in light of the novelty of climate change is warranted.

¹ See for example *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Everyday Life* by (Norgaard 2011) (Boston: MIT Press, 2011), and *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* by (Oreskes and Conway 2010) (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

² For example, see *Influencer: The New Science of Leading Change* by (Grenny et al. 2013) (New York: McGraw Hill, 2013). See also (Roser-Renouf et al. 2016). *Faith, Morality and the Environment: Portraits of Global Warming’s Six Americas*, Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2016. They report that “many Americans who are not currently concerned about global warming, nonetheless believe we should care for other people and the environment, but have yet to recognize that reducing global warming will help both. As the majority prefer religious over scientific explanations, a moral perspective on global warming by religious leaders such as Pope Francis may reach segments of the U.S. public that have yet to engage with the issue.” (p. 5).

In what follows, I will first explain the theological grounds for climate change denial used by conservative American Christians and what I see as a compromised understanding of the power and creativity of human agency.³ I contend that this conservative theology is held captive by the conditions of coloniality. For this reason, I will then turn to postcolonial poetics in order to offer a speculative, postcolonial Christian conception of atonement and the fall. In conclusion, I will focus on how such a postcolonial theology might change the way believers read both scripture and nature and liberate the agency needed to respond to the climate crisis. In other words, I seek to offer a more resilient Christian theology that is, I hope, sympathetic to the concerns of skeptics, but that can inspire their agential creativity and novel responses in the age of the Anthropocene.

Novelty, Agency, and Prophecy

Perhaps the most common and important source of theological resistance cited by American conservative Christians is the idea that the very idea of climate change threatens the absolute sovereignty of God by dangerously and hubristically imagining human power on par with God. Climate change isn't happening, in other words, because theologically it can't.⁴ This raises the question that if more emphasis is placed on the unprecedented novelty of the problem, will traditional cultures feel less likely to believe they can offer a response? Another source of theological resistance is eschatological: If more emphasis is placed on the dire circumstances that lie ahead, will believers in the end times feel obligated to accept decline as inevitable? Meanwhile, climate science uses assessments of past impacts and present patterns in order to describe the novel and potentially catastrophic trajectory of anthropogenic change, and thus, challenges human motivation and our ability to identify the grounds for innovation. In other words, despite the best of intentions, the science that undergirds the Anthropocene presents itself as a kind of fatality or inevitability that competes with Christian eschatology and often inspires indifference, denial, or, worse, theological arguments for its inevitability and necessity.

It should be obvious, however, that a moral response to the novelty of the Anthropocene requires novelty from human beings as geological agents. This would mean that human beings should not only acknowledge that their agency has brought about a change in the earth's history but find ways to use that agency to change it again, hopefully more deliberately, more carefully, and with a better trajectory. Feelings of inevitability and theological or ideological justifications for the status quo cannot produce novel, moral responses. Instead, it seems that all human populations and certainly all Christians need new ways of thinking about the earth, its climate, and its presumed *telos* that can teach, rather than shield people from, answerability to the world.

As Michael North's important study of novelty has shown, how we imagine that things will end has a lot to do with how we imagine that they began and what we believe are the parameters of human agency.⁵ North identifies a fundamental struggle in Western thought between the idea of a creation that happens *ex nihilo* and a creation that emerges from pre-existing matter. According to the Greeks, or at least to the atomists who were particularly persuasive to the modern West, "nothing comes from nothing," as Parmenides formulated it. The Roman poet Lucretius popularized Parmenides's idea by suggesting in his poem *De Rerum Natura* that the world is made up of only one fundamental material and that the world was made various and diverse by virtue of recombinations of this material. As Lucretius argues, "if things came out of nothing, all kinds of things/ Could be produced from all things. Nothing would need a seed" (Lucretius 2008, p. 8). While atomism insisted on continuity, it struggled to account for novelty. The atomists' answer was the idea of the swerve, a way of describing

³ I do not intend to describe all Christian theology, of course. I am, however, describing a theological argument of denial that is not uncommon among conservative American Christian communities. Rather than rehearse at length my argument I have already made regarding a Christian theology of climate change denial, I refer my reader to my more in-depth exploration in my chapter "Climate Skepticism and Christian Conservatism in the United States," in my co-authored book, *Climate Change Skepticism: A Transnational Ecocritical Study*, with (Handley 2019) (London: Bloomsbury Books, 2019), pp. 133–73.

⁴ Among those who have made this argument are James Inhofe, Sarah Palin, Pat Robertson, The Cornwall Alliance, and others.

⁵ See (North 2013), *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

the motion of atoms that defied pure mechanistic or predictable patterns, and that therefore, accounted for the possibility of change and created the space for the possibility of human agency. In such a cosmos, accident and suffering are central to the fabric of reality; human meaning, although perhaps not obvious, is possible.

Christians, on the other hand, posited a creation *ex nihilo* which explains novelty and human meaning more overtly by attributing it to the creative energy of God. However, this cosmology also famously created the added difficulty of adequately accounting for accidents, tragedy, and inexplicable and unjustifiable suffering. Theologians went to work on theodicies that would explain the reality of suffering and evil in light of the omni-God's sovereignty, but such explanations often came at the cost of fully accepting the human responsibility and capacity to act to mitigate suffering.

The point of this brief sketch is this: How Western society has thought about continuity and novelty has a great deal to do with how it has thought about accident, tragedy, and the opportunities and responsibilities of human choice. How Christians choose, then, to think through the problems of evil and suffering will likely determine how threatening the reality of climate change is to their cosmology. This is no small problem. Jenkins (2013) has persuasively argued that cultures deny phenomena that are perceived to threaten the very ontology of those cultures. A common response among climate activists to this problem is to believe that data can or should change hearts and minds or that simply shaming skeptical cultures for being on the wrong side of history is enough. A more effective response, however, is not to assume a culture's fixity but instead appeal to its dynamism by identifying ways in which it can reread its own tradition and reimagine itself in the face of the unprecedented. In this sense, the path to hope and faith in the Anthropocene is one of imagination and revision. As North's study shows, novelty always has an ambiguous status, in any case. He argues that it is perhaps best to think of novelty as innovation, which is essentially renewal and reform.⁶ We might think of this as akin to the call of St. Paul to "Conform no longer to the pattern of this present world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds" (Romans 12:2). New responses to climate change do not require new cultures so much as *renewed* cultures, re-imagined in light of the unprecedented.

Because of its collective and deep temporal dimensions, anthropogenic climate change challenges Western understandings of human agency.⁷ For Christians, it becomes vital to reimagine human agency in this new context. Perhaps it would help to acknowledge that Christianity has not always successfully reconciled the tension between the freedom of the individual and the range or limits of God's sovereignty. Indeed, even though the Bible suggests that the world ends in a final judgment of human choice, it also suggests, at least for some readers, that God's purposes in human history appear to be met precisely by the collapse of history brought on by human choice. I am suggesting that, given that various strains of Christianity are divided by the endless debates about grace and about the possibility of predestination, the status of human agency in Christianity is at best ambiguous. At times, it seems that agency results in novelty but also in predictability, in consequences for which we are truly accountable but also in consequences that were anticipated and perhaps even willed by a higher power.

This ambiguity is even greater when individual choices are assessed within a larger and more collective temporal frame. Christianity anticipates a retrospective look back on the meaning of human history that sees choice as playing a necessary role in the unfolding of history, and that therefore, significantly compromises, if not proscribes, the human freedom to choose anew. For this reason, Christian skepticism tends to arise around events that, because of their scale, suggest a shape or telos to history that had not been anticipated. At the risk of attributing too much theological seriousness to Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe's climate denial, it is noteworthy how often Inhofe (2012) quotes

⁶ He writes: "Novelty is supposed to be an ontological possibility, since there is 'first use or discovery,' but its objective status is mysterious enough to be protected by scare quotes. To innovate is, in Latin at any rate, to renew or to reform, not to start over afresh" (p. 3).

⁷ Various scholars have approached this question, including (Serres 1995) in *The Natural Contract*, Willis Jenkins in *The Future of Ethics*, and more recently (Latour 2018) in *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climate Regime*.

God's promise to Noah that he will preserve the seasons as a reason to disbelieve climate science.⁸ For many Christians who find themselves skeptical of the claims of climate science, worrying about the destiny of the planet is terrain normally relegated to divine providence. In its crudest form, the logic of this skepticism implies that we are simply incapable of changing the direction of earth's history and that even if we were, this change would presumably have been anticipated by, and therefore, necessary to God's purposes. If the earth is going to die anyway, the logic goes, why bother taking care of it? Which is another way of asking, why not actively bring it to an end?

We see here a refusal to accept responsibility for, let alone the reality of, consequences that are disproportionate to individual intentions. If I only meant to be of help by driving my son to soccer practice or my neighbor to the hospital, why should my carbon emissions be considered a problem? If fossil fuels brought so much human flourishing to so many for so long, why and how is it now the enemy to that flourishing? These questions amount to a refusal to admit that suffering can result from human ignorance and error or that collective action can create negative consequences that are disproportionate to individual intention. The irony, of course, is that such individualistic resistance to believing in a globally and humanly caused phenomenon like climate change results in an abdication of individual responsibility not just for the planet but for the human family. It is as if Christian skeptics, in their anxieties about the weight of human freedom, want to protect themselves and their Creator from the shame of the Creation. Because human freedom means that we can introduce novelty into the world, theology in the Anthropocene, then, ought to be focused on liberating human agency in the face of what appears to be inevitable. Christian theologies will need, in other words, a more adequate theodicy that accepts answerability and inspires love in the face of collectively created and unprecedented circumstances of human and natural suffering.⁹

Instead, we find a form of denial that Bruno Latour argues scales back the interdependency of a global and ecological community and insists on the exceptional and singular character of local identity: "[T]he choice to be made is between a narrow definition of social ties making up a society, and a wider definition of association that make up what have been called collectives" (Latour 2018, p. 57). For Latour, elites shield themselves from the problems of climate change by no longer "pretending, even in their dreams, to share the earth with the rest of the world" (p. 19). And yet who but elites have accelerated the very globalization of the world that they then resent?

In this sense, climate change denial exhibits colonialism's tendency to extend homogeneity across space, as well as to retreat in horror at the diversity thereby discovered. More properly said, we can read climate change denial as a form of neo-colonialism. As scholars such as Richard Grove and Alfred Crosby have well documented, Western colonial expansion inaugurated a new era of globalized ecologies, expansive regimes of invasive species, and an intensified interest in world biota that sought to document the biodiversity of a planet even as that expansion rendered it less diverse.¹⁰ The Anthropocene is not easily disassociated from the history of colonialism that expanded the reach of capitalism into new corners of the earth and converted people and places into commodities and markets and then ravaged the peoples, cultures, and biodiversity of those places by seeking to remake them in the image of the empire. Ironically, colonialism expanded human understanding of the diversity of the human species but also of the biodiversity of the planet, even as it was shrinking the planet under the

⁸ In his book, *The Greatest Hoax*, he writes: "In the end, through all the hysteria, all the fear and all the phony science, what global warming alarmists have often forgotten is that God is still up there and as Genesis 8:22 reminds us: 'As long as the earth remains, there will be springtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night'" (p. 175).

⁹ I have in mind the kind of theological confrontations with the implications of chance and suffering in evolution that we see in (Johnson 2014) *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*: "Theologically, [plants and animals] are the work of the Spirit of God who vivifies the community of creation from which we humans have also emerged. The ineffable holy mystery of Love creates, indwells, and empowers plants and animals, delights in their beautiful, wise, and funny ways and grieves their sufferings" (p. 284).

¹⁰ See (Grove 1996) and (Crosby 2015).

reach of globalization and destroying the diversity it encountered.¹¹ Colonialism manifested, in other words, a simultaneous fascination with (and repulsion of) the diversity that colonialism laid bare, and generated a cosmology and theodicy that justified, and sacralized, its consequences.

The Lessons of Postcolonial Literature

These parallels between colonialism and climate skepticism briefly sketched out here justify looking at postcolonial literature for its theological wisdom. I would argue that postcolonial literature is invested in theology, because at the very least, it is invested in rewriting the quasi-theological narratives of inevitability that were offered by colonial centers of power. Like a creation out of unorganized matter, postcolonial cultures must make themselves out of the materials of pre-existing cultural inheritances; they do not have the luxury of pretending to a radical origin. In this effort, they also offer insights into the challenge of identifying the terms of novelty available in light of the previously inaugurated and ongoing catastrophe. The following brief example from the Caribbean demonstrates this.

In 1974, the Caribbean poet, Derek Walcott, wrote an extraordinary essay entitled “The Muse of History” that was a call to his compatriots in nations of the Americas affected by the history of colonialism and the slave trade to find a way to avoid the snares of either the desire for revenge, on the one hand, or an endless nostalgia, on the other. He was concerned that if poets in the New World merely reacted to the forces of colonial catastrophes and were not seizing upon their own powers of imagination and creativity to reorder the meaning of experience and make the world new again, they would fail to escape the imprisoning logic of colonial catastrophes. *Poiesis* is, after all, a word that suggests a made or imagined new world, and as such, and in a postcolonial context it argues for a space of freedom for the human imagination even in the wake of the particularly egregious and violent history of slavery. For Walcott, post-slavery circumstances make poetry not only possible but necessary.

The challenge that Walcott and his compatriots faced was to make a new world—to find sufficient hope to imagine and create the new—without erasing the traces of what had come before or perpetuating their legacies. Any poet writing in the wake of colonial catastrophe faces the challenge of deciding what should be remembered and why and in what language. Walcott calls for a “tough aesthetic” which “neither explains nor forgives history . . . [that] refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force” (Walcott 1998, p. 37). I argued in my book, *New World Poetics*, that this “tough aesthetic” offers a postcolonial environmental ethic because it refuses to make the history of what has happened a prophetic force for what will yet happen. Instead, it places the freedom to imagine history anew squarely on the shoulders of the poet who, Walcott argues, must draw inspiration from the particular gifts of the present landscape.¹² If the poet believes that nature offers an escape from the nightmares of history, nature will have been reduced to a fantasy, but if the poet is always “wailing by strange waters for a lost home” and bemoaning pre-existing tragedy, the poet will similarly turn away from the present and local environment which holds the key to making a new home in a renewed world (p. 44).

Even though colonial history has indelibly shaped the present, including the colonized and anthropogenic landscape, Walcott insists that nature and the human imagination both have the capacity to remake the meaning of what has undeniably happened and thereby point the way to a new future. Poetic novelty does not come from a separation or rejection of what came before but from a refashioned experience of the ordinary and already known world, *as if it were new*. This “as if” construction is important to his argument. The figural phrasing of “as if” implies a performance that sees the dramatic irony of its stance of novelty in light of the inherited past. His “tough aesthetic” is not that of Adamic innocence but more like, as he puts it, the self-conscious performance of a “second Adam” in “a second Eden” (pp. 40–41). This leads to an important redefinition of novelty. He explains:

¹¹ I have written elsewhere more extensively about the racial aspects of this phenomenon in my study of interracial sex and genealogy in (Handley 2000).

¹² (Handley 2007).

The Caribbean sensibility is not marinated in the past. It is not exhausted. It is new. But it is its complexities, not its historically explained simplicities, which is new . . . while many critics of contemporary Commonwealth verse reject imitation, the basis of the tradition, for originality, the false basis of innovation, they represent eventually the old patronized attitude adapted to contemporaneous politics, for their demand for naturalness, novelty, originality, or truth is again based on preconceptions of behavior.

(Walcott 1998, p. 54)

Note here that imitation does not have to mean derivation just as originality does not require rejection of imitation. Novelty, in this model, is more akin to Lucretius's idea of the swerve or North's notion of innovation; it is the result of recombinations of unchangeable facts that nevertheless propel perpetual change. Walcott is not looking for radical originality but a potent and truly poetic or world-making recombination of inherited elements in order to begin again.

Noah, often referred to as a second Adam in biblical scholarship, might help illuminate the theological implications of Walcott's idea. Noah begins not from a blank slate but from an awareness of extraordinary suffering and even apocalyptic devastation, but begin he must. (It is also worth mentioning that Christ is also referred to as the second Adam, a point I will return to later). Darren Aronofsky's (Aronofsky 2014) 2014 film, *Noah*, for example, is inspired by Elie Wiesel's notion of Noah as suffering from a form of survivor's guilt (Wiesel 1984). For Aronofsky, the catastrophe Noah has survived is our long history of environmental and social degradations that began with Cain and Abel, and has culminated in an equally unspeakable destruction of human and natural life in a global flood (the allusion to climate change is not lost on the viewer).¹³ Noah's postdiluvian awe, unlike Adam's, is not naïve or ignorant but rises to Walcott's standard of a "tough aesthetic" that can still find a reason to praise existence in the wake of destruction, in part because he can appreciate more fully the potency and irony of natural regeneration. As Walcott explains, for the Adam in the Americas after colonialism and slavery, "the apples of [his] second Eden have the tartness of experience. In such poetry, there is a bitter memory and it is the bitterness that dries last on the tongue" (Walcott 1998, p. 41).

Cultures, of course, are shaped by the accidents of history, but Walcott is suggesting that culture's vitality is found in the creative recombinations of the past that artists make in the present, not in the genetic heritage of historical experience. As Walcott once provocatively said, "history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered, what has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention" (Walcott 1974, p. 53). William Carlos Williams anticipated Walcott's postcolonial poetics by once arguing passionately on behalf of poetry's capacity to avoid the traps of historical thinking that only wants to see "generic patterns" in the past, as if all we want or can see are dead people, when it is poetry that can envision our presence among the once-living or their presence among us.¹⁴ This postcolonial poetics suggests that culture is by default a form of novelty, even if it appears paradoxically as continuity. Akin to Latour's understanding of the protectionism of climate denial, anxiety about the preservation of tradition, or about the loss of such, blunts our capacity to creatively and morally redirect culture.

¹³ I have written more extensively about this film in my article, "The Anthropocene and the Postsecularity of the Environmental Humanities: Aronofsky's 'Noah'" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 64: 617–38 (Handley 2018).

¹⁴ Williams said, "History follows governments and never men. It portrays us in generic patterns, like effigies or the carvings on sarcophagi, which say nothing save, of such and such a man, that he is dead. That's history. It is concerned only with one thing: to say everything is dead. [. . .] Not at all. History must stay open, it is all humanity. Are lives to be twisted forcibly about events, the mere accidents of geography and climate? ... If history could be that which annihilated all memory of past things from our minds it would be a useful tyranny" (Williams 1956, pp. 188–89).

Postcolonial Poetics as Ecotheology

As is implied throughout this essay, environmentalists have struggled to make a case for hope and to motivate those who remain indifferent or entrenched in denial. They have expended a great deal of energy describing the inaugurated and worsening apocalypse and have tried to shame those on the wrong side of history, but this seems to have only emboldened the resistance. The anxiety of climate activists, however, is that if they speak of hope, they will enable the naiveté and denial that they so harshly criticize. There is no doubt that false hopes are to be avoided, but it might help to remember that real hope is a form of moral courage in light of a present challenging reality. A theology that cannot inspire faith in the creative and innovative energy of moral imagination to forge different future risks proscribing change; in other words, it risks caving to the power of a declensionist narrative of forecasted and unavoidable catastrophe. As an alternative, I wish to offer below a speculative proposal for a theology of atonement that resembles this postcolonial poetics of the “second Adam”, and that might better serve to liberate Christian agency rather than harden resistance in the Anthropocene.

Christianity faiths posit that Jesus Christ is the means by which humans can find the courage to choose a future different from the one predicted by their past mistakes. Although the atonement means that God will remember human sins no more, that is not the same thing as saying that it erases the fact of what has transpired. Christ’s power is believed to be found in his healing and annealing effects, in his capacity to transform the meaning *but not the fact* of what has happened in this mortal and earthly context. As St. Paul suggests, believers become new creatures in Christ, and this new creation is at least one reason why Christ becomes the Second Adam. New creatures in Christ are not new people with entirely new life stories, but rather people renewed and restored to a proper understanding of themselves, freed to imagine a different future. Like Jesus’s wounds, the scars remain, the past has irrevocably shaped the present, but the evidence of such shaping is now transformed into a cause for hope, rather than despair. Whether on the societal or individual level, it seems that the fact that Jesus offers freedom from the nightmare of human sins and lived experience in the body and on this earth does not mean that human sins in this life didn’t happen and didn’t shape our lives or the lives of other people. What it does mean is that Christ’s mercy frees humans to no longer feel determined by the factness of events, to no longer be trapped by a pattern of predictable error.

So what allows life to feel new isn’t that the slate has been wiped clean but that human beings have become free to imagine and choose a different future than what seemed to be predicted by their past. Believers could then see with compassion their own living humanity and that of others. We could argue, then, for an atonement that is meant to break the addiction to history and its tone of fatality without jumping the ship, as it were, of life on this planet. Rather than a transformation of facts, the atonement here performs a transformation of consciousness that then changes the meaning of what this life brings, which is perhaps why St. Paul speaks of hope not as the denial of fault, but as its transformation: “My grace is sufficient for thee”, the Lord tells him, “for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul responds: “Most gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities . . . for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12: 9–10).

I want to suggest the parallels between this conception of atonement and postcolonial poetics. For example, Octavio Paz eloquently describes the Mexican artist’s task in the face of the nation’s history of violent rape and destruction in a way that resembles both Walcott’s and Williams’s arguments about poetry: “History has the cruel reality of a nightmare, and the grandeur of man consists in his making beautiful and lasting works out of the real substance of that nightmare. . . in freeing ourselves from the shapeless horror of reality—if only for an instant—by means of creation” (Paz 1985, p. 104). Paz describes art’s power to create novelty in the wake of disaster but from the very materials of what has happened. This is not an oblivious Adamic innocence, but like a second-Adam or Noah, it is a sobered reckoning and transformation of the past through the novelty of imagination and creation. We can see similar atoning language in the conclusion of Walcott’s marvelous essay:

You were when you acted your roles, your given, historical roles of slave seller and slave buyer, men acting as men, and also you, father in the filth-ridden gut of the slave ship, to you they were also men, acting as men, your fellowman and tribesman not moved or hovering with hesitation about your common race any longer than my other bastard ancestor hovered over his whip, but to you, inwardly forgiven grandfathers, I, like the more honest of my race, give a strange thanks. I give the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice, that exiled from your own Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that was my inheritance and your gift.

(Walcott 1998, p. 64)

This “new world” that Walcott enters is made possible by his power of reimagining the meaning of the past, which, like grace, allows him to let go of the need for balancing the scales of justice. It might be enough to say that his poetics makes grace and imagination synonymous. Novelty, in this way, becomes a gift of accepting one’s inheritance without being determined by it. This “new world” is both a continuation of the old and a yet a vital departure from its devastating impact. In theological terms, we might say that this offers a conception of heaven that is not so much an escape from the conditions of this life but a transformation of their meaning.

Practical Implications

What might this kind of theology mean in practice? Essentially, I believe it highlights two things: It highlights the poetics of reading—that is, that re-reading is central to remaking a tradition’s meaning—and the poetics of landscape—that is, that seeing this ordinary and damaged world with new eyes of appreciation can inspire care, preservation, and where necessary, restoration.

First, let us think about the poetics of reading. If Christian anti-environmentalism has painted itself into a corner of inaction, this is largely the result of readings that assume a reader who is uninvolved not only in the ongoing creation of the world but in the creation of theological meaning itself, that is otherwise fixed and already given. And there are at least three fixed meanings associated with the creation that remain dogma and suggest no significant ongoing role for human agency in the creation. I am thinking of three specific problems: (1) The Creation is read as a one-time event that brought all matter into existence out of nothing by the hand of God who alone possesses the power of novelty; (2) the fall is an unfortunate, even catastrophic, event that has cast us out into a world of matter that is itself fallen and a reminder of our absence from the presence of God, heaven, and our true spiritual nature; and (3) our only obligation to this temporary physical world is to use it for our self-interest. These readings of the Bible have been central to climate skepticism, but they aren’t necessary. In the same way that Christ’s atonement allows a reconsideration of the meaning of the past, ecotheologians and Pope Francis himself have shown that embracing the freedom and responsibility to reread the Bible and the Creation story is consistent with faithfulness and can lead readers to a new level of understanding of human responsibilities. It would be a mistake, in other words, to always be reading to protect an endangered originary meaning when the goal should be to find contemporary application and relevance. The latter is not inconsistent with tradition but may, in fact, hold the key to its continuing vitality.

What if Christian skeptics questioned the inevitable conclusion or accepted implications of a creation *ex nihilo*? Lucretius and his atomist predecessors offered an understanding of the origins of matter that turned out to fit more comfortably with the story of evolution than did Christianity. And because it offered an understanding of a world subject to chance, it also more readily understood the reason for evil and suffering in the world. As some ecotheologians, such as Catherine Keller and others have argued, perhaps the biblical account leaves more room for pre-existing chaotic matter than

was assumed.¹⁵ And perhaps this matters because it stresses the re-creativity of human agents who participate in and even partner with Creation to remake the world. A creation *ex materia* feels like a suggestion of a story of nature that does not begin at some radical starting point but is always *in media res*. While the biblical account of Creation is famously ambiguous, an *ex materia* understanding of creation is at least more consistent with lived experience of the natural world. While a creation out of nothing preserves the space and power of the divine as the source of all novelty, novelty in the physical world and in culture nevertheless always depends on a re-organization of what comes before. Christians might imagine, then, that even the originary, Adamic language born of awe in the Garden was not new even if its grammar was. The question of the historical status of Adam and Eve doesn't have to be swept aside in order to understand them as always also potent mythological symbols of living human beings that begin not at the beginning of time but here and now. Each believing reader stands like these precursors in the present facing the future, always in the wake of collective and individual histories that haunt the present. Ritual, performance, poetry, and music, as Eliade (1971) has so eloquently argued in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, return us again and again to the Adamic moment of Creation, or we might say to the "second Adam" or Noah who always begins again. The ritualistic returns to creation in the arts and in religious practice are ways of suggesting that there is no return to an absolute beginning but instead highlight the perpetual responsibility to reimagine origins so as to refashion moral possibility. This performance of acting as if I were at the beginning of time does not erase the vestiges of the past but is instead a way of imagining what vestiges I am tasting when I taste the world, when I strive to see it with naked and newborn eyes and how I might rearrange those elements through acts of creation into a new world.

In this way, Christians might consider Adam and Eve as caught in a kind of dramatic irony wherein they cannot yet see that the newness around them is a function of a kind of grace-induced forgetting. The old memories have simply gone away. The newness of the world, then, is uncanny, providing echoes of something only vaguely intuited but hinted to have come before. In re-reading the Creation, readers do not go back to the Garden, but they do *imagine* going back. This is a vital distinction. If readers fail to take responsibility for the imaginative leap that they make in going back to those originary roles of Adam and Eve, they also shield themselves from the roles they play and the damage they do in the contemporary garden of this earth. This shielding is precisely what motivates Carolyn Merchant's warning about the dangerous potential of the Eden myth.¹⁶ However, what Merchant doesn't adequately account for is the power of the imagination to remake the meaning of such myths. After all, theologians of a Fortunate Fall and artists like Walcott and Aronofsky, as just two examples, are using the myth of the Creation and the fall more ethically and creatively not to justify further exploitation, degradation or mere instrumental use, but rather to inspire new grounds for hope and awe in the wake of catastrophe.

Which brings me to the second practical implication of a postcolonial ecotheology, that of the value of experiencing wonder in this present moment and landscape. Since none of us can go back to a world untouched by human impact, it is tempting to deny that such an impact exists or to wish for transcendence as a form of escape from such conditions. What is needed, however, is a sobered hope. Similar to the spirituality of the second half of life articulated by Richard Rohr, hope in the Anthropocene is a more mature desire for transcendence that is not rebellion, rejection, or denial of what came before but a return that includes but transforms the meaning of the past.¹⁷ The facts of the Anthropocene can lead to toxic nostalgia, just as they can lead to hardened denial. Since neither is practical or adequate to inspire a different future other than that predestined by the conditions of

¹⁵ See (Keller 2003).

¹⁶ See (Merchant 2003).

¹⁷ See (Rohr 2011).

history, I am suggesting that intentional re-creations of original myths remind that the imagination is the locus of creative, agential freedom to choose a new future.

Consider, for example, the difference between imagining a present landscape as a static space that is predicted either by God's past creativity or humanity's past depravity as opposed to seeing it as a manifestation of an ongoing creation where God and heaven are immanent, and the future is open. The latter, which we already saw was central to postcolonial poetics, emphasizes human creative capacity and accountability as co-participants in the Creation. This reverses the negative connotations of the Fall—a physical world that is a perpetual reminder of human sinfulness and exile from God's presence—and transforms it into moral opportunity, as a story not yet written by humanity's future choices. The ethical implications of a Fortunate Fall are not unlike those of Epicureanism; a Fortunate Fall suggests that, instead of denying the flesh, deeper joy will be found in the modest management of a pursuit of pleasure, in light of physical and temporal limits. The postcolonial poetics I have described anticipated the criticism of [White \(1967\)](#), and agrees that returning to the inherent value of physical life is vital for Christians to find a way out of the legacies of prior catastrophe.

A Fortunate Fall requires learning to see and accept both the beauty and wonder but also the shame and darkness of ecology. Exotic natural beauty distracts with its marvels and makes the love of nature seem, well, natural, but the true test of that love is how well humans cope with and accept the facts of biological existence—ordinary and dying bodies in ordinary and changing landscapes of home. The mundane and present landscape is a litmus test for one's ability to tolerate mystery and to accept one's mortal createdness. As William Jordan ([Jordan 2003](#)) has written, creation is a source of anxiety because it is "troubled, destructive, and shameful" (p. 40). Only in frozen frames of aesthetic beauty does nature seem relentlessly friendly. But Jordan argues that religion must come to terms with the fact that there is "a contradiction inherent in creation" (p. 41). The contradiction includes such facts of nature that new life comes from violence, beauty and ugliness are interdependent, and chaos is inseparable from the order of the Creation. Jordan implies that religion struggles to come to terms with nature because nature is a sign of mortality's injustices of evil and suffering. To confront the complexities of climate change, in sum, Christians need stronger and better theodicies. They need, in other words, stronger grounds for bringing God closer to the messiness of the Creation and made more relevant to human and imperfect responses to it.

Walcott offers some concluding wisdom. Despite a life he often described as weighed down by his own sins and by the sins of history, the immanence of God's glory was central to Walcott's oeuvre. He argued against the tendency to assume that some better world lay across the earth or across the threshold of death and instead brought our focus back to the sights of ordinary light touching upon the familiarity of things and transmuting them into poetic vision. As [Walcott \(1997\)](#) notes in his remarkable poem, *The Bounty*: "Between the vision of the Tourist Board and the true/Paradise lies the desert where Isaiah's elations/force a rose from the sand" (p. 2). Echoing Leopold's famous call for building roads of receptivity into the still unlovely human mind, Walcott describes an abundant world that only requires the poetic eyes to see it. What blinds the human eye is either worldly hierarchies of beauty that predetermine what is valuable and what isn't or the false religion of believing that paradise is unavailable here and now. What causes the desert to blossom as the rose is a transformation of consciousness, not the act of engineering a garden in the desert or the anticipation of divine intervention that would take us away from this fallen world. Novelty emerges from the capacity and willingness to see the inherent and always available beauty of the earthly desert of this planet, however, compromised by prior human error.

If Walcott's postcolonial poetics is a theology, it is decidedly a theology of a creation *ex materia* and not *ex nihilo*, which I am arguing for not so much as a point of doctrine but as an imaginative and poetic practice. It points to a power that respects the contours of a prior reality yet expresses true freedom as it works within the restraints of being. If we are to take this as a theologically serious idea, it suggests that the atonement is more than a redress of the Fall but the very engine of the Creation itself, since it takes up the unorganized pre-existent material of before and shapes it into a hopeful vision of what is

perpetually yet to come. Artistic creativity is a reminder that human beings participate in their own, potentially atoning and redemptive, way in the ongoing creation of the world. A postcolonial theology for the Anthropocene embraces aesthetic appreciation, the gifts and pleasures of embodiment, and the potency of human agency. This need not inspire indifference in the face of physical suffering. Instead, it could inspire a spirit of reverence for beauty, and a responsiveness to the degradations that have imperiled that beauty.

Walcott wrestled with and decried the environmental degradations of his native island of St. Lucia all of his life, and yet he never felt he was adequate to or able to exhaust its beauty:

yet there are the days
when every street corner rounds itself into
a sunlit surprise, a painting or a phrase,
canoes drawn up by the market, the harbour's blue,
the barracks. So much to do still, all of it praise.

(Walcott 2010, p. 86)

There is an important lesson here the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene demands that humanity faces some ugly facts—not just about nature, but about our own history as a species. But if postcolonial poetics can teach us anything, it is the risk of neglecting the present out of nostalgia for what we have lost. We cannot afford to become addicted to degradation nor even to bemoaning it. For believers, this would mean that the Anthropocene requires human beings to face the Creation with sobered realism and with willed humility and awe. Meeting nature with praise as a divine creation and gift helps to see the condition of embodiment as a blessing rather than as a curse. It begins again the search for new metaphors that might be adequate to the experience of wonder that embodiment inspires. Consider the alternative. Incapable of praise, either because of terror, despair, or indifference, we as a species find ourselves on some kind of downward spiral of inevitable declension. Once Adam and Eve fall, they just keep falling. Once human beings ruin one landscape or one history, they just keep on ruining it again and again, like a dog returning to its vomit.

Too many in the Christian community in the United States continue to sell their theological birthright for a mess of dominionist pottage, falsely assuming that there was something wrong and in need of repair about this world from the moment humans stepped outside of the garden. Christians have been acting as Adam and Eve, over and over again, but in the context of the wrong theology—and the earth's degradations show for it. I say this because they have assumed the world needs redemption through escapist transcendence or through engineered novelty—like some kind of plastic surgery on what they falsely imagine to be the earth's inadequate body, which embarrasses because of its raw asymmetry, lack of proper color, or unruly wildness and incoherence.

Ruin and degradation are undeniably, sobering realities. Carbon emissions that won't leave the atmosphere for hundreds of years challenge the grounds for hope, but fatalism is the curse all Christians must avoid. Novelty based on creative transformation of the conditions of disrepair and despair is what is needed. This is not only indispensable for hope in the Anthropocene but, as I hope I have helped to show, it is, or can be, the very hope of Christian theology. Just as the world needs ecological restoration, I suspect that Christianity faiths need to be restored to their former wisdom, again and again, for adherents to finally awaken and arise to the reality of the world they have inherited. And with each attempt to come to themselves and recall what they have forgotten, perhaps the ruined world stands a chance to become a new creature too.

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