

RESPONSE TO ANNE CLIFFORD

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I would like to offer my thanks to Mary Hines for organizing this wonderful convention and for the invitation to respond here this morning. I would also like to express my gratitude to Anne Clifford for her thought-provoking paper with its careful attention to the experiences of women within the context of the ecological crisis.

Anne Clifford provides us with a nuanced reading of *Laudato Si*. In her analysis, she is appreciative of both the encyclical's call to protect planetary health and its attempt to hold together the preferential option for the earth with the preferential option for the poor. At the same time Clifford critiques *Laudato Si*' both for the way in which it elides the voices of women and the potentially dangerous manner in which it describes nature in gendered terms. I begin my remarks by picking up on this final point.

Clifford brings to our attention the problematic implications of Francis' use of the ubiquitous term "mother earth." She notes that the term is oft accompanied by a romanticized vision of "nature's endless bounty" which, at the very least, is unhelpful at a time in which restraint appears prudent. It seems to me that Clifford's caution with regard to the term mother earth might also be developed in the direction of an anti-colonial critique.

In *Apocalypse Now and Then*, Catherine Keller considers the manner in which the earth was envisioned within the nascent European colonial imagination.¹ In so doing, she turns to the writings of Cristobal Colón—better known to us today as Christopher Columbus. Informed by the geography of his time, Colón thought the world to be shaped like a woman's breast. In 1492, he believed that he had arrived at the earth's paradisaical nipple. As Keller observes, "This is no casual analogy but the basis for serious cartography. The continent looms as. . . the mother breast ready to suckle death-ridden, depressed Europe into its rebirth. . . Gaia's nipple arises in the sterility of the all-male world of the conqueror, promising not relationship but suckle."² Indeed, environmental sociologist Andrew Jorgenson argues that the colonial project was predicated upon coercing the global south to act as a "tap"—a nipple from which the earth's natural resources could be drawn out and converted into energy and wealth for European centers of power.³ Thus, one can begin to discern resonances between the connotations of the term "mother earth" and the language of subjugation that one finds in Francis Bacon's highly gendered vision of the scientific domination of nature.⁴

To be fair to Pope Francis, when he employs the term "mother earth" he does so while explicitly underscoring the need to care for creation and offering a critique of the west's colonial legacy. Nonetheless, we should be mindful of the manner in which even

¹ Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

² *Ibid*, 157.

³ Andrew K. Jorgenson, "Social Change, Natural Resource Consumption, and Environmental Degradation," in *Global Social Change: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Christopher Chase-Dunn and Salvatore J. Babones (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2006), 176–200 at 190.

⁴ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 168–72.

this seemingly benign term might be freighted with sexist and exploitative undercurrents characteristic of androcentric colonial power relations. This is especially true when Francis' most proximate ecclesial context too often bears close resemblance to the "all male world" that Keller describes with regard to Colón, and when, as Clifford observes, the voices of women are largely silenced throughout the encyclical.

In the time remaining, I turn to consider critically Clifford's reflection on panentheism and the manner in which this concept has shaped ecotheological discourse. In so doing, I interrogate the manner in which Christians are called to read the book of nature. As Clifford notes, the concept of panentheism describes the view that God is in all things and all things are in God. The concept is frequently employed by ecotheologians and ecofeminists like Ivone Gebara who use it to oppose a hierarchically dualistic worldview that would imagine a desecralized earth, an earth that is entirely separated from God. Here, I focus on the manner in which concepts like panentheism can be employed problematically within ecotheology to present a distorted view of the world in which we live.

Let me begin by saying that, insofar as the concept of panentheism is used to draw attention to the sacramentality of creation, I wholly affirm the use of this term. As *Laudato Si'* proclaims, nature is a book (*LS* 6, 12, 239), which, when read attentively, can disclose something of who God is and what God desires. However, too often within Christian ecotheological discourse (and here I include Gebara's ecofeminism) the move to re-sacralize nature within the Christian imagination has led to the espousal of a romanticized interpretation of nature that depicts nature predominantly in positive terms, foregrounding characteristics like cooperation, symbiosis, and interdependence. At the same time, this interpretation underplays the ways in which competition, scarcity, predation, waste, and horrific suffering are also endemic to the natural order. Along these lines, ecotheology and ecofeminism also have tended to draw on outdated views of ecology which maintain that ecosystems are characterized fundamentally by balance—a balance that is disrupted chiefly by human intervention. Within this view, then, nature discloses to humanity a clear and stable framework for the good life of mutual flourishing.⁵

In contrast to this understanding of ecology, the ecologist David Lodge and Christopher Hamlin propose an ecology of flux—one which acknowledges the constant mutability that is intrinsic to the natural world in which we live. As Lodge and Hamlin acknowledge, "This new ecology is terrifying because it exposes the inadequacy of our normative systems."⁶ We must take Lodge and Hamlin's view seriously. My point here is that while nature is a book that can and should be read, it is a highly ambiguous text that must be interpreted carefully. Nature alone does not give us any firm foundation for a social or even an environmental ethic.

In view of this ambiguity, I would advocate for the retrieval of the Patristic and Medieval method of interpreting the book of nature by reading it in light of the book

⁵ Lisa Sideris offers an astute analysis of these tendencies within Christian ecotheology and ecofeminism. See Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University, 2003).

⁶ David Lodge and Christopher Hamlin, eds. *Religion and the New Ecology: Environmental Responsibility in a World of Flux* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University, 2006), 9.

of Scripture (here, scripture refers to both Scripture and tradition).⁷ Ecotheology has tended to invert this method by giving the book of nature pride of place over the book of Scripture. This inversion is driven in part by ecotheology's often uncritical acceptance of Lynn White's critique of the Judeo-Christian worldview. Moreover, the privileging of the book of nature is perhaps especially prevalent in some strands of ecofeminist discourse, such as Gebara's, which tends to operate with a double-hermeneutic of suspicion when reading "the book of scripture"—approaching this book with suspicion on account of both feminist and environmental concern.⁸ In my view, an important challenge to Christian ecofeminism is to meet this double hermeneutic of suspicion with a double hermeneutic of retrieval.

At least with regard to environmental commitment, there is ample reason not to be wholly suspicious of Scripture and tradition. In recent years, biblical scholars such as Ellen Davis, Hilary Marlowe, and Richard Bauckham have demonstrated that many of the authors of Scripture were particularly attuned both to the ways in which sin disorders the human/earth relationship and the manner in which the God of Israel seeks to renew the face of the earth.⁹ Elsewhere, Jame Schaefer's excellent book *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics* catalogues numerous examples of the ways Christian tradition affirms the goodness, beauty, and integrity of God's creation.¹⁰

Nonetheless, there are *of course*, good reasons to be suspicious of the book of Scripture which itself is, in varying ways, patriarchal, ambiguous, and in flux. No matter what, there are no assurances that Christians will be correct in their readings of the two books of revelation. Nor is there a way, *a priori*, of ensuring that the practical-ethical programs these readings recommend will be ultimately salubrious. However, here one hermeneutical principle should be kept at the forefront of the ongoing work of ecotheology—the formulation that Jesus Christ is the norm that norms all other norms and is not normed by any other norm. As Kathryn Tanner concisely captures it, "Christ is the Key."¹¹

My suggestion that ecotheology, inclusive of ecofeminism, continue to return to the book of Scripture, then, is ultimately a call for ecotheology to center its reflection on Jesus Christ. Here, though, I am referring not simply to the cosmic Christ in and through whom all things were created, but foremost to Jesus Christ the *autobasilea*, the

⁷ Peter Hess, "'God's Two Books': Revelation, Theology and Natural Science in the Christian West," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cosmology & Biological Evolution*, ed. Hilary D. Regan (Hindmarsh: Australian Theological Forum, 2002), 19–49.

⁸ Norman Habel argues that ecological hermeneutics mirror the feminist hermeneutic developed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. See, Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth: The Earth Bible*, vol. 1, ed. Norman Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 32–33.

⁹ See for example, Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University, 2009); Hilary Marlowe, *The Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009); Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco: Baylor University, 2010).

¹⁰ Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2009).

¹¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University, 2010).

sacrament of God's liberating reign.¹² It strikes me, therefore, that the continued retrieval of Sophia, begun in the work of scholars such as Elizabeth Johnson and Celia Deane-Drummond, and whose importance Clifford highlights for us in her address, marks a particularly promising way forward in continuing to develop the theological underpinnings of Christian ecofeminist discourse.¹³

To offer one particularly notable point of departure for this type of retrieval, I close by noting that the Matthean beatitude, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt. 5:5) can be read as good news for both oppressed persons and the earth itself, who for too long have been subjugated to myriad regimes of imperialistic and patriarchal exploitation and abuse. In light of Johnson's observation that Jesus and by extension the Beatitudes are consistently identified with God's wisdom within Matthew's gospel, it seems fair to suggest that the option for the poor and the option for the earth can be rooted in faith in the wisdom of God and the hope of its coming reign.

¹² As Origen writes, "The Son of God is king of heaven. And just as he is wisdom itself and righteousness itself and truth itself, so too is he also the kingdom itself [*autobasileia*]." See Origen, *Origen: Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of his Writings*, ed. Hans Urs Von Balthasar (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1984), 35.

¹³ See Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); and Celia Deane-Drummond, *Creation Through Wisdom: Theology and the New Biology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).