Introduction: Faith after the Anthropocene

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Received: 7 July 2020; Accepted: 20 July 2020; Published: 23 July 2020

Abstract: This is the introductory essay to the Special Issue “Faith after the Anthropocene” published in Religions 11:4 and 11:5. How does the Earth’s precarious state reveal our own? How does this vulnerable condition prompt new ways of thinking and being? The essays that are part of this collection consider how the transformative thinking demanded by our vulnerability inspires us to reconceive our place in the cosmos, alongside each other and, potentially, before God. Who are we “after” (the concept of) the Anthropocene? What forms of thought and structures of feeling might attend us in this state? How might we determine our values and to what do we orient our hopes? Faith, a conceptual apparatus for engaging the unseen, helps us weigh the implications of this massive, but in some ways mysterious, force on the lives we lead; faith helps us visualize what it means to exist in this new and still emergent reality.

Keywords: Anthropocene; ecocriticism; faith; vulnerability; environment

The articles in this Special Issue began as invited papers at the Brigham Young University (BYU) Humanities Center symposium “On Being Vulnerable, Part II: Faith after the Anthropocene,” held at Brigham Young University, Utah, in September 2019. This meeting was the logical, more thematically capacious and ethically urgent, follow-up to the symposium sponsored by the BYU Humanities Center the previous year, titled “On Being Vulnerable: ‘Crisis’ and Transformation.” During that first meeting, a number of speakers reflected together on how retrenchment has become a dominant reflex of the humanities during vulnerable times, exacerbating the feeling of crisis from which the impulse toward defensiveness is designed to protect us. When we and our disciplines are rendered vulnerable, how do we respond? In addressing this question we took a cue from Hannah Arendt, who argues in The Human Condition that only actions of the most vulnerable kind—self-disclosing, interpersonal, and unanticipated; lacking defense of precedent or certainty of outcome—achieve lasting effects.1 Arendt associates such actions with speech and writing, drama, music—in short, with the arts and humanities—and contrasts them with displays of strength that fortify institutions and bolster economies but ultimately do little to cultivate the human spirit. In effect, she provides a model for the humanities after an era of “crisis,” when humanities disciplines are increasingly portrayed as indefensible and when their greatest chance for survival, ironically, may depend on how their proponents embrace that very trait.

The symposium from which this Special Issue was born represented an amplification of this theme, addressing the vulnerability associated with our ecological condition. Our focus, however, was less the vulnerability of the Earth, per se, than how the Earth’s precarious state reveals our own—how it prompts us to new ways of thinking and being. The Anthropocene, of course, designates the Earth in

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1 See (Arendt 1958).
a state of transformation, cataclysmically so, in response to human activity. However, is it possible, we asked, to imagine ourselves transformed for the better as a function of the ecological peril our planet faces? How might our consciousness of gathering catastrophe incite changes in us that help us redress the deeper conditions of which the Anthropocene is a symptom? We were especially compelled by the thought of how our vulnerable condition, ecologically and existentially, inciting the transformative thinking this condition requires, inspires us to reconceive our place in the cosmos, alongside each other and, potentially, before God. “Faith after the Anthropocene” refers to those ways that our current condition of sober novelty, of generative catastrophe, modifies our beliefs and practices, both religious and secular. Who are we “after” (the concept of) the Anthropocene? How might we project and approach the horizon of our existence? What forms of thought and structures of feeling might attend us in this state? How might we determine our values and to what do we orient our hopes?

However we answer those questions, it seems to us that faith plays a central role. We define faith, with Paul, as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen” (Hebrews 11:1, NRSV). Such assurance typically pertains most directly to confessional religions, but Paul’s definition relates, in some ways, to climate as well. Unlike weather, climate is notoriously difficult to perceive directly. It is experienced by everyone and no one; we can measure it and point to its effects, but we do not experience it the way we would an object. We only compound this challenge when we move, from climate per se, to an entire climatological epoch. Paraphrasing the Gospel of John, no one has seen the Anthropocene at any time. The Anthropocene, rather, is a name we accord a modern state of planetary being. Faith, a conceptual apparatus for engaging the unseen (even if, in this case, not “hoped for”), helps us weigh the implications of this massive, but in some ways mysterious, force on the lives we lead; faith helps us visualize what it means to exist in this new and still emergent reality. What is more, there is a practicality to faith, a translation of belief into action. In the words of a nineteenth-century theological treatise, “Would you have ever sown if you had not believed that you would reap? Would you have ever planted if you had not believed that you would gather? . . . [W]hat have you, or what do you possess, which you have not obtained by reason of your faith? Your food, your raiment, your lodgings, are they not all by reason of your faith?”

In the Anthropocene Age, when “reap[ing] and gather[ing]” become increasingly uncertain, our planet becomes a product of and a challenge to the kind of faith we invest in the future, the nature of the choices we make. We recreate it, we hope, through our collective actions.

The scope of the Anthropocene is essentially planetary. Whatever else it means, it refers to the enormous influence of human beings upon the entire terrestrial system, and thus the historical emergence of the anthropos as a geological agent. While the effects of the new climatic regime are certainly global, the faiths upon which we focus in this Issue are necessarily more regional. We focus especially on certain western expressions of Christian faith, including its transformation or disappearance, both aspects of its vulnerability. This Issue, in other words, is focused on the way that communities and intellectual traditions shaped by the Christian legacy are responding in a variety of theoretical and practical ways to the new conditions of universalized precarity brought on by the Anthropocene. We acknowledge, of course, that global and interreligious perspectives are urgently needed, but we also believe that these are best realized when they engage with rich, local conversations rooted in particular histories, traditions, and cultures. By doing some of that more local scholarly spadework we hope that the contributions in this Special Issue may, in their own granular ways, help to prepare the ground for some of those larger, more global conversations in the future.

In thinking together about the faith in the Anthropocene, we are continuing a scholarly conversation about the complex role of Christianity and the cultures it has influenced in generating and responding to widespread ecological challenges. While Christian traditions have a long and venerable history of

2 “No man hath seen God at any time . . . ” (John 1:18, KJV).
3 (Smith [1876] 2010).
thinking about both nature and creation—the Hebrew prophets, for example, thought passionately about issues of environmental degradation—Christian involvement in the coordinated efforts of ecological theory and action only emerged in the twentieth century in response to the new science of ecology, on the one hand, and to the novel moral visions articulated in conservation and environmental movements, on the other. Although broad Christian engagement with ecological theory and action is perforce a relatively recent phenomenon, it is now a substantial, growing, and promising area of contemporary study, including emerging specialties such as ecotheology and emerging fields such as Religion and Ecology. Throughout the last decades of the twentieth century, this initial Christian engagement with ecological concerns was often somewhat reactive and tended to deploy two strategies: one characterized by an attempt to make Christianity “green”, either by revising inherited beliefs and practices in accord with present ecological considerations, the other by the attempt to show how Christian scriptures and traditions, in their most authentic guises, were already substantively ecological. This late twentieth-century approach to ecotheology often took for granted that the central ethical and theological question with regard to ecology was anthropocentrism and its alternatives (usually some form of either biocentrism or ecocentrism). There is still much that is valuable in this literature, but our Issue locates itself more in the recent work both by Christians and by those of other traditions that has tended to shift the conversation away from the demands of a kind of ecological a priori (non-anthropocentrism) before which religious traditions need to justify themselves, and towards a more dialogical, theoretically rigorous, and heuristic exploration of the way religious communities might deploy their spiritual and intellectual traditions in order to participate in the continuing effort to construct an integral ecological theory, practice, and politics able to meet the demands of a warming world and a vulnerable creation.

Of course, ecologies rooted in Christian traditions have struck up rich conversations with other bodies of religious thought and practice—something this Issue models in the essays by Whitney Bauman, Willis Jenkins, and Lisa Sideris. While deeply attuned to the questions that have animated philosophies of “faith”, Bauman, Jenkins, and Sideris take up different aspects of these questions that bear less directly on Christianity. All of the contributions to this Issue are rich and varied, however, and some introduction to them is in order.

Lisa Dahill explores the relationship between ecology and traditional Christian ritual and beliefs, analyzing the sacraments and the theology of the resurrection as forms through which to ponder our need for the “wild.” The latter represents aspects of nature that deeply inform our ecological being but that we typically repress and from which we are easily estranged. Dahill is especially taken with thoughts of the Eucharist and ways we become food, and thus sustain life, for other creatures, whether predators or simply microorganisms after our bodies begin to decompose. Mary Frohlich also pushes us to consider our wider network of attachments, though for her “greening the self” means putting individuals into a wider network of relations that includes God and the cosmos. How we enter into communion with these agencies beyond ourselves depends, in large measure, on how we are able to adapt to what she calls the “rhythms of the Spirit,” the ecological motions of the divine that inform all life. John Gatta, meanwhile, turns our attention to another shade of “green,” the “Green Jeremiad.” The use of this rhetorical form in America dates back to the “city on a hill” sermons that took root with the Puritans. It finds new life in powerful rhetorical interventions by Rachel Carson, Bill McKibben, Barbara Kingsolver, and others, serving as an ecological great awakening to our responsibilities in the Anthropocenic age.

However, is the language of the Anthropocene even the best way for us to bring attention to the urgent realities of the present day? Whitney Bauman raises some important doubts. As he sees it, the term only perpetuates longstanding, destructive projections of humankind onto nature, making the remedy symptomatic of the traditional problem. What is more, the type of human we find projected onto nature, still, tends to be hegemonic and heteronormative, recapitulating racial, gendered, and sexual hierarchies that elsewhere, in social domains, are frequently subjected to thoroughgoing criticism. Bauman wonders whether a range of different—planetary—ways of framing our current dilemma
would not yield a more diverse, truly ecological way to address the precarities of our current condition. George Handley’s argument similarly takes up problems with Anthropocenic discourse, although he situates the solution more squarely on religious grounds. How does an enhanced understanding of the fall and the atonement enable us to perceive—to read—nature more fully? How might it help us better understand the limits and possibilities of human agency? In short, how might we cultivate a more resilient Christian theology of nature?

This is made all the more complicated by the fact that the very concept of nature—a concept that often turns on the notion of an unsustainable and ecologically invidious nature/culture duality—is increasingly contested by philosophers, critical theorists, and environmentalists alike. Do we need to disabuse ourselves of the very concept of nature in order to move toward a greater vision of ecological flourishing, as many now suggest? In his essay, Jacob Sherman argues that while the modernist notion of nature as the stable backdrop for the adventures of human history, culture, and epistemic achievement is indeed problematic, premodern approaches to the “book of nature” such as one finds in the twelfth-century work of Hugh of Saint Victor may be more promising. Indeed, precisely because they subvert modernist categories of nature and culture, a creative retrieval and critical reimagining of such premodern theological and contemplative approaches to reading the book of nature may offer important resources for the postmodern task of crafting a “terrestrial” hermeneutics of nature in the midst of the Anthropocene. The task of reimagining Christian life in the Anthropocene is taken up, as well, by Timothy Robinson in his reconstruction of Christian hope in the face of profound vulnerability, ecological precarity, and a certain inescapable hopelessness. Christian hope has often been construed as a way to avoid our historical vulnerability by placing faith for the future in some unparalleled power: God’s omnipotent providence and divine sovereignty for a certain kind of confession, but also hope in political action and movements, hope in technological innovation and human ingenuity. However, such appeals to be saved by a great power coming to us from outside cannot assuage the ecological anxiety so many suffer today. By contrast, Robinson commends a deeper hope, one that embraces a kind of virtuous hopelessness, and commends us to act with justice and wisdom on behalf of the Earth not for the sake of some outcome but as a good in itself. Hope, for Robinson, is not epistemic, but enactive.

In her essay, Lisa Sideris also attends to the way in which human comportment to the past and the future is brought to grief by the tremendous ongoing changes associated with the Anthropocene. The loss and devastation wrought by climate change and the great extinctions underway can give rise to immense grief and mourning. Responses to this environmental grief run from repression and denial by those seeking to preserve current human civilization at all costs to responses of creative mourning, remembrance, and the embrace of death and loss as integral to any meaningful change. Throughout her essay, Sideris attends as well to the way that moral, religious, and quasi-religious elements are profoundly apparent in the writings of secular authors as they confront environmental grief. Finally, Willis Jenkins also draws our attention to the way that categories of religion continue to operate even “outside” of those forms of life usually deemed religious. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Bhutan and Yellowstone, Jenkins shows how processes of sacralization interact with ecological stresses as both human and non-human or environmental actors collaborate to make spaces sacred, to set them apart as sanctuaries from sovereign and exogenous powers, especially in response to sudden ecosocial changes. Jenkins’ work highlights for us the transdisciplinary challenge of making sense of such complex collaborations of human and non-human actors in particular geographical places that are, nevertheless, affected by planetary developments and across both sudden and geological spans of time. It is not only faith that is transformed in the Anthropocene, but scholarship too, and new methods, collaborations, and vulnerabilities will be needed as we struggle to understand, to critically engage, and perhaps to hope. In such a spirit, we offer these essays to our readers not at all as the last word, but as a contribution to a conversation that we believe is ever more urgent.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.
Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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