Scriptura74 (2000), pp. 345-357

THE HEURISTIC KEY OF 'SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY': A few notes

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Abstract

This article reflects on the somewhat vague notion of an 'ecological hermeneutics'. It suggests that such an ecological hermeneutics is characterised by the use of ecological 'heuristic keys'. It investigates the use of 'sustainable community' as one example of such a heuristic key. The emphasis on community has to be understood within the context of the tension between the forces of fragmentation and the realisation of the integratedness of all forms of being. The qualification of sustainability has to be understood within the context of the realisation of the limits to growth on a finite planet. The article finally evaluates the feasibility of such a notion of 'sustainable community'.

1. Introduction: Ecology and hermeneutics

In the literature on Christian theology and ecology relatively few attempts have been made to relate ecology to hermeneutics.[1] Any notion of an 'ecological hermeneutics' therefore remains somewhat vague at this stage. Nevertheless, ecological perspectives may be or become instructive for various dimensions of theological interpretation. For the moment, I will simply note some connections between contributions in ecological theology and various factors playing a role in theological interpretation.[2] I hope to develop this towards an ecological hermeneutics in a future contribution.

- Numerous attempts have been made to retrieve the somewhat ambiguous ecological wisdom 'in' the Biblical texts (at a surface level).[3]
- Some interesting studies have been done to show the impact of environmental factors 'behind' the Biblical texts on the production and early reception of these texts.[4]
- Several studies have assessed the 'ambiguous ecological promise' of the history of theological interpretation 'in front of' these Biblical texts.[5]

1. See my indexed bibliography (Conradie 1998a) for some references. Most of these texts do not engage in formal hermeneutical reflection (if 'hermeneutics' is understood as a theoretical discipline reflecting on concrete acts of interpretation). For recent contributions to an ecological hermeneutics, see Van den Brom (1998) and especially Habel (2000).
2. The six aspects which are mentioned below are based on the 'map' of factors playing a role in Biblical interpretation developed by Smit (1987). See also my own analysis of this map (Conradie et al 1995).
3. See my indexed bibliography for some references to the literature. For a thorough analysis of the 'ambiguity' of these attempts to retrieve the ecological wisdom in the Bible, see Santmire (1985).
4. See Hiebert (1996) for one recent attempt to account for ecological aspects in the world behind the text.
5. See Santmire's (1985) excellent analysis of the ambiguous ecological promise in the theologies of Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Dante, Francis of Assisi, Luther, Calvin, Teilhard and Barth.

- Any adequate analysis of a particular social *context* now has to take its environmental dimensions into account.
- Anthropocentrism has been added to the list of hidden ideologies 'below' the text that may influence Biblical interpretation at all levels.[6]
- Ecological theologians have been experimenting with innovative heuristic keys[7] to *relate* text and contemporary context with one another (viz. the 'spiral of interpretation').[8]

This article will focus on one suggestion for such an ecological heuristic key, i.e. the notion of 'sustainable community.' In the next section I will argue that this concept has to be understood against the background of a legacy of social fragmentation and ecological degradation.

2. The legacy of fragmentation

The discourse on 'identity', 'particularity', 'social location', 'otherness' and 'boundaries' reflects the increasing postmodernist recognition of *plurality* and the rejection of the universalist assumptions of modernity.[9] This is expressed in the resistance against 'metaphysical comfort (Nietzsche), 'présence', 'logocentrism', and 'phonocentrism' (Derrida), 'meta-narratives' (Lyotard), or 'objectivism' (Bernstein). With reference to Derrida, Tracy comments that the thrust of this discourse is to, '... expose any pretensions to full selfpresence, any self-congratulory Western resting in an untroubled, alinguistic, self-present, reality-founding ego ...' (1987:59). Indeed, '... the purely, autonomous ego is no more' (1987:82). We realise much better today how our worlds, our identities and our social locations are shaped by history, culture, gender and language.

This discourse on plurality has to come to terms with the social effects of fragmentation. To an awareness of and appreciation for plurality, an acknowledgement of the impact of social disintegration is called for. Many of us have to cope with the cognitive dissonance of living at the same time in different social locations, different interpretive communities, each with their own fragmented and contested identities. Indeed, as Bernstein (1989:87) remarks, '... the dominant rhetoric today is that of incommensurability, fragmentation, rupture, fissure, otherness, and différance'.[10] We are faced with the reality of what Caputo (1987) calls the 'flux', the question '...

6. The dangers and perhaps inevitability of some degree of anthropocentrism remain contested. See Gustafson (1993) and Northcott (1996) for two thorough discussions of anthropocentric, biocentric, ecocentric or theocentric approaches in this regard.
7. Heuristic keys play a crucial role in the identification of similarities (amidst differences) between the Biblical text and a contemporary context. They have a double function in this regard. They provide a key to unlock the meaning of *both* the contemporary context *and* the Biblical texts and simultaneously enable the interpreter to establish a *link* between text and contemporary context. Heuristic keys are not only employed to *find* similarities but to *construct* similarities, to *make* things similar (idem-facio), if necessary. The scope of such heuristic keys are often quite comprehensive: they purport to provide a clue to the core meaning of the contemporary context *as a whole* and the Biblical text *as a whole*.
8. For the notion of heuristic keys, see also Conradie (1998b).
9. 'Post-modern thinking', says Kearney (1991:182), 'would be expressly fragile to the extent that it refuses to reduce the complex multiplicity of our cultural signs and images to a systematic synthesis ... (it) renounces the modern temptation - from Descartes and Spinoza to Hegel and Marx - to totalize the plurality of our human discourse in a single system or foundation.'
10. Jeanrond (1989:218) adds: 'The destruction of the individual ego's glorious pretences by old and new masters of suspicion, such as Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault, has left us with no other alternative than the hope for a genuine conversation between fellow humans.'

whether anything can survive the flux, i.e. whether and how it is possible to build up unities of meaning and stable objects in and through the flow of time' (Caputo 1987:3), and the task of '... tracing out a pattern in a world in slippage' (Caputo 1987:37). A relatively untroubled, relaxed sense of postmodernism and a mere joyful celebration of the freeplay of signifiers therefore seem deeply ambiguous.[11]

This awareness of impending fragmentation is embedded in the devastating social impact of technology, industry and urbanization - the very achievements of modernity. There is no need to deny the liberating benefits that (at least a certain segment of) humanity has reaped from modern science and technology. The average human lifespan has been extended by a generation or more, many diseases have been brought under control, enormous wealth has been produced and distributed to millions, so that human life could extend beyond the mere struggle for survival. However, unless they are ecologically sustainable, these yields may prove to be short-lived.

In his instructive work, *Moral fragments and moral community*, Larry Rasmussen (1993) shows the social legacy of these processes of fragmentation in which the bonds of community in church and society are being eroded more quickly than they are replenished. The effects of fragmentation are countered by the process of globalisation only in appearance. The spectacular achievements of globalisation, symbolized by interconnected networks of high-speed electronic communication cannot hide the (economic) exclusion of an increasing number of people from the 'one world' of the present global economic order, condemning them to mere survival on its fringes.[12]

These processes of fragmentation also have devastating ecological consequences. More specifically, they have affected humanity's understanding of our place in nature. The environmental crisis is a pathological sign of the alienation between human beings and nature.

Rasmussen refers to the 'apartheid habit' of distinguishing between humanity and non-human nature, leaving the impression that we are an ecologically segregated species. Perhaps a sensitivity to particularity, difference and otherness requires a vocabulary which is reluctant to use 'nature' as a *homo*(!)geneous term for oceans, mountains, forests, grasslands, deserts, lakes, trees, plants, birds, insects, viruses, bacteria, amoebae and mammals like human beings. A distinction between 'humankind' and 'otherkind' may remain appropriate - at times. Rasmussen (1996:75-89) adds that the same 'apartheid habit' is also manifested in the 'great divorce' of nature from (human) history. Human beings and the history of humanity should be regarded as a mere episode in the larger history of the cosmos itself and of life in the cosmos.[13]

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11. See Tracy's (1994:105) sharp comment: 'The postmoderns sometimes seem more determined by ennui than by ethics. They are not, in fact, so much repelled by the ethical barbarism of modernity as bored by liberal modernity's 'gray-on-gray' world. This is perhaps an understandable aesthetic response to liberal modernity. But it is only that - a merely aesthetic response without the moral power of the great aesthetic and ethical traditions of the Good and the Beautiful like Platonism or Romanticism.'
12. See the assessment of globalization by Konrad Raiser (1997:23f) and the December 1997 issue of the journal *Echoes* on globalization.
13. Thomas Berry is perhaps one of the most eloquent advocates for seeing humanity as an episode, a dimension of the history of the universe. He states, for example, that: 'The human is less a being on earth or in the universe than a dimension of the earth and indeed the universe itself.' (1988:195).

A few further quotes may underscore the thrust of this aspect of fragmentation. Thomas Berry (1988:215) has used the striking metaphor of 'autism' for this alienation of humanity from nature. He says:

> In relation to the earth, we have been autistic for centuries. Only now have we begun to listen with some attention and with a willingness to respond to the earth's demands that we cease our industrial assault, that we abandon our inner rage against the conditions of our earthly existence, that we renew our human participation in the grand liturgy of the universe.

Ernst Schumacher (1973) makes a similar comment:

> Modern humanity does not experience itself as a part of nature but as an outside force destined to dominate and conquer it. Humans even talk of a battle with nature, forgetting that, if they won the battle, they would find themselves on the losing side.

Sallie McFague (1993:34) comments on the same tendency:

> We have lost the sense of belonging in our world and to the God who creates, nurtures, and redeems this world and all its creatures, and we have lost the sense that we are part of a living, changing, dynamic cosmos that has its being in and through God.

Albert Nolan (1992:4) adds to this chorus:

> The majority of people in the world today seem to have lost touch with the earth from which we were all born. And because we no longer experience ourselves as part of the cosmos, many of us are participating in the destruction of God's creation. When we lose touch with creation, we lose touch with God.

To conclude: Human beings need to explore once again what it feels like, looks like, sounds like, smells like and tastes like to live in harmony with creation and thereby begin to heal the brokenness that surrounds us (see Chial 1996).

3. The lure towards integration

In ecological theology this legacy of fragmentation and alienation (especially between humanity and nature) is often contrasted with insights from the astrophysical and biological sciences, emphasising notions of ecological wholeness, interconnectedness and integratedness in nature itself.

The emerging ecological consciousness has led to a new awareness of the one earth community to which all species, cultures, nations and religions belong. In fact, the picture emerging from the sciences and environmental movements alike is that everything in the cosmos, including human beings, is genetically interrelated, radically akin with one another. This sense of relatedness is well illustrated in the following quotes from authors such as Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and Sallie McFague:

- Cosmology joins evolutionary biology, molecular biology, and ecology in showing the interdependence of all things. We are part of an ongoing community of being; we are kin to all creatures, past and present. From astrophysics we know our indebtedness to a common legacy of physical elements. The chemical elements in your hand and brain were forged in the furnaces of the stars. The cosmos is all of one piece. It is multi-levelled; each new higher level was built on lower levels from the past. Humanity is the most

advanced form of life of which we know, but is fully a part of a wider process in space and time (Ian Barbour, quoted in McFague 1993:28).

- Gravitation ... binds everything together so closely that nothing can ever be separated from anything else. Alienation is an impossibility, a cosmological impossibility. We can *feel* alienated, but we can never *be* alienated (Berry 1991:14).

- We are distant cousins to the stars and near relations with the oceans, plants and other creatures on our planet (McFague 1993:104).

No tribal myth, no matter how wild, ever imagined a more profound relationship connecting all things in an internal way right from the beginning of time. All thinking must begin with this cosmic genetic relatedness. (Brian Swimme quoted in McFague 1993:106).

There are no Catholic lakes, Protestant rivers or Muslim forests. We all share a common earth and in the face of a threat to the survival of the planet we should unite our efforts and forget which institutions should have precedence, and other ecclesial niceties (McDonagh 1990:192-3).

Remarkably, this sense of relatedness and community does not imply a levelling of differences and particularity or a lack of individuation. The history of the cosmos is one of staggering differentiation and individuation, evolving into millions of species and individual specimens, each with their own unique characteristics. No two specimens from the same species are, or have ever been, exactly the same. Again this sense of differentiation may be illustrated through a number of quotes:

- Nature depends on diversity, thrives on differences, and perishes in the imbalance of uniformity. Healthy systems are highly varied and specific to time and place. Nature is not mass-produced.' (Paul Hawken quoted in Rasmussen 1996:114).

- Everything is also radically diverse and unique. Annie Dillard tells us of biologists finding in a single square foot of topsoil only one inch deep 'an average of 1,356 living creatures ... including 865 mites, 265 springtails, 22 millipedes, 19 adult beetles, and various numbers of 12 other forms ...' This does not include what may be up to two thousand million bacteria and millions of fungi, protozoa, and algae and innumerable other creatures which make the topsoil the one inch of adamah it is (Rasmussen 1994:119).

- No two things, whether they be two exploding stars or the stripes on two zebras, are the same; individuality is not just a human phenomenon - it is a cosmic one. At the same, time, however, the exploding stars and the zebras are related through their common origin and history (McFague 1993:105).

- God created with seemingly mad exuberance. From our human viewpoint there is too much creation altogether - too many stars, too many galaxies, too many billions of light years, too many species of plants, animals, fish, birds, insects, germs, viruses, too many races among humankind, too many languages, too many cultures, too many religions. It would have been much more sensible to limit the number of all those things to a manageable size. Wouldn't one race, one language, one religion have been enough? At the risk of being somewhat

> anthropomorphic (but then everyone must who tries to speak of God), one might characterize God as 'showing off', creating with reckless abandon, spewing forth diversity in life in senseless super-abundance, so as to impress us with his powers and ingenuity (Greeley 1974:697).

These insights emerging from the astrophysical and biological sciences resonate with the well-known ecumenical adage of the 'integrity of creation.' Since the Vancouver assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1983 numerous attempts have been made to clarify the use of this somewhat vague notion. It seems that three connotations contribute to its meaning:

- It is often emphasised that the whole creation as a one time endowment has its own intrinsic integrity and dignity which has to be acknowledged and protected - like any person's dignity. From a theological perspective the dignity of the whole creation is derived from the confession that the earth is the Lord's. The Christian God is the God not only of the poor but of all creatures whose integrity are violated.
- Secondly, the integratedness, the wholeness of creation, the mutual dependence and integral functioning of all forms of life and ecosystems as a whole, is of vital importance.
- Thirdly, the term suggest the internal relationships between social and environmental justice since creation is at its very roots a shared home for all forms of life. The notion of 'integrity of creation' thus portrays a vision of shalom - of a just, equitable and peaceful community of creation.

Jay McDaniel (1990:165) provides a satisfactory summary of the meaning of the phrase 'integrity of creation':

> It refers to the value of all creatures in themselves, for one another, and for God, and their interconnectedness in a diverse whole that has unique value for God.

To summarise: ecological theologians are articulating from various perspectives the need to resist the processes of fragmentation and alienation and to retrieve a sense of integratedness.

4. The quest for sustainable community

These renewed ecological sensitivities and the environmental legacy of fragmentation and alienation has prompted many ecological theologians to explore notions of *community* and *sustainability*. This emphasis on inter-relatedness, mutual dependence and community is quite significant since it comes precisely at a time when human communities and forms of social cohesion seem to be breaking down everywhere.

Numerous indigenous theologians have emphasised a sense of *community* in an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom of indigenous peoples, e.g. from within an American Indian, Latin American, Aboriginal, Phillipine, Pacific or African context. These retrievals respond to the economic processes of fragmentation which destroy both indigenous cultures and whole ecosystems. In virtually all these indigenous theologies the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature in pre-industrial cultures is praised and celebrated in songs and legends. There is a sense of wonder for the fecundity of life, for the land and all the creatures that live from it, for the cycles of

the seasons. There is an almost overwhelming emphasis on notions of interrelatedness, mutual dependence, reciprocity, ecological balance, wholeness, the integrated web of life, and especially *community*. The world exists as an intricate balance of parts. Human beings must recognize this balance and strive to maintain and stay within this cosmic balance. The earth is regarded as a living being that must be treated with respect and loving care. Everything from hunting to healing is a recognition and affirmation of the sacredness of life.

The testimony of George Tinker, the American Indian Lutheran theologian, who speaks intimately of creation as kin, has become well-known in ecumenical circles. His passion for all one's relatives is expressed in the following words:

> The keyword then, for the American Indian cultural context, is *respect*, respect for a tree. Even more important is the underlying notion of reciprocity. The prayers and the offering of tobacco are reciprocal acts of giving something back to the earth and to all of creation in order to maintain balance even as we disrupt the balance by cutting down this tree. The question Indian cultures pose for Christian people, especially those of Europe and North America, is this: how can respect for a tree or rock, animals or eventually other human beings find any place in the industrial-commercial world that has emerged out of modernity and now threatens all of creation with 'postmodern' extinction? And what sort of reciprocity do we or will we engage in; what do we return to the earth when we clear-cut a forest or strip mine leaving miles of earth totally bare (Tinker 1992:144-145)?

African contributions to an ecological theology have stressed the importance of an African sense of community, interconnectedness, pan-vitalism, etc. Emmanuel Asante (Ghana) uses the concept of 'pan-vitalism', Harvey Sindima (Malawi) speaks of the bondedness, sacredness and fecundity of the 'community of life', while Gabriel Setiloane (South Africa) celebrates an African biocentric theology and ethos:

- Reality is inseparable. The African is kin to all creatures - gods, spirits and nature ... The whole of nature must be understood as sacred because it derives its being from the Supreme Being who is the Creator-Animator of the universe (Asante 1985).

- The African idea of community refers to bondedness; the act of sharing and living in the one common symbol - life - which enables people to live in communion and communication with each other and nature. Living in communication allows stories or life experiences of others to become one's own (Sindima 1989).

- We Africans sincerely believe that by taking into its fabric these African interpretations and views about the universe, creation and nature, the Christian understanding is enriched rather than impoverished and the image of God becomes more worthy, inspiring greater wonder, love and praise. (Setiloane 1995).

To counter the effects of fragmentation in an industrialised context and to challenge the ideology of unlimited growth, ecological theologians often use the notion of *sustainability*. Remarkably, the World Council of Churches' slogan of a just, participatory and sustainable society (Nairobi 1975) has received widespread currency through calls for 'sustainable development'. In the discourse of environmental

economics, sustainable development has become an alternative to the failure of earlier models of development and to the impossibility of unlimited economic growth on a finite planet. Development should be sustainable in terms of the earth's carrying capacity.

The United Nations Commission of Environment and Development adopted the following widely accepted definition in this regard:

> Sustainable development is development which meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:
>
> - the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
> - the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs (quoted in Environmental Monitoring Group 1992:3-4).

In the National Environmental Management Act (107 of 1998), the South African government adopted a similar definition of sustainable development, i.e. 'development that meet the needs of the present while not compromising the needs of future generations.'

The value of the notion of sustainable development is that it serves as an important corrective against expansionist notions of economic growth. It reminds us that unlimited economic growth is not sustainable and simply not possible in a world where resources remain limited.

However, the notion of sustainable development remains somewhat elusive. Some regard it as an euphemism used by entrepreneurs for 'business as usual', i.e. economic growth, qualified by a few environmental cautions. When faced with a choice between development and a sustainable environment, the interests of developers and entrepreneurs (who can often provide short-term economic gain in terms of employment) regularly seems to receive a priority.

The abuse of the notion of sustainable development has led some analysts to argue that the notion of *development* itself remains problematic. The legacy of the 'failure of development' (Granberg-Michaelson 1992) cannot be cured simply by adding the adjective 'sustainable.' In the quest for an alternative economic vision, Larry Rasmussen suggests that the indigenous emphasis on community should be linked to the discourse on sustainability and thus proposes a notion of 'sustainable community'.[14] This echoes earlier work by Cobb (1989) and Cobb & Daly (1994) on sustainability. These authors also emphasised the importance of retrieving a sense of ecological community.

What does such a vision for a *sustainable community* imply? Rasmussen identifies the following characteristics of a sustainable community:

- It is *ecologically sustainable*. Unlimited material growth on a finite planet is simply not possible. We can only survive on this planet if we follow its household rules, not ours. This means that renewable resources are consumed no faster than they can be renewed, that non-renewable resources are consumed no faster than renewable resources can be found and that wastes are discharged at a rate no

14. See his groundbreaking work, *Earth community, Earth ethics* (Rasmussen 1996).

greater than they can be processed by nature or human devices (see Béguin-Austin 1993:15).

- It provides *sufficient sustenance* for all. While some live in relative luxury, more than a billion people are not able to obtain a calorie-adequate diet (the World Health Organization's definition of the poverty-line). A sustainable community imply that such people should gain access to energy, resources, work and land in order to obtain sufficient sustenance and their fair share of the earth's resources. This calls for a new sense of what is 'enough' or satisfactory (*satis* = enough). We need to learn again how to appreciate the simple things in life (which is often for free). We need to adopt a lifestyle based on the virtue of simplicity, of being content with what is sufficient.
- It calls for a *working together in community*. In a sustainable community wealth is defined as the well-being of the whole community. This requires a sense of caring for one another and not just of gaining material prosperity. All economic activity, including paid and unpaid labour, should be conducive to community well-being.
- It requires *participation by all*. This means both the right and responsibility to share in work for the common good of the community. Human dignity requires a dispensation where people will not be excluded from work but will participate in decisions pertaining to their work and to what is best for their community.
- It *respects diversity*. A sense of community does not imply rigid conformity or monotonous identity but calls for an appreciation of community:

> Nature depends on diversity, thrives on differences, and perishes in the imbalance of uniformity. Healthy systems are highly varied and specific to time and place. Nature is not mass-produced (Rasmussen 1996:114).

5. The delusion of a sustainable community

The urgency and polemic thrust of these notions of sustainability and community cannot be denied. However, the heuristic value of a notion of sustainable community calls for further critical investigation. Where can a model for such a sustainable community be found? Does it not evoke a romantic agrarian dream of a 'sweet little village' from a bygone age?

Hans Van Hoogstraten (1998) questions the idealistic presuppositions of this notion of community. He asks what the basis is for a positive evaluation of the 'good community' versus the 'bad individual.' It seems to be based on the assumption that people live in bio-physical communities and because virtues such as sympathy are dominant communal features, people should follow an economic practice that serves and strengthens the 'original' community. The inherent sense of connectedness and relatedness, derived from some features of the biosphere, constitute the magic formula to retrieve this sense of community.

Van Hoogstraaten argues that a sense of 'original community' cannot be defended historically. He shows how the Greek polis - which Cobb & Daly use as a paradigm - was systematically plagued by the structural inequalities of slavery and patriarchy. Van Hoogstraten (1998:43) concludes:

> We cannot simply reawaken these lost communities; the result will inevitably be either a harmless or harmful idealistic concept. Emancipation, communication, technology, secularization, and the market economy have all contributed to the human community's disappearance as a historical reality. ... Community cannot

function as a saving concept, at least not in the sense of an anthropologically or biologically founded postulate.

The retrieval of an African sense of community (or ubuntu) is infested by similar caveats. The romanticised memory of a pre-colonial African village can all too easily mask the oppressive impact of authoritarian and patriarchal social structures. At most, the notion of ubuntu may become an appropriate vision for the future of an egalitarian society (that never existed in that form before). Rhetorically, this vision is often retrojected into the distant past in the same way that the idyllic garden of Eden is portrayed in the Genesis narratives.

Calls for a retrieval of a sense of community remain appropriate in terms of its polemic thrust against rugged individualism. However, this sense of community all too often degenerates into a subtle manipulation to accept authority and conformity. To escape from the narrow-mindedness of such communities can indeed be a liberating experience.

In addition, the sustainability of pre-industrial societies should not be overestimated. Communities have had an adverse effect on the natural environment since the formation of the first human settlements. It is therefore a fallacy to regard the environmental crisis as a purely modern phenomenon. The shift from hunter-gatherer to agricultural societies during the neolithic period led to food surpluses, population growth and defined territories with organisational structures. From these settlements the first great civilizations developed. The rise and fall of many of the great civilisations may have been closely linked to environmental factors. Moltmann (1989:64-65) comments on this link:

> There are many investigations of the connection between land and civilization which show that, for example, the cultures by the Euphrates and Tigris, the Roman cultures in North Africa, the Maya culture in Yucatan and other collapsed because the land was exploited recklessly and short-sightedly and the fertility of the soil was steadily destroyed. Emigration and the 'deportation' of people became necessary, to save both the ground and human beings. It was especially the great empires which exploited their granaries and fertile provinces to feed their great cities and armies and also devastated them through pillaging.

Ingemar Hedström (1990:111) adds in more evocative language:

> All the great civilizations of the world began with the felling of the first tree ... the majority of them disappeared with the felling of the last tree.

6. Conclusion

The comments in the previous section indicate that a sustainable community can neither be assumed nor be retrieved from a primordial dispensation. It may *become* a regulative vision for the future, an inspiring dream that could instil in us a sense of hope, not a regained paradise but the promise thereof.[15] For the moment we may need to follow the more modest route of searching for locally restricted traces of community amidst the forces of social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, political and economic and ecological fragmentation.

15. See Haught's comment (1993:111f) that the history of the cosmos suggests that nature is not a paradise but only the promise thereof.

At the same time, this vision for sustainable community may be deepened within the context of local Christian communities towards the more intimate one of a viable and flourishing *communion* in the presence of the Spirit, the Giver of Life. In the celebration of the holy communion, Christian communities are reminded by the nourishing symbols of bread and wine that they are deeply rooted in the earth. Yet, the church is also an eschatological communion. This requires a transformation of the relatively limited (and somewhat stationary) vision for sustainability towards one of everlasting life for the earth and all its creatures.[16]

16. See Conradie (2000:352-380) for an ecological reinterpretation of the vision for eternal life.

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