

## Some Theological Reflections Regarding Multi-disciplinary Discourse on the “Anthropocene”

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### Abstract

*In this contribution, some salient insights emerging from multi-disciplinary discourse on the so-called Anthropocene are noted. These touch briefly on stratigraphical markers, on disturbances in the Earth system, on dating the “Anthropocene”, on identifying its root causes, on naming the “Anthropocene” as such, on assessing the “Anthropocene”, and concomitant responses to the “Anthropocene”. In response, four clusters of challenges posed by such discourse on the “Anthropocene” to Christianity and Christian theology in particular are identified and outlined, namely 1) the critique of Christianity as complicit in the root causes of the “Anthropocene”, 2) Christian critiques of the “Anthropocene” and of naming it as such; 3) prospects for constructive Christian responses to the “Anthropocene” for the sake of the common good (stability in the Earth system); and 4) prospects for constructive responses to the “Anthropocene” for the sake of Christian authenticity. This yields the conclusion that, in the “Anthropocene”, Christians need to acknowledge that (some) humans have become a geological force of nature but also that it should now be more clear than ever before that humans cannot save themselves from self-destruction.*

**Keywords:** Anthropocene; Christian authenticity; Common good; Constructive theology; Earth system science; Ecological reformation; Human uniqueness; Human sin

### Introduction

This contribution follows from a consultation on “Planetary entanglement: Theology and the Anthropocene”, involving colleagues from the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands, the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch university, and the Department of Religion and Theology in September and October 2021. The request from the organisers was to provide an orientation to contemporary theological discourse on the so-called Anthropocene.<sup>1</sup> On this basis, I will first note some salient insights emerging from multi-disciplinary discourse on the so-called Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup> These will touch briefly on stratigraphical markers, on disturbances in the Earth system, on dating the

<sup>1</sup> For the series on *An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”*, it was decided to use the term “Anthropocene” always in quotation marks to indicate the contestations over naming it as such (see below). Doing ecotheology “amid” the “Anthropocene” is then not only a reference to disturbances in the Earth system but also signals resistance to dominant ways of interpreting the “Anthropocene”. In this contribution, I follow this decision.

<sup>2</sup> This contribution builds upon my *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene* (2020), especially in terms of literature consulted on the “Anthropocene” and some quotations here placed in footnotes.

“Anthropocene”, on identifying its root causes, on naming the “Anthropocene” as such, on assessing the “Anthropocene”, and concomitant responses to the “Anthropocene”.

In response to such discourse, I will identify and outline four clusters of challenges posed by such discourse on the “Anthropocene” to Christianity and Christian theology in particular, namely 1) the critique of Christianity as complicit in the root causes of the “Anthropocene”, 2) Christian critiques of the “Anthropocene” and of naming it as such; 3) prospects for constructive Christian responses to the “Anthropocene” for the sake of the common good (stability in the Earth system); and 4) prospects for constructive responses to the “Anthropocene” for the sake of Christian authenticity.

### **Multi- and transdisciplinary discourse on the “Anthropocene”**

One of the most salient features of academic discourse on the so-called Anthropocene is that the divide between the natural sciences and the humanities is radically called into question.<sup>3</sup> “The human” (*anthropos*) has always formed part of nature but has now become “a geological force of nature”, so much so that the side effects (not merely the artefacts) of culture will be inscribed in rock layers for many millions of years to come. The object of study in the natural sciences now has to take the complexities of the humanities into account.<sup>4</sup> Geology can no longer be separated from politics and therefore from colonisation, slavery and the impact of extractive industries, or else it will be branded as “white, colonial geology” (Yusoff 2018:13, 103, 105). At the same time, the humanities have to reckon with the geological impact of being human. The underlying problem is that the humanities and social sciences were built on the assumption that humanity has a history of its own – an assumption that is no longer philosophically defensible.<sup>5</sup> While many dualisms have been undermined, often in a reductionist way, the one between nature and culture has proved to be intractable,<sup>6</sup> given the need to defend human dignity, human rights and human responsibility – typically given the underlying assumption of human uniqueness.<sup>7</sup> Put concisely, what is required is a notion of “nature”

<sup>3</sup> As Chakrabarty (2012) puts it, “The wall of separation between natural and human histories that was erected in early modernity and reinforced in the nineteenth century as the human sciences and their disciplines consolidated themselves has some serious and long-running cracks in it.”

<sup>4</sup> See Steffen et al. (2018:5) “... human societies and our activities need to be recast as an integral, interacting component of a complex, adaptive Earth System. This framing puts the focus not only on human system dynamics that reduce greenhouse gas emissions but also on those that create or enhance negative feedbacks that reduce the risk that the Earth System will cross a planetary threshold and lock us into a Hothouse Earth pathway”.

<sup>5</sup> See Hamilton (2017:8). See also the first of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s theses (Chakrabarty 2009:201): “Anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history”.

<sup>6</sup> One of the most significant attempts in the field of anthropology to address the divide between nature and society is by Philippe Descola (2013).

<sup>7</sup> The assumption of human uniqueness has prompted numerous critiques from animal ethologists as well as philosophical critiques of anthropocentrism. While the “integrity of creation” may be defended alongside an inalienable human dignity, few tend to support a radical biocentric equality given the hierarchical distinction between what is mineral, plant, animal and human. The food industry depends on that distinction – between let us say children, chickens and chickpeas. Likewise, vegetarians and vegans assume such a hierarchy. For a recent discussion, see Conradie (2021). To illustrate the point, see this pertinent formulation by Nicholas Longrich (2021): “People tend to assume that there’s something that makes us fundamentally different from other animals. Most people, for example, would tend to think that it’s okay to sell, cook or eat a cow, but not to do the same to the butcher. This would be, well, inhuman. As a society, we tolerate displaying chimps and gorillas in cages but would be uncomfortable doing this to each other. Similarly, we can go to a shop and buy

in the natural sciences that includes humanity and a notion of “history” in the humanities that includes the history of life on earth.

Reflection on the “Anthropocene” is now found in practically each and every discipline, offering an opportunity for academic institutions to become *uni*-versities again. However, academic discourse on the “Anthropocene” has brought to the forefront the competition, indeed the conflict, between disciplines. “Consilience” (EO Wilson) does not come easily and then often comes at the cost of reductionism (Sideris 2016). The “Anthropocene” disturbs any basic distinction between facts and values, since what ought to be – and what ought not to be – is already geologically inscribed in what is. This has become an excellent test case for the naturalistic fallacy and hence the need to disentangle descriptive from normative claims (Antonaccio 2017). Yet, conflating science with ethics (or religion), the state of nature with the nature of the state (Hobbes!), remains as dangerous as ever before, even if separation is no longer feasible. Such contestation will almost necessarily lead to transdisciplinary reflection at a meta-theoretical level on how disciplines are related to each other in terms of subject matter, methodologies, epistemologies and cosmologies (or ontology / metaphysics).

Such conversations may help one to recognise the limitations of one’s own expertise and of one’s own discipline and hopefully to resist temptations towards disciplinary imperialism. In what follows below, I will identify a number of salient features of academic discourse on the “Anthropocene” in no particular order. I will do so as a theologian overhearing conversations between others (typically not addressing Christian theology) without claiming expertise in this regard except in the form of articulating as a “take-home message” what it is that I have heard in such a process of overhearing from within the South African context. Brevity will therefore be a virtue!

### ***The “Anthropocene” as a stratigraphic marker***

Like any other species, humans have always changed the environments in which they have lived (hence theories of niche construction in evolutionary biology) and this has had an impact on larger systems. If bacteria and other forms of life have altered Earth systems for billions of years, human impact is not by itself unique. So what is new about the so-called Anthropocene (ἄνθρωπος + καινός = “new” or “recent”)?<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking, academic discourse on the “Anthropocene” is at home in one narrow branch of geology, namely stratigraphy, studying the evolution and dynamics of the Earth System as embedded in various layers of rock in the lithosphere, including fossil evidence in such layers. Officially, a proposal on naming the “Anthropocene” as such is being investigated by the 37-member Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), established by the Sub-commission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, one of seventeen sub-commissions of the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS). Each of these sub-commissions is responsible for a specific period of geological time. In 2019, the AWG voted (29 to 5) in favour of declaring the Anthropocene an Epoch and

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a puppy or a kitten, but not a baby.”

<sup>8</sup> I find the emphasis on human systems by Erle Ellis (2011) helpful. He distinguishes between basically three such human systems, namely the Palaeolithic system of hunting and gathering communities, the Neolithic agricultural systems and the Industrial system. Each has had a significant impact on the terrestrial biosphere, but the scale is not the same. The industrial system is novel in its use of fossil fuels, the industrial synthesis of reactive nitrogen to boost agricultural productivity and genetic engineering.

plans to submit a report to the ICS after deciding on a definitive geologic marker or “golden spike” (technically a Global boundary Stratotype Section and Point). Final ratification would have to come from the executive committee of the International Union of Geological Sciences. The AWG has to consider evidence of a change in the (future) rock layers, has to date such change, and has to mark that literally with a golden spike at a location where this is most evident.

Ample evidence is gathered in this regard: residues from nuclear explosions, an accumulation of plastics, together with the abrupt disappearance of multiple species from the fossil record, will be evident in rock layers for many millions of years. The latest majority proposal is to mark the end of the Holocene (since the end of the last ice age) and the start of the “Anthropocene” at around the mid-Twentieth Century, given radioactive debris from nuclear explosions that became embedded in sediments and glacial ice (marking the Atomic Age), the use of agricultural chemicals and the accelerated pace of industrial production.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the human footprint will continue to cast a shadow long after the end of human civilisation. Accordingly, the “Anthropocene” will be marked as a new epoch (as distinct from a boundary event, a transition “stage”, an “age”, “period” or “era”) to follow the Holocene epoch on the Geological Time Scale.

### ***The “Anthropocene” in Earth system science***

Discourse on the “Anthropocene” becomes misconstrued if restricted to such stratigraphic markers. This is because of an increasing recognition of the multiple ways in which the geosphere interacts with the hydrosphere, the atmosphere and the biosphere as the four sub-systems of the Earth system (in the singular).<sup>10</sup> Each of these may be further sub-divided but it is the interaction between these sub-systems that has become the focus of attention. This is a single, dynamic system, not a collection of ecosystems. The Earth system has been characterised by dramatic changes over 4.6 billion years, with the biosphere (including the noosphere and the technosphere) coming into play later. Such changes are also influenced by variations in solar radiation; the impact of other planets, comets and asteroids; the earth’s orbital movements and its tilt. The “Anthropocene” is then best understood as a change, a recent (*kainos*) disruption within the Earth system. It is crucial to see that droughts, floods, hurricanes, loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification (climate change’s “equally evil twin”) and zoonotic diseases are all symptoms of underlying disturbances within the Earth system (in the singular). Put bluntly, without reference to Earth system science, any reflection on the “Anthropocene” in the humanities would be missing the point.<sup>11</sup> It would underestimate what is at stake by focusing on the symptoms instead of the underlying disease.

<sup>9</sup> See the news report (dated 21 May 2019) published in *Nature* at <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01641-5> (accessed 20 July 2021).

<sup>10</sup> The Earth System may be defined as “the integrated biophysical and socioeconomic processes and interactions (cycles) among the atmosphere, hydrosphere, cryosphere, biosphere, geosphere, and anthroposphere (human enterprise) in both spatial—from local to global—and temporal scales, which determine the environmental state of the planet within its current position in the universe. Thus, humans and their activities are fully part of the Earth System, interacting with other components.” See Rockström et al. (2009: endnote 1).

<sup>11</sup> This is a core argument in Hamilton (2017).

### ***Global change and the notion of planetary boundaries***

The emphasis on Earth system science is best evident in the outcomes of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (1987–2015), which studied global change<sup>12</sup> in terms of the major biogeochemical cycles of nitrogen, phosphorus, carbon, and water. This led to a landmark synthesis report entitled *Global Change and the Earth System: A Planet Under Pressure* (2004). The “pressure” here refers to the dangers associated with crossing various natural thresholds that could lead to non-linear changes within the Earth system. An anthropogenic disruption of the balance within the Earth system is best associated with the social construct of “planetary boundaries” as described by the Stockholm Resilience Centre. Such planetary boundaries are related to nine processes that regulate the stability and resilience of the Earth System. Two of these boundaries, namely climate change and biosphere integrity, are regarded as “core” boundaries, since significantly altering either of these would drive the Earth System into a new state. Four of these boundaries have already been breached, namely the two core ones as well as land-system change, and altered phosphorus and nitrogen cycles. The other boundaries are ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion, global freshwater use, aerosol loading and chemical pollution by an array of industrial chemicals (which cannot be fully assessed<sup>13</sup>). The aim is not only to assess whether and to what extent such boundaries have been breached and the impact that this may have on the Earth system as a whole. It is also to circumscribe a safe operating space, well within these boundaries, allowing for a zone of uncertainty for each of these boundaries. The idea is that such a safe operating space, instead of minimizing negative externalities (i.e. “limits to growth”), can serve as a guide for policy making.

### ***A life-belt economics***

The implications of planetary boundaries for policy making have been picked up in the social sciences through discourse on a so-called “doughnut” or “life-belt” economics,<sup>14</sup> which defines a safe operating space between minimum requirements for sustainable livelihoods (the foundation) while not exceeding ecological boundaries (the ceiling). This is portrayed as a disc with a hole in the middle (thus a doughnut or life-belt). The twelve social foundations are inspired by the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals and include food security, health, education, income, peace and justice, political voice, gender equality, housing, social networks, and access to energy and water. Accordingly,

<sup>12</sup> In the opening statement of the significant 2004 IGBP report, the nature of *global* change is captured in the following way: “Crucial to the emergence of this perspective has been the dawning awareness of two aspects of Earth System functioning. First, that the Earth itself is a single system within which the biosphere is an active, essential component. Secondly, that human activities are now so pervasive and profound in their consequences that they affect the Earth at a global scale in complex, interactive and apparently accelerating ways; humans now have the capacity to alter the Earth System in ways that threaten the very processes and components, both biotic and abiotic, upon which the human species depends.” See Steffen et al. (2004:1).

<sup>13</sup> Rockström et al. (2009) explain: “By current estimates, there are 80 000 to 100 000 chemicals on the global market ... It is impossible to measure all possible chemicals in the environment, which makes it very difficult to define a single planetary boundary derived from the aggregated effects of tens of thousands of chemicals. Some toxicity data exist for a few thousand of these chemicals, but there is virtually no knowledge of their combined effects.”

<sup>14</sup> The concept and associated diagram was developed by economist Kate Raworth in an Oxfam paper entitled “A Safe and Just Space for Humanity” (2012) and developed in her book *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (2017).

an economy may be considered “prosperous” when all twelve social foundations are met without overshooting any of the nine ecological ceilings.

### ***Dating the start of the “Anthropocene”***

Dating the start of the “Anthropocene” remains a subject of controversy. This is important because that also conveys a position on the root causes of the “Anthropocene”. Six main possibilities may be noted, namely a) the extinction of megafauna in the Pleistocene due to the early geographic spread of *homo sapiens*; b) the impact of the agricultural revolution, which coincides with the advent of the Holocene; c) the “Columbian spike”, associated with a sudden *drop* in CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations around 1610, probably given the impact of imperialism and colonialism on the spread of diseases and mass deaths in the Americas, leading to a change in farming practices and the regrowth of forests;<sup>15</sup> d) the impact of the industrial revolution (marked by the invention of the steam engine); e) the so-called “great acceleration” in production and consumption following World War II;<sup>16</sup> and just prior to that, f) the advent of the nuclear age (marked by the first nuclear bomb explosion at Alamogordo, New Mexico on 16 July 1945).

### ***A correlation with responses to the “Anthropocene”***

The debate on the start of the “Anthropocene” has significant implications for how responses to the “Anthropocene” are to be construed. Such responses are explored in a wide range of disciplines – from engineering to the social sciences (economics and politics), to literature and the arts. Accordingly (in inverse order), if the “Anthropocene” is marked by the advent of nuclear weapons, then it can readily be resolved through the transformation of nuclear technology to nuclear power and other elite-driven technologies.<sup>17</sup> If consumerism (or “affluenza”) is the problem, then the behavioural patterns of the consumer class would need to change. It is then the cumulative impact of industrialised civilisation, through urbanisation, resource extraction and waste management, that is at stake (Hamilton, Bonneuil and Gemene 2015:2–3). This raises complex problems around “sustainable development” and sustaining lifestyles and indeed civilisations. If the use of coal for the steam engine constitutes the problem, then an appropriate response would require a transformation of the energy basis of the global economy. But if this also marks the advent of industrialised capitalism, then an end to capitalism is required, prompting the quip by Fredric Jameson that it nowadays seems easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism (as quoted in Latour 2017:108). If the industrial revolution is regarded as the outcome of the rise of modernity and is then associated with the slave trade, imperialism and colonialism, then

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion, see especially Lewis and Maslin (2018).

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion, see especially McNeill and Engelke (2014).

<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the narrative of the “Anthropocene” is constructed in such a way that “risk leading to the conclusion that the socio-ecological crises of the Anthropocene can be resolved by continuing to pursue the unfinished projects of Western colonial-modernity and technological mastery over nature through to their triumphant conclusion.” See Simpson (2018:67). Then some clever scientists and engineers have to save the day, perhaps with help from the military (!), where politicians, business leaders and religious leaders have failed to do so. If so, the Anthropocene marks a narrative of elite-driven technology with planet-wide consequences, including the long-term impact of radiation on the victims of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and subsequent nuclear tests in Oceania. See Lewis and Maslin (2018:327); also Yusoff (2018:44–48). On the grand narrative with scientists as heroes, see Bonneuil and Fressoz (2017:79–83).

questions on the possibility of moving away from “modernity” emerge. Can the history of colonialism be reversed? Is the geological notion of the “Anthropocene” then a renaming of the philosophical notion of modernity itself? (see Latour 2017:116) And if agriculture is the problem? Or human migration? Then the “Anthropocene” becomes in a sense natural because it would seem that being human (or human innovations) itself poses a problem!<sup>18</sup>

### ***On naming the “Anthropocene” as such***

These different positions have also yielded vigorous debates on naming the “Anthropocene” as such.<sup>19</sup> As any African would appreciate, there is much in such naming. A plethora of alternatives have been suggested, including the Anthro(po)bs)cene,<sup>20</sup> the Capitalocene,<sup>21</sup> the Chthulucene<sup>22</sup> (a poetic rendering of symbiotic relationships), the Eremocene (the age of loneliness following the loss of biodiversity), the Homogocene,<sup>23</sup> the Necrocene (spelling death and extinction), the Oliganthropocene (caused by a small fraction of humans) the Plastocene, the Technocene, or the Thanatocene (ecocide) to list only a few of the available alternatives. In jest, I would prefer to call it the “Hamartiocene”, i.e., the age in which the global impact of human sin has become evident, but since such nomenclature will not be widely adopted, I will continue using the term “Anthropocene”, albeit with many reservations indicated by the quotation marks used throughout.<sup>24</sup> Such debates should be welcomed, but only if the basic premise is granted, namely that (some) humans have become a geophysical force on a planetary scale.<sup>25</sup>

At the heart of this debate is a resistance from the side of the humanities and social sciences against what is regarded as homogenising tendencies in the natural sciences. Put bluntly again, are all humans responsible (if admittedly not equally so) for the “recent” disruptions in the Earth system or only some sectors of humanity? Who is this “Anthropos”? Is this human not all too Western, white, male and affluent? Is it not the American dream that has yielded the Anthropocene nightmare? Does lumping anthropogenic impact together in an undifferentiated category of the “Anthropocene” not conceal the role of white supremacy and colonialism?<sup>26</sup> Is the very concept of the

<sup>18</sup> As Clive Hamilton (2013:202–203) puts it, “It is not the product of industrial rapaciousness, an unregulated market, human alienation from nature or excessive faith in technological power; it is merely the result of humans doing what humans are meant to do, that is, use the powers Prometheus gave us to better our lot.”

<sup>19</sup> See especially Crist (2016).

<sup>20</sup> See Swyngedouw (2019) The term “Anthro(po)bs)cene” refers to the obscene technocratic way in which death, also the death of a civilisation, is treated as obscure and distant, an obscene impossibility. Swyngedouw (2019:256) speaks of the fantasy of absolute immunisation, that is, “the fantasy that despite the fact we (the immunised) know very well we shall die, we act and organise things as if life will go on forever”.

<sup>21</sup> See especially Moore (ed.) (2016).

<sup>22</sup> See Haraway (2017).

<sup>23</sup> See Morton (2016:23).

<sup>24</sup> Kathryn Yusoff resists alternatives (alter-cenes) to the “Anthropocene” but insists on a redescription in terms of extractive colonialism as the racialised assemblage from which it emerged. See Yusoff, (2018:61). She (2018:xii) understands blackness as a “historically and intentionally enacted deformation in the formation of subjectivity, a deformation that presses an inhuman categorization and the inhuman earth into proximity.” It is this proximity of black bodies to harm as a result of such intimacy that she refers to as “black Anthropocenes”.

<sup>25</sup> See Morton (2016:20).

<sup>26</sup> See Simpson (2018:65).

“Anthropocene” not embedded in the intellectual space of the Euro-Western academy? Is discourse on the “Anthropocene” not merely an extension of discourse on globalisation where world-systems theory (following Immanuel Wallerstein and others) is extended towards Earth system theory? There is surely a link between globalised capitalism and global warming. Does the category of the “Anthropocene” not hide assumptions regarding neo-liberal globalisation?<sup>27</sup>

Whose “Anthropocene” is it then<sup>28</sup> – given that academic discourse in this regard is heavily dominated by the global North and despite the concept’s global connotations?<sup>29</sup> Is such a species concept derived from the natural sciences accurate given social divides?<sup>30</sup> Clearly, it would be unjust and disingenuous to put the blame partly on those humans who are the very victims of such disruptions. However, if emphasis on difference is clearly important in order to resist hegemony and domination, there is also a need to recognise a *common* humanity (against racial divides), the inalienable dignity of *all* human beings (against various forms of oppression) and (in Asia) “integral thinking” (against Western dualities).<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, one may ask why the middle class and the poor (throughout the world) seem to aspire so eagerly to follow the consumptive patterns of the consumer

<sup>27</sup> Theories of globalisation, of course, cannot be reviewed here. For a discussion of the links between globalisation and discourse on the “Anthropocene”, see Latour (2017) and Sloterdijk (2014), on whom he draws.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of this question, see the volume of *RCC Perspectives* engaging with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “Four Theses”, edited by Emmett and Lekan (2016). See also Conradie (2020).

<sup>29</sup> Very few scholars in the fields of ethics, religion or theology are engaging with the notion of the “Anthropocene” from the perspective of the global South, i.e., scholars who are situated within the global South with interlocutors coming from the global South. In a review of 1209 journal articles published between 2002 and 2016, Jens Marquardt (2018) (Stockholm University) comes to the conclusion that “ideas, worldviews, and concepts from the Global South are rarely recognized in the Anthropocene discourse despite the concept’s global aspirations.” Marquardt (2018) notes that the global South is framed in discourse on the “Anthropocene” in terms of especially four key narratives, i.e., “helping the global South”, “making the Global South accountable”, “guiding the Global South” and “assimilating the Global South”. Each of these is deeply problematic and subject to critique. Marquardt (2018) comments that, “the Global South is primarily framed as vulnerable to the effects of anthropogenic environmental effects, passive in terms of its own problem-solving capacity, and dependent on technological, institutional and social innovations from the Global North. Instead of providing alternatives to the growth-based development model, voices from the Global South are marginalised as they are in related academic debates about topics like global environmental governance ... or climate justice”.

Indeed, there are many scholars from the global North speaking on the “Anthropocene” on behalf of the global South and some scholars from the global South writing about the “Anthropocene” who are now located in the global North (e.g., Dipesh Chakrabarty, Kathryn Yusoff), but very few who are actually located in the global South who have interlocutors and implied readers from the global South. One exception in the South African context is Achille Mbembe. See his paper entitled “Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive”.

<sup>30</sup> In an important article entitled “The Geology of Mankind?” Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg (2014) question the use of the species category in understanding the Anthropocene narrative and argue that intra-species inequalities are integral to ecological destruction. They observe that “climate change is denaturalised in one moment – relocated from the sphere of natural causes to that of human activities – only to be renaturalised in the next, when derived from an innate human trait, such as the ability to control fire” (65). They conclude that such species-thinking on climate change is “conducive to mystification and political paralysis” and that it cannot serve as a basis for challenging the vested interests of business-as-usual (67).

<sup>31</sup> As Michel Serres (2018:213) observes, a recognition of the universal does not necessarily give rise to uniformity; only “stupid force” can enforce hegemony and this is always unsuccessful. The singularity of the big bang generates, gives rise to, makes, all the difference. While globalisation opposes difference, the universal encourages it. See Serres (2018:213).



class. This is symbolised by rising carbon emissions in China and India and also elsewhere in so-called “developing” economies. The unification of humanity under the ubiquitous banner of the shopping mall (as buyers, workers or beggars) may be unwelcome but is nevertheless unmistakable (see Hamilton 2017:77). How, then, is discourse on the “Anthropocene” constructed across global divides, however these may be construed – West / East, North / South, industrialised / industrialising, developed / developing, Christian / Muslim cultures, centre / periphery,<sup>32</sup> the consumer class and the poor? How is an emphasis on such deep divides to be reconciled with an emphasis on the Earth system in the singular? Again, for social critique to underplay the latter for the sake of emphasising the former would be missing the point. There is, then, some obvious wisdom in the IPCC’s bureaucratic formula of a “common but differentiated responsibility” to address climate change.<sup>33</sup>

### ***On being human in the “Age of humans”***

In the humanities, the core question has become what it means to be human in the age of the human. Understandably, contrasting positions have developed. Some defend equal human dignity and “universal” human rights on the basis of the Enlightenment values of liberty, equality and fraternity. Some general rubric, if not homogeneity, then seems crucial precisely in order to resist racism. Clive Hamilton (2017) even suggests a “new anthropocentrism”. Others resist modernism, calling for an appreciation of radial diversity amongst humans in the name of postmodernism or postcolonialism and the like. Some seek to counter human exceptionalism through forms of posthumanism. Yet others opt for transhumanism to overcome carbon-based forms of life through silicon-based forms of intelligence. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2012:1–2) is probably correct in sensing that the humanities will need to hold together three contrasting images of the human (besides antihumanist and posthumanist views), namely “... the universalist-Enlightenment view of the human as potentially the same everywhere, the subject with capacity to bear and exercise rights; the postcolonial-postmodern view of the human as the same but endowed everywhere with ... differences of class, sexuality, gender, history, and so on ... [and] the figure of the human in the age of the Anthropocene, the era when humans act as a geological force on the planet, changing its climate for millennia to come.”

### ***The “good Anthropocene”?***

Since the “Anthropocene” has become a value-laden term, there is a need for assessing it – as good or bad or ugly,<sup>34</sup> sinister or exuberant. This is prompted by ecomodernist discourse on the so-called “good Anthropocene”, namely with reference to the ability of

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<sup>32</sup> See Hamilton (2018:30, 60). The South African theologian Klaus Nürnberger employs this distinction in many contributions. See, e.g., Nürnberger (1999).

<sup>33</sup> Amitav Ghosh (2016:115) accepts that anthropogenic climate change is the consequence of the very existence of human beings as a species: “Although different groups of people have contributed to it in vastly different measure, global warming is ultimately the product of the totality of human actions over time. Every human being who has ever lived has played a part in making us the dominant species on this planet, and in this sense every human being, past and present, has contributed to the present cycle of climate change.”

<sup>34</sup> For Simon Dalby (2016:48), though, the “Anthropocene” is neither good nor bad but ugly: “The Anthropocene is neither good nor bad but is going to be shaped by a politics that is necessary and probably will be rather ugly given the resistance of the fossil fuel industry in particular to attempts to keep ‘rocks’ in the ground.”

human technology to address the side effects of disturbances in the Earth system through appropriate technologies for the sake of a better future for all.<sup>35</sup> The argument is that a return to premodern forms of civilisation would be disastrous. The only alternative to “collapse” (Jared Diamond) is then through human ingenuity, to draw on Enlightenment resources to overcome future challenges. The litmus test for judging the “Anthropocene” as “good” is the positions maintained in the debate on geoengineering, especially in the forms of carbon sequestration and solar radiation management. This ecomodernist position on the prospects of a “good Anthropocene” has provoked multiple critiques, raising suspicions regarding the use of the term “Anthropocene” itself. Does the nomenclature not serve as an ecomodernist ideological cover-up of the contradictions of neo-liberal capitalism?<sup>36</sup> For example, can “development”, insofar as it assumes sustained economic growth be sustainable?<sup>37</sup> Can discourse on the “Anthropocene” escape from the philosophical assumptions of modernity, its colonial logic and its often racist assumptions (see, for example, Simpson 2018)? Probably not, at least not ecomodernist positions on the “good Anthropocene”. There is clearly a need for vigorous debate here, especially across North-South divides – but again only as long as the plurality of positions does not come at the cost of recognising the disturbances in the Earth system in the singular.

The stakes are high given the need to steer between the Scylla of an arrogant but foolish optimism (Icarus or Prometheus) and the Charybdis of apocalyptic pessimism (Sisyphus).<sup>38</sup>

### *In need of an adequate diagnosis*

What, then, has gone wrong with the world in the “Anthropocene”? There is no need here to describe the symptoms that manifest themselves. Not only does this require expertise beyond what I can provide; there is also ample literature that offers a description of such symptoms in a publicly accessible way. An appropriate diagnosis<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> The “Ecomodernist Manifesto” is a pertinent example of the call “to use humanity’s extraordinary powers in service of creating a good Anthropocene”, one that would promote the four human aspirations of peace, freedom, material well-being and environmental health together. See *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, signed by 18 co-authors, <http://www.ecomodernism.org/> (accessed 20 January 2019).

<sup>36</sup> See Swyngedouw (2019:254–255). His critique is uncompromising: “Under the banner of radical techno-managerial restructuring, the focus is now squarely on how to change so that nothing has to change.”

<sup>37</sup> For an excellent early discussion, see Ekins and Jacobs (1995). See also Conradie (2016).

<sup>38</sup> As Ben Minteer and Stephen Pyne remark, the “Anthropocene” has become a kind of environmental Rorschach test: “For some, the notion that humans have become a geological force on the planet – a species able to write its presence in the rocks – is a liberating revelation. It means that we should get on with the business of smart planetary management and get over outdated myths of a separate, pristine wild nature that exists free of human influence ... For others, the Anthropocene idea signals the tragic consummation of the destructive human domination of the earth, a last threshold crossed on the march to total ecological despotism.” Quoted in Antonaccio (2017:123).

<sup>39</sup> In *Redeeming Sin?* (Conradie 2017), I propose that Christian sin-talk may be regarded, at least from the outside, as a form of social diagnostics of what has gone wrong in the world. For an adequate diagnosis, the secularised vocabulary of anthropocentrism (sin as pride), consumerism (sin as greed), domination in the name of difference (sin as violating human dignity), alienation (sin as privation of the good), a lack of development (sin as sloth), denialism and folly may be employed. In *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene* (Conradie 2020), I then offer a diagnosis of what has gone wrong in terms of unjust habits of the heart, structural violence, ideology, quasi-soteriology, idolatry and heresy. See also Žižek (2014:7). He makes a finer distinction between *diagnosis* (of the capitalist system), *cardiagnosis* (ideologies that make us accept that system), *prognosis* (what awaits us beyond the end of capitalism) and *epignosis* (knowledge that

is important since that will also determine the prognosis (and a sense of destiny), albeit that the prognosis may be that the disease may well be terminal. However, as Stephen Gardiner observes, as far as climate change is concerned, we are in a stage of initial diagnosis rather than depth diagnosis.<sup>40</sup> Shallow, superficial analyses are readily available. The twentieth century has suffocated us with such diagnoses – national grievances, inadequate development, the oppression of particular groups, the over- or under-regulation of the market – each coming with their own prescriptions.

If an adequate diagnosis remains educated guesswork with multiple uncertainties, that applies even more so to proposed remedies or therapies. It cannot be taken for granted that a prophylaxis will be available to immunise some against the threats associated with disturbances in the Earth system.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the medical terminology may be misleading: a therapeutic model tends to treat the client as a patient or even a victim while the root causes of the “Anthropocene” are associated with guilt and complicity.

To search for an adequate diagnosis is a task that can only be approached in a multi-disciplinary way. What is required is not only scientific observation, technical expertise and economic calculus – that each privileges a form of rationalism – but also a form of reasoning that is valid in other spheres, “where the weaknesses of humans and their institutions are recognized and the lessons of history absorbed” (Hamilton 2017:123). To assess the “Anthropocene” entails nothing less than an assessment of the human condition. To “know thyself” has been the core task of philosophy – as the haunting inscription at the temple of Apollo in Delphi reminds us. This task is becoming ever harder following the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century death of God, the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century death of the subject and perhaps the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century death of history.

The “Anthropocene” poses an even deeper question, namely to reflect on what we have become. To know oneself may be the art of living, but the clue may well lie in the art of dying (*ars moriendi*), to prepare for death. As Roy Scranton (2015:21,23) has it, “The rub now is that we have to learn to die not as individuals, but as a civilization ... The greatest challenge we now face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is already dead.” Africans may note that the “we” and the “this civilization” refer to western societies and western notions of civilisation, also western notions of an “ecological civilisation”. However, in a globalised economy the death of one does not readily provide a niche for another to fill.

There is indeed a need to guard against shallow diagnoses and therefore superficial remedies. At this point, Christian theologians may wish to enter the discussion by bringing the gospel into play. However, the danger is that a diagnosis in terms of human sin may be presupposed before the patient is properly examined!

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drives us towards the next phase of the emancipatory struggle).

<sup>40</sup> Gardiner (2011:244) states: “We are still largely at the stage of saying, for example, that climate change is seriously unjust to the global poor, future generations, and nature, rather than at the stage of offering deep analysis of what exactly has gone wrong and what it would take to get it right.”

<sup>41</sup> See the comment by Swyngedouw (2019:255): “Is it not also the case that many of the sustainability, “resilience”, “smart” technologies, and adaptive eco-managerial policies and practices are precisely aimed at re-enforcing the immunological prowess of the immune system of the body politic against recalcitrant, if not threatening, outsiders (like CO<sub>2</sub>, waste, bacteria, refugees, viruses, Jihadis, ozone, financial crises, and the like) so that life as we know it can continue?” It must be noted that Swyngedouw wrote this already before the virus-politics around Covid-19 emerged!

### Theological reflections on the “Anthropocene”

If the walls separating the natural sciences from the humanities have come tumbling down in the “Anthropocene”, a separation between the natural sciences and Christian theology cannot hold either. For some, Gaia can be hypostasised with a sense of awe, in fear and trembling (see Latour 2017). Hamilton (2015) thinks that the notion of a “good Anthropocene” then calls for a theodicy. For others, “playing God” has become an (geo-)engineering term. We have become the “God-species”! In the infamous words of ecomodernist Stewart Brand “We are as gods and HAVE to get good at it”.<sup>42</sup> Even insurance companies trying to assess what may or may not count as an “act of God” recognise that if not God at least social constructions of “God” can have a planetary impact.<sup>43</sup>

This puts a new spin on discourse on theology and science, including the natural and the social sciences but also the humanities and the arts. The so-called “Anthropocene” has been picked up as a theme for theological reflection, especially within the context of Christian ecotheology.<sup>44</sup> Let me identify and outline four clusters of challenges posed by discourse on the “Anthropocene” to Christianity and to Christian theology in particular.<sup>45</sup>

### The ecological critique of Christianity

A first cluster of challenges is associated with the critique that Christianity is deeply entangled with the anthropogenic roots of ecological destruction. This critique was famously expressed in a 1967 essay by the American historian Lynn White, a Presbyterian layperson, and has been reiterated ever since (see White 1967). In the “Anthropocene”, the plausibility of this critique, at least from outside Christianity, is readily understood: most of the countries with high historical carbon emissions were at least nominally Christian by the advent of the industrial revolution. Even if Christianity is not by itself complicit, the question is at least whether it responded promptly and appropriately once the ecological impact of industrialised capitalism became evident. If not sin as hubris or violence, this is at least sin as sloth.

A Christian confession of guilt will not suffice without investigating what is at stake in terms of the crux of the gospel and the heart of the Christian faith. The question is not only whether Christians have misunderstood the biblical texts and misappropriated their own message given the track record of Christianity (at the level of praxis), but also whether the message itself may be flawed. From the inside one may identify at least six such challenges: 1) Avoiding an escapist eschatology (hope for the *Earth* itself) without

<sup>42</sup> Quoted by Lynas (2011:22). Lynas adds an “Amen!” to that. The reference is to Brand, *Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto* (New York et al.: Viking, 2009), epitaph on page 1.

<sup>43</sup> Remarkably, the use of theological terminology is recognised in *secular* discourse on the “Anthropocene”. See for example the essay by Mark Sagoff (2015) on the “theological” assumptions of the ecomodernist notion of the “good Anthropocene”.

<sup>44</sup> The most significant contribution is perhaps the volume edited by Celia E. Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann and Markus Vogt (2017), which follows a conference of the European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment. See also Clingerman and O’Brien (eds) (2016) and Bergmann (2015; 2016; 2021). See also Rasmussen (2014) and Scott (2021). In the South African context, see also Meylahn (2015) In the Dutch context, see Van Urk (2020). There is now a steady stream of contributions but not all meet the criterion of recognising anthropogenic impact on the Earth system (in the singular), so that term is often used rather loosely.

<sup>45</sup> These clusters correlate with the four tasks of doing ecotheology that I have outlined in recent contributions. See, e.g., Conradie (2020b; 2023).

abandoning dreams for a better world (*hope* for the Earth), noting that the “Anthropocene” may well have been caused by modernist versions of such dreams (see Conradie 2005b);<sup>46</sup> 2) Doing justice to both God’s work of creation (“saving the *Earth*”) and of redemption (“*saving the Earth*”),<sup>47</sup> thus resisting a retreat from cosmology into personal faith;<sup>48</sup> 3) Finding ways to speak of both God’s transcendence and God’s immanence in the world without alienating creature from Creator while clarifying the plausibility of God’s engagement with the world;<sup>49</sup> 4) overcoming a dualist anthropology without falling in the traps of either reductionism or human exceptionalism (anthropocentrism) (see Moltmann 1985:34, Conradie 2005a); 5) accounting for the plausibility of an affirmation of both the goodness of God’s creation given the prevalence of “natural evil” (e.g., natural dissection, predation and aggression) and of the fall of humanity;<sup>50</sup> 6) explaining the distinctiveness of Christian truth claims (believing its own message) in conversation with other religious traditions and secularised societies without reducing the inclusiveness of God’s grace or falling into the traps of self-secularisation.

In discourse on the “Anthropocene” these challenges have become even more pertinent. Let me mention three further aspects associated with naming the “Anthropocene” as such, namely 7) the claim that Jesus Christ is fully human, indeed fully animal (“deep incarnation”) and fully divine and subsequent human hopes for becoming divine (theosis),<sup>51</sup> or at least partaking in the divine communion, a hope that has become secularised in ecomodernist aspirations towards “playing God”, indeed of becoming *Homo Deus*;<sup>52</sup> 8) addressing the critique, precisely amid the “Anthropocene”, that Christianity is inextricably intertwined with anthropocentric hubris, while maintaining the emphasis on inalienable human dignity (the same is not claimed for other animals) with equal vigour;<sup>53</sup> 9) the affirmation of human sin as “universal” (that all human beings are sinners) despite calls for a clear distinction between perpetrators and victims, those who are sinners and those who are sinned against.<sup>54</sup> This challenge is

<sup>46</sup> See my *Hope for the Earth* in response to this challenge. In *The Earth in God’s Economy* (Conradie 2015), I explain why the available alternatives of restoration, elevation, replacement and ongoing recycling each remain deeply flawed. The Anthropocene of course elicits considerable eschatological interest. See, for example Northcott (2015); Skrimshire (2019).

<sup>47</sup> Addressing this challenge is far easier said than done. To explain why this is the case, see Conradie (2013; 2015). It also requires cosmological reflection on God’s relatedness with the world and divine action in the world (see [3] just below).

<sup>48</sup> See Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> In response to a deist alienation between creature and Creator, there is an overwhelming emphasis on God’s immanence in contemporary ecology – to the point that one has to ask “What is the ecological significance of God’s transcendence?” See my essay on this question (Conradie 2020c). The problem is illustrated by the long-standing debates on how to understand divine action in the world. See Chapter 4 of *Conradie* (2015:175–220).

<sup>50</sup> See again Conradie (2017) as one attempt to retrieve Christian sin-talk in the public sphere.

<sup>51</sup> On “deep incarnation”, see especially the volume edited by Gregersen (2015). On theosis, see especially Edwards (2014). For Edwards, these are clearly compatible. See my engagement with his position in Conradie (2020d).

<sup>52</sup> The reference here is to Harari (2017). The Promethean metaphor of “playing God” is widely discussed in discourse on geoengineering. See for example, Hamilton (2013) and Clingerman & O’Brien (eds) (2016).

<sup>53</sup> On human uniqueness, see especially Van Huyssteen (2006) There is an unfinished agenda here given the impact of such claims on human uniqueness precisely in the “Anthropocene”. See my engagement with Van Huyssteen in Conradie (2021).

<sup>54</sup> For a discussion, see again Conradie (2017). Following Augustine and Luther, evangelical theologies have

structurally analogous to questions raised about the implied identity of the “Anthropos” in the “Anthropocene”.

Christian responses to such critiques are of course varied, ranging from an apologetic defence of Christian truth claims to abandoning the church, Christianity and the Christian faith as hopelessly entangled in imperialism, colonialism and the destructive Western quest for progress. More appropriate responses, I would suggest (where the shoe fits), come in the form of confessing guilt,<sup>55</sup> in Pope Francis’ call for ecological conversion (see Pope Francis 2015), and in multiple calls for an ecological reformation of the whole of Christianity.<sup>56</sup> Where the proverbial shoe does *not* fit, for example in communities on the economic periphery in Africa and the Pacific (where a critique of consumerist aspirations and of the prosperity gospel may still be required), there is an appropriate need to shift to Christian critiques of the “Anthropocene” and of naming it as such.

### *Christian critiques of the “Anthropocene”*

A second cluster of challenges is related to Christian critiques of the “Anthropocene” and of naming it as such. In ecumenical theology, *Kairos* theology, and prophetic theology, such critiques of climate change and related challenges are quite widespread, even from within the (South) African context.<sup>57</sup> A critique of the manifest symptoms of destruction (and of the grave injustices associated with such symptoms) is important but would not suffice. It is also important to identify the root causes underlying the disease and to specify these in the graphic way of the prophets of old. In the tradition of speaking truth to power, it will not suffice to pass resolutions aimed at mustering the support of insiders, or even of factions within the Christian fold. Put bluntly, if those in positions of political and economic power do not receive, read and respond to such critiques, then

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typically maintained that all human beings are sinners, that only human beings are fallen, and that sins cannot be graded. By contrast, several contemporary theological movements have emphasised a clear distinction between those who are sinners and those who are sinned against. To underplay such a distinction is to undermine the need for justice and to hold the victims of history responsible for their own oppression. My argument is that the proportionality of guilt does not exclude a recognition of the universality (or better the planetary scope of the impact) of sin. We are all (all living creatures) in this mess (the “Anthropocene”) together. None of us chose this mess, at least not deliberately (which offers no excuse anyway). We (all humans) contributed to this mess in one way or another, as moral agents or as moral patients (on whose behalf others act), but not equally so. We (will) all suffer under it, but again not equally so. None of us can avoid or escape from the mess either, not even through activist struggles to “save the earth”. The question is then not whether the implied *anthropos* is inclusive or representative of all human beings, or whether all are culpable; instead the point is that the impact of the powerful on Earth systems dialectically reverts to encapsulate all human beings – and to impose the guilt of the “not so few” on the many.

<sup>55</sup> There is a twist for Christians who regard themselves mainly as victims of destructive forces beyond their locus of control. During the church struggle against apartheid in South Africa, several church leaders came to the realisation that while they as individuals cannot be held accountable for the evils associated with apartheid (and were at the forefront of the struggle against it), they were leaders of churches that did support apartheid in one way or another. As church leaders, they could not distance themselves from the implied guilt. This awkward realisation poses immense difficulties for unity within the body of Christ and for ecumenical relationships across global divides (see Conradie 2011b). This is obviously radicalised in complicity in the root causes of the “Anthropocene”.

<sup>56</sup> On such a notion of ecological reformation, see Andrianos et al (2019); Conradie and Pillay (2015); Conradie, Tsalampouni, and Werner, (2016); Dahill and Martin-Schramm (2016).

<sup>57</sup> See especially the SACC document, *Climate Change – A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa* (2009). Notably, the challenge here is to the churches and not in the first place to those in positions of power in the global economy. The document does include a number of ecumenical statements that offer a prophetic critique regarding climate change.

this is hardly prophetic, since such lobbying poses no significant costs involved for the critics (see Conradie 2010).

However, a prophet is not just a critic. Prophetic discourse is not merely about “reading the signs of the time” but also about discerning the counter-movements of the Spirit and about articulating an attractive and viable vision for the future (see Nolan 1986). This is much easier said than done in a context where dreams and aspirations (also among the lower middle class and the poor) are more readily expressed in consumerist terms than in a vision of “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation”.

Another layer of challenges associated with such prophetic critique concerns the credibility and integrity of the prophet, precisely as a result of the ecological critique of Christianity. Who are Christians to offer prophetic critique if they are deeply complicit in the underlying problem? There is an obvious solution, namely to draw a sharp distinction within Christianity. The prophetic witness of some Christians will then be undermined by other Christians. A prophetic critique of ecological destruction therefore requires an engagement with ecumenical divides: between East and West, between the global North and the global South, between those in the centre of power and those on the periphery of such power, proverbially between Christian supporters of Donald Trump’s politics and Christian critics of neo-liberal capitalism. Drawing a sharp distinction within Christianity may enable Christian prophets to collaborate with those outside the Christian tradition who may otherwise not be keen to collaborate with them. However, this is a double-edged sword that can easily lead to a bracketing of Christian specificity for the sake of common agendas.

There is another complication for any assumption that prophetic critique is at home within the Jewish-Christian tradition. Remarkably, against their own methodological intuitions, scientists have become prophets in the “Anthropocene”, issuing numerous prophetic warnings in public forums with some truly apocalyptic imagery.<sup>58</sup> The IPCC was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 (with Al Gore)! Where does that leave Christians? Christian prophets may be inclined to merely reiterate such scientific warnings without the necessary expertise and integrity. However, they also need to guard against what Erik Swyngedouw (2019:255) describes as a “hyper-accelerationist eco-modernist vision and practice in which science, design, geo-engineering, terraforming technologies, and big capital join to save both earth and earthlings”. The same applies to billionaire philanthropists who regard themselves as self-appointed Messiahs who will save the world from destruction. In short, a Christian critique of the “Anthropocene” (and of naming it as such) is undoubtedly needed, but such a critique requires both vigour and vulnerability, circumspection and decisiveness, ecumenical solidarity and the willingness to stand alone when needed.

### ***Constructive Christian responses to the “Anthropocene”***

A third cluster of challenges is related to constructive Christian responses to the “Anthropocene” for the sake of the common good, understood as some stability in the Earth system, extending Holocene conditions as far as possible. Christians may eagerly

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<sup>58</sup> See Latour, (2017:28): “the earth science experts are the ones today who look like over-excited militants of a cause, fanatics, catastrophists, and climate skeptics are the ones assuming the role of stern scientists, who at least do not confuse the way the world is going with the way it ought to go! They even succeeded in appropriating – while reversing its meaning – the fine word ‘skeptical’.”

draw on long-standing biblical, doctrinal, moral, institutional, liturgical and practical resources towards the common good. For example, on climate change (a crucial challenge in the “Anthropocene”), Christian responses are symbolised by the “green patriarch” Bartholomew, by Pope Francis and by the World Council of Churches. Could this be extended to the challenges associated with the “Anthropocene”?

It is necessary to state the obvious, namely that Christians will have to work with others in this regard. Such others include governments, international political bodies, business and industry and multiple organisations in civil society, including other religious traditions.<sup>59</sup> Christians cannot take the lead here and do not occupy any moral high ground. Working with others implies having shared goals and shared agendas, even if the ultimate vision may remain distinct. Christian theology, in particular, needs to work together with a wide array of other academic disciplines. The biggest hurdle may lie in working with others from within, namely with other Christians across confessional and doctrinal divides, global divides between Christians in the North (typically complicit in climate change) and in the South (typically the victims of climate change), and various ethical divides (including climate denialism but also issues such as abortion and sexual orientation).

But what if such others do not wish to work with Christians? Resistance against collaboration may be because of reservations about Christianity’s own track record (see the discussion on the ecological critique of Christianity above). It may also be due to perceptions that Christianity (and Christian theology) do not and cannot contribute much to the common good beyond a generalised vision. The expectation may be that Christianity could at best provide some moral support (or worse ideological legitimisation) for agendas determined by others in the public sphere. Perhaps churches (not least in the sub-Saharan African context, where the pervasive impact of Christianity is recognised) may be regarded as useful platforms for disseminating information, for raising awareness, for service delivery and for mobilising mass action. However, churches rightly tend to protect their independence and resist being used for ulterior agendas. There may well be a need for Christians to participate in and support what others do – without seeking to grab the initiative or to gain credit for that. It is understandable and indeed sometimes necessary to repeat what others say in the public interest. A mere presence in public processes may be welcomed. But beyond such functionalist arguments, at some stage the question will emerge whether Christians (and Christian theology) can contribute in particular, and if so, what they can contribute. Can it make a distinct contribution? It would be a shame if they refrain from making a contribution to the common good if Christians are the only ones who are able to make such a contribution.

However, as far as discourse on the “Anthropocene” is concerned, the harsh truth is that, at least from the perspective of outsiders, the most significant and most distinctive contribution that Christians can make to the common good is to get their own house in order. Christians need to become the recipients of their own message proclaimed as good news for the whole world. This will only be possible on the basis of a contribution to Christian authenticity, not by downplaying Christian particularity but by focusing on

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<sup>59</sup> This observation forms the point of the departure for *The T&T Clark Handbook on Christian Theology and Climate Change* (Conradie and Koster 2020).



### ***Constructive contributions to Christian authenticity***

A fourth cluster of challenges associated with the “Anthropocene” is therefore related to Christian authenticity, to enhance Christian self-understanding on the basis of more profound biblical exegesis, revisiting its own doctrines, traditions, moral codes, forms of spirituality and forms of praxis. The challenge is not merely that of an ecological reformation of the Christian tradition (see above) in response to either the critique of Christianity or the urgency of the situation given, for example, tipping points associated with climate change. Such a sense of crisis does offer an opportunity for discernment (*krinein*) and renewal but not if external criteria are accepted to which Christianity must then conform. An ecological reformation will also remain shallow if this is merely a matter of an ecological appropriation of existing truth claims. Instead, the question is what such an ecological reformation can contribute to Christian authenticity, to understanding the biblical texts, the gospel and the Christian message better than before. This is a double-edged sword too – given debates on whether Christian authenticity is an aim in itself or whether the gospel is aimed at the coming reign of God (which would require a return to the previous set of challenges). Are we humans in order to become Christians or do we become Christians in order to be human? If the latter, what does it mean to *become* human in the “Anthropocene”? Is Christian humanism really what is needed in the “Anthropocene”?<sup>60</sup>

Making constructive contributions to Christian authenticity is a core challenge for Christian ecotheology. There are ample responses to this challenge, both through a critique of heresy (e.g., the critique of “playing God”, of anthropocentrism, and of the prosperity gospel) and through constructive reinterpretations of classic metaphors and symbols. Suffice it to say that a mere emphasis on human responsibility (e.g., through metaphors such as stewardship, priesthood or partnership) will not suffice. There can be no doubt about the need for such responsibility, but the “Anthropocene” could also be understood as being inadvertently caused by such notions of responsibility, by attempts to make the world a better place for all. I am not convinced either that a return to some Indigenous sense of the sacred or a Catholic sense of the sacramental will be able to resist the lure of grandeur or consumerist temptations.<sup>61</sup>

The dominant root metaphor in Christian ecotheology, at least in ecumenical contexts, has been that of the whole household of God, thus holding together ecological, economic and social dimensions of inhabiting this household with others.<sup>62</sup> If this is indeed *God’s* household, this prompts the need for further reflection on the Triune God’s identity and character. Can such a metaphor sustain us amid the “Anthropocene”? My sense is that this is possible only if *oikos* is treated also as a verb (house-keeping, home-

<sup>60</sup> The formulations here build on insights derived from Arnold van Ruler. For a discussion, see e.g., Conradie (2019).

<sup>61</sup> An apologetic emphasis on stewardship and a Catholic emphasis on the sacred represent two widely recognised approaches to ecotheology. See, for example the typology offered by Ruether (2000), and my discussion of various typologies (Conradie (2011a).

<sup>62</sup> This metaphor was first explored in the writings of Philip Potter and Konrad Raiser, both general-secretaries of the WCC. It is widely used in the South African context, for example in the Diakonia Council of Churches’ *The Oikos Journey* and in the volume *The Church in God’s Household* (Ayre and Conradie eds, 2016).

making, home-coming etc.) and not only as a noun. A distinction is needed between a house, a home and a hearth (Kanyoro and Njoroge eds 1996). The Earth may be the only available house for living creatures, and it would be dangerous to hope for other houses elsewhere – in heaven or other habitable planets. But for many humans and for very many other forms of life, it does not offer a home (yet). “Home”, I suggest, is an eschatological concept (see Conradie 2005a). In the “Anthropocene”, it may be necessary to couple such a notion of *oikos* once more with that of a journey, perhaps a long walk to freedom, perhaps a journey to the promised land – with all the dangers that wandering through the wilderness may hold (Baumann, Conradie, and Eaton eds 2013). Indeed, *oikos* and *hodos* need to be juxtaposed to each other (Conradie 2022).

Beyond a retrieval of such root metaphors, the core task, as I see it, is one of telling the story of who the Triune God is and what this God has done, is doing, and is expected to do on the road ahead, within but also well beyond the church.<sup>63</sup> This requires attention to both the identity and character of God (the immanent Trinity) and the work of God (the economic Trinity from creation to consummation) but then with an acute prophetic sense of what is new (*kainos*) in the “Anthropocene”, discerning a proverbial fork in the road, a moment of truth (*kairos*) where the future of the church, of humanity, of civilisation, of other species and perhaps even of life on this planet is at stake.

The core theological question is this: What on Earth is this God doing in a time like this?<sup>64</sup> Is God doing anything at all? Is the absence of evidence not evidence of absence? Has the divine parent actually passed away, perhaps for our sake,<sup>65</sup> so that our Father is dead, i.e., “in heaven” only? But even if “God” is nothing more than a human construct, an idea (whether good or bad or ugly), a vision for the future, a way of talking about human agendas, then this question still has to be addressed: What on earth is going on around us? Or should we hope for an all-powerful “Thermostat” (Gaia) to self-regulate global temperatures (see Latour 2017:132)? How, then, should the story of what “God” is doing be told? What lies beyond the “Anthropocene”? And how should we humans then respond? Who are included in this “we”? Who is this “Anthropos” in the “Anthropocene”? Again, what does it mean to be human in the age of humans?

### A concluding theological comment

The categories employed above, such as critique, challenge, responding to such challenges, constructive contributions and of telling the story may all become misleading. The claim cannot be that Christians have to save the world, or that telling the story may make any difference. It is not as if the story itself saves, or that telling the story may become salvific. Living the story (i.e., living within the parameters created by the story) is anyway more important than actually telling the story. Telling this story

<sup>63</sup> This is the agenda of a series of edited volumes entitled *An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”*. See Conradie and Lai (2021), also Conradie and Moe-Lobeda (2022).

<sup>64</sup> Christians need to resist the temptation to see climate change (or the Covid-19 pandemic) as God’s punishment for human sin. However, they cannot refrain from addressing this question unless they yield that, in fact, God is not doing anything at all. The problem is that most of the available answers to this question are either not attractive or not plausible. See Conradie 2020a: 211–232.

<sup>65</sup> This is the kind of God Slavoj Žižek (2011:402) prefers for the radical left: “a God who has fully ‘become a man’, a comrade who not only ‘does not exist’ but also *knows this himself*, accepts his own erasure, passing over entirely into the love that binds all members of the ‘Holy Ghost’, that is, of the Party or emancipatory collective.”

requires a vision of who *God* is and what this *God* is doing in the world. It is *Christ* that transforms culture (through the Spirit), and that is hermeneutically possible only if *Christ* is fully human and fully divine. The task of narrative theology is only to tell this story in the hope that this will become an instrument in the work of the Spirit. We remain dependent upon *God’s* grace.

In the “Anthropocene”, Christians need to acknowledge that (some) humans have become a geological force of nature, but it should now be more clear than ever before that humans cannot save themselves from self-destruction. They cannot cause the wind to blow, but they do need to discern the direction of the Wind and set their sails accordingly.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> This observation is derived from Mark MacDonald, the National Indigenous Anglican Bishop of Canada.

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