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Response to “Beyond Sustainability: Hope in a Spiritual Revolution?”

Rachel Muers, University of Leeds

Lynn White’s famous analysis of the pernicious effects of anthropocentric Christian theology on Northern and Western attitudes to non-human nature has cast a long shadow. Many ecotheologies, including many of those cited in “Beyond Sustainability”, have been framed as direct or indirect responses to White – defending or reframing Christian theology as a positive contributor to environmental concern and to responses to the environmental crisis. Alongside this, however, theology is also able to raise critical questions for contemporary environmentalism. As the author of “Beyond Sustainability” rightly suggests, theology can provoke and sustain the rigorous interrogation of taken-for-granted value judgements, particularly those of global capitalism. In the light of its perspective on the ultimate *telos* of humanity and nonhuman nature, theology holds up for critical evaluation any and every set of assumed values, goals or principles of action. Sustainability, as the author of “Beyond Sustainability” shows – and as I have argued elsewhere, in relation to earlier UN documents – is one contemporary value that calls for theological critique and reformulation.[1] In particular, insofar as the theory and practice of sustainability relies on and reinforces the values of global capitalism, theology should not allow itself to be co-opted into the search for sustainability. Of particular importance, as again the article demonstrates, is the question of hope. For what is it right to hope, and what constitutes an adequate object and practice of hope? The idea of the Sabbath as *telos*, as developed in Moltmann, Rae and others, provides one example of a theological challenge to the hopes and desires of modernity – hope for an end to work, striving and acquisition, and not for the indefinite sustaining of (something like) the *status quo*. Other recent theological interventions – for example Sallie McFague’s critique of consumerism from the perspective of saintly lives – take different routes through Christian tradition to confront the same deep-routed assumptions.

This alternative teleology, as the article implies but does not explore at length, is grounded not only in scripture and tradition but also in lived practices, including practices of worship; and, taken seriously, it might be expected to give rise to distinctive forms of ethical and political action. Arguably, as Willis Jenkins’ important work suggests, Christian environmentalism is best understood not simply through theology – providing alternative paradigms or grand narratives – but through the lived relationship between theology and practice, worked out in particular cases.[2] Viewed in this way, Christian environmentalism turns out to be rather more diverse, complex and messy, and its mapping of the future rather more provisional and humble, than the present article suggests.

This raises a critical question about the framing of the article within “a global discourse on sustainability”, and about its call for a “spiritual revolution amongst the capitalist cultures of the world”. Is it possible that the presentation of a single “global” vision – spoken in a single human voice, while taking what purports to be a God’s-eye view – is part of the spiritual and environmental problem, rather than part of the solution? Is it possible that we need to change the form and not merely the content of the global-teleological stories told in the contemporary world? When the article calls for a “new world order” developed on the basis of “a Christian theological perspective”, we must acknowledge that the history of attempts to re-order the world from Christian perspectives, to implement a vision of “God’s purposes for humanity, nature and the world”, is not universally positive. To the extent that calls for a “spiritual revolution” imply that theology can be disseminated from the top down, as a single alternative framework that offers the “tools of hope”,

[1] Rachel Muers, *Living for the Future: Theological Ethics for Coming Generations*(T&T Clark, 2008).
[2] Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

there is a real risk that it will repeat the errors both of the anthropocentric theology that White critiqued, and of the sustainability discourses that force all natural goods and relationships into a single framework of value.

In practice, if there is to be a "spiritual revolution" in response to the environmental crisis it must presumably involve the radical surrender of the God's-eye perspective, and the rediscovery of the humility proper to the human. My question is about how this humility can best be reflected in the practices and structures of religion – including the practice of theology – as it seeks to interact with powerful global narratives of sustainability. Trying to out-narrate sustainability, or ecosystems thinking, by presenting "the normative context discovered through understanding the purposes of God for his creation" might on the one hand help to inculcate this humility. On the other hand, especially without a clear account of how this "normative context" is perceived, related to and lived with, there is a risk that it simply replaces one overweening grand narrative with another.

A further question that follows from this concerns the nature and status of hope. To put it baldly, why should we assume that Christian theology – or any theological work – is going to provide a solution to the environmental crisis? And if we make that assumption, is there a risk that what started out as a theologically-founded critique of ideology could be co-opted by that same ideology? As I noted in relation to the *Global Environment Outlook* report, there have been plenty of attempts to put "the world's religions" to work in the service of globally-organised responses to the environmental crisis, and it is not always clear that this is being done with a full understanding of the deep challenge that these "religions" might pose to the whole framework. More to the point, however, it is at least arguable that the distinctive contribution of Christian theology to political and environmental discourse is found in theologies of the cross and resurrection, as much as in theologies of creation and incarnation. How might the centrality of a story of failure and death to Christian theology – including Christian theological accounts of hope – shape a theology "beyond sustainability"? I hope that at least some of these questions will be taken further in the critical conversations initiated by this author.