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FERNS is an intercollegiate academic journal that focuses on the intersection between human action and environmental impact. FERNS emphasizes the conversation necessary between scientists, politicians, ethicists, and theologians, welcoming work in fields that intersect around environmental stewardship. FERNS showcases the intellectual, academic, and creative research from emerging scholars at graduate and undergraduate levels within a double-blind peer-reviewed journal that allows students the ability to promote their interdisciplinary work around environmental care.

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All members of the editorial board are dedicated to an interdisciplinary approach to environmental stewardship and understand the need for a journal such as *FERNS*. The board hopes to continue fostering a student community through the work of emerging scholars.

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Welcome Letter

I am delighted to introduce the new academic journal FERNS! This is the first journal that gives students a platform to showcase their work in the field of environmental stewardship. FERNS provides a perfect opportunity to explore the advancements of the fast growing field of religion and ecology and aims to be the leading student journal for this field. It provides the primary forum for advancement and dissemination of the hybridity of the humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences surrounding environmental care.

The journal includes high-quality and original contributions from a variety of international authors, which include research papers, book reviews, and even creative pieces. This inclusion of multiple pedagogies and epistemologies demonstrates the need for the future of academia to include different ways of researching, writing, and presenting one’s work. FERNS always encourages contributions that make rigorous use of a variety of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. The journal will also welcome critical debate between opposing perspectives, as putting texts into dialogue with one another is a crucial element of informed writing.

FERNS is served by an extremely skilled editorial board that diligently reads and reviews manuscripts. Our board contains members from across the United States and Canada at varying levels and a diverse group of academic institutions. These individuals come from different disciplines, which enhances our readership capabilities and thereby the work published in the journal. Because our content is driven to foster applicable environmental stewardship, this journal also reaches beyond the confines of academia into the praxis of professional and institutional arenas.

We as members of the editorial board are extremely proud of how our first issue developed. The voices represented demonstrate the assorted voices we want FERNS to showcase. This journal serves as a resource not only for the reader, but for students who are beginning their publication career. We always encourage submissions and want to inspire students to become a part of the FERNS legacy.

Thank you for your interest in FERNS!

from the Editor

Julia Johnson
Introduction

MARY EVELYN TUCKER and JOHN GRIM
Co-directors, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology (fore.yale.edu)

To launch a new journal requires a leap of faith as well as talent and determination. We offer our congratulations to the students from Yale Divinity School and the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies who initiated this effort and drew in students from other graduate and undergraduate programs. This is an accomplishment for which we are most grateful.

This first issue demonstrates the wide ranging field of religion and ecology that has emerged over the last two decades. Beginning with a series of ten conferences and ten books at Harvard in the mid ’90s and blossoming into the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale, there is now a robust area of study emerging in academia. Moreover, there is a growing engagement in environmental problems by the world’s religions. This includes such issues as the effects of toxicity and pollution, access to clean water and air, deforestation and biodiversity loss, climate change challenges and food safety.

While science, policy, law, and economics are necessary for the solutions to these environmental problems, they are not sufficient. We realize that the moral force of religions is indispensable to long term environment solutions. This is because the world’s religions can bring together the intrinsic value of nature along with social justice for the human community. Ecojustice is now seen as both a global and local concern. This is evident in the Encyclical, Laudato Si’, where Pope Francis calls for the flourishing of both people and the planet.

The articles here are wide ranging and provocative. In the first, Isabel Mares responds to ecocide and loss of species with a call for a biblical ethics of stewardship, not dominion. In the second article, Mamati King’asia addresses the degradation of forests in Kenya. The solution offered is cultivating respect for holistic indigenous worldviews, rather than erasure of those views as has often occurred with Christian missionaries. Nathan Empsall’s article makes it clear that our current systems of ethics are insufficient for inclusion of the environment. He suggests we need a broader intercentric ethics, even beyond biocentrism. Finally, Aubrey Milatz highlights the problem of human exceptionalism in relation to our knowledge about and treatment of non-human animals. Each of these articles is worthy of further discussion and debate. Such is the mark of a lively journal.

In a period of great danger to the health of ecosystems and species, the creative contributions of the next generation are becoming clearer, as is evident in this journal. Their ideas and ethical positions are being articulated in these articles and in the action they represent. These penetrating insights and moral voices will become ever stronger in the years to come. For this we give thanks, along with an intergenerational handshake of encouragement. As Thomas Berry would say, your “great work” is indispensable to our shared planetary future. Indeed, the Earth community is now looking to you for original ideas and committed leadership. This journal is a major step in this direction.
Isabel Mares

The Original Ecocide: How Genesis 1–4 Illuminate an Anthropocene Age

ABSTRACT

Genesis 1–4 reveal humanity’s break from the natural world, the Earth, as embodied in the Garden of Eden and the exile to the East. This legendary account of power and punishment—the story of the first humans, the first sin, and the first murder—has long been used to explain and promote the dominance of ruling humans (predominantly male) over the bodies of women, subordinates, and the Earth. These first four chapters of the Bible juxtapose environmental stewardship and ecocide, as well as human relationships and fratricide. The unremitting dominion of humans over the Earth has brought the planet, the creation, to an ecological crossroads. As was published by the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, human dominance over the Earth’s body has affected at least 83% of the planet’s viable land surface, altering ecosystems and geochemistry. From the “dome” of the atmosphere to the “waters” supporting all life, a global epidemic of ecocide marks a new epoch, the Anthropocene, where human impact on Earth is so significant that it is global and in many ways irreversible. Perhaps now more than ever the “cursed” relationship of human beings to the Earth does not feel like a mythic echo or a metaphor.

Contemporary interpretations of ecocide help identify the original ecocide of Genesis, thus contextualizing the ecological crises of today. Using feminist and ecofeminist biblical criticisms, the problematic absence of the Earth’s voice and the misogyny woven into Genesis are also challenged to better understand the ecological message of the origin story. By re-engaging the Abrahamic stories of humanity, there is hope to heal our understanding of the human species in relationship our miraculous blue-green planet, as well as one another, if not also prevent further damage to the Earth’s living systems.

Keywords: judo-christian, sacred text, genesis, exile, violence

More than Myth

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.”

Genesis 1–4 reveal humanity’s break from the natural world, the Earth, as embodied in the Garden of Eden and the exile to the East. This legendary account of power and punishment—the story of the first humans, the first sin, and the first murder—has long been used to explain and promote the dominance of ruling humans (predominantly male) over the bodies of women, subordinates, and the Earth. These first four chapters of the Bible juxtapose environmental stewardship and ecocide, as well as family and fratricide. The unremitting dominion of humans over the Earth has brought the planet, the creation, to an ecological crossroads. As was published by the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, human dominance over the Earth’s body has affected at least 83% of the planet’s viable land surface, altering ecosystems and geochemistry. From the “dome” of the atmosphere to the “waters” supporting all life, a global epidemic of ecocide marks a new epoch, the Anthropocene, where human impact on Earth is so significant that it is global and in many ways irreversible. Perhaps now more than ever the “cursed” relationship of human beings to the Earth does not feel like a mythic echo or a metaphor.

Contemporary interpretations of ecocide help to identify the original ecocide of Genesis, which in turn contextualizes the ecological crises of today. Harnessing feminist and ecofeminist biblical criticism, the problematic absence of the Earth’s voice and the misogyny woven into the ecocide of Genesis are confronted. Today, re-engaging the Abrahamic origin stories—of Creation, the Punishment, and the Beginnings of Civilization—can help heal
our understanding of the human species in relationship to one another and our miraculous blue-green planet, if not also prevent further damage to the Earth’s living systems.

The First Ecocide

Ecocide is defined by the “loss or damage to, or destruction of ecosystem(s) of a given territory(ies), such that peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants has been or will be severely diminished.” Much of what has occurred in human “advancement”—in transportation, agriculture, industry, electricity, as well as commercial and residential sectors—has indeed caused irrevocable damage to the Earth’s body. The recognition of damage, and its criminality, is relatively new in comparison to the mindset behind ecological disregard. Interestingly enough, the crime of ecocide has been sitting in Judeo-Christian scripture for thousands of years, beckoning humanity to listen to its warning.

So what is the crime of ecocide in Genesis? Biblical scholar and ecofeminist Brigitte Kahl frames the original ecocide as the moment the first woman, Eve, “transgresses the borderline protecting the one tree.” In Genesis 3, the consumption of the forbidden fruit separates humans from creation, from Earth. This moment has become a major linchpin in centuries-long persecution and subjugation of women, blaming the female-bodied for the “fall of man.” However, focusing on the gender of the human who first challenged the creation’s order has distracted from the crime of ecocide itself.

Kahl denotes that the later fratricide in Genesis 4, Abel’s murder by Cain’s hands, also gives way to ecocide, furthering the enmity between the Earth and humans. Therefore, violence between humans harms more than just humans. Human civilization, as told in Genesis 4, was born of the line of Cain. And although there is much beauty that comes with civilization, there is also destruction and death. Violence begets violence is one of the first messages from civilization in Genesis: “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, surely Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” The spread of human civilization, and the violence that comes part and parcel with it, affects many species, many ecosystems. It threatens creation altogether.

In the Bible, ecocide is a matter of disobedience. When humans desire the knowledge (or power) of God, harm is caused to the creation. When humans commit acts of violence out of hubris and spite, harm is caused to the creation. Human action continues to cause rifts between members of our species, other species, and the Earth. Nevertheless, there is more to draw from these ancient texts to help us understand ecocide in the Anthropocene Age.

The Juxtapositions of Genesis

“In the beginning”, humans are created in the image of God. In Genesis 2, humans are helpers within God’s creation. In the following chapters, they prove themselves also capable of violence against the Earth-body and familial-human body. According to Genesis 1, humans are to be dominant over the Earth and its creatures. However, in Genesis 3 and 4, humans are also cursed from the Earth. The events of these first four chapters document a complex, polarized relationship between humans and the Earth.

Humans do not exist in an intellectual vacuum of rationality alone, but rather in a continual state of relationality. The first few chapters of the Old Testament serve to explain homo sapiens’ relationship to the Divine, each other, and their environment, particularly outlining the relationships between God and humans, men and women, and humans and the Earth. The origin story of Genesis is one of the persisting bedrocks of human hierarchy, known well as the patriarchy. This entitled men to the ownership of women, “subordinate” beings (including other humans), land and its resources for millennia.

Although humans have challenged these norms in the last few hundred years with regards to gender equality, reproductive rights, and slavery, Earth and her resources are still pillaged and polluted in the names of power and profit. Genesis 1 states that human beings are to have dominion over the creatures of the Earth—“let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of
the earth." Genesis 2 (also known as “Another Account of Creation”) frames humans as environmental stewards—“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” Then, Genesis 3 ruptures human connection with the Earth, naming humans as neither rulers or stewards, cursing the ground from humankind. This break continues into the violent events of Genesis 4, where Cain slays his brother Abel out of jealousy. Genesis certainly provides a conflicting outline for people to navigate shared existence, and yet, thousands of years later, these themes are still so relevant today.

The way humans orient themselves in the world has changed over time. Scientific discoveries and theories have abetted in change, such as Copernican heliocentrism, relativity, and evolution. These new understandings modify how people orient themselves in the world. Adapting to new understandings, the very ancient pieces of humanity’s stories—the stories of human origins on Earth—are read with fresh eyes. What makes sacred texts perennial is their thematic applicability across time. Yet, they cannot be read literally through all ages. Theologians and historians are tasked to engage them dialectically, opening doors to problem solving, and even influencing the evolution of contemporary life.

The Wound of Exile

The Biblical account of the first humans tells that humanity lives in a protracted state of exile, rejection, and loss. From a psychological perspective, a person or society’s sense of exclusion might result in abuse. If a human child experiences neglect in the first few years of her or his life, the ability to feel empathy is jeopardized. What might this mean if a vast majority of humans function under the assumption that they not only are separate but unwelcome in their environment? In more elegiac terms, what might it mean to be separate from the Earth?

A psycho-spiritual wound between humanity and the Earth’s systems has resulted in the greatest ecological damage caused by a single species. As with any trauma, revisiting the site or memory of wounding is tantamount to healing, and must be done with great care. Clergy, scholars and laypeople can and should reengage Genesis in the context of the Anthropocene, with hopes to help better understand the wound.

“And the Lord, ‘What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.’”

When God declares “you are cursed from the ground” to Cain, this is not to say that the Earth willfully rejects us. This is a curse put forth by a patriarch God. The swallowing of Abel’s blood by the Earth caused the act of crying. Abel’s blood, his life force, is connected to Earth. Upon entering Earth through violence, his blood cries out to God. In the Judeo-Christian origin story, the Earth does not cry, the Earth is rather a vessel for the grief and loss of a life. Yet, what if the Earth grieves the loss of her human children after the first murder? Nowhere in the text does the Earth have a say in the relationship to the creatures of creation, especially humans. The agency of Earth is superseded by God and human action.

If one is to take the first four chapters of Genesis as prescriptive, definitive, and fixed, then it may seem as though humans’ relationship to Earth is doomed. However, those first chapters of Genesis are carrying important messages. Genesis 2 explains that humans have an incredible stake in the care of the world, as they were given a great responsibility to be caretakers of the garden. Genesis 3 and 4 demonstrate that human action makes an impact on humanity and the Earth. Genesis 4 tells us that violence can cause great damage, rippling for generations (“If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold”), further harming humans’ relationship to the Earth.

What Genesis 3 and 4 help to explain is that when human beings gained awareness of “good and evil,” they lost a sacred connection to the creation. Something in human consciousness, a wanting, shifted, leading us to today’s...
ecological crises. This shift in the human psyche is mythologized in Genesis. At the root of our exile is the grief of having been in relationship with nature and then being cursed from it. The Genesis story is not itself the root of our Anthropocene ecological predicament, but it is an expression of the root of our exile.

“She gave me fruit . . . and I ate”

“To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’”

It is awfully convenient to frame this shift in consciousness as the result of a woman’s act and temptation. The association of Earth with femaleness is no coincidence. Seen as receptive and reproductive bodies, the Earth and women are not given autonomy. The pain inflicted upon woman is the predecessor to the pain of exile.

It is important to note that the treatment of women’s bodies is bound up in the dominion over all reproductive bodies. The curse on woman’s reproductive body comes before the curse on the Earth’s reproductive body in relation to humanity. One might argue that the fervent attempts to control both women and the Earth are linked to a warped attempt at returning to a pre-exilic (and idyllic) state, where life (food and offspring) came forth with ease, and the fruits of the garden were the human’s birthright.

The narrative of Genesis puts the fault and toil of reproduction on the female body, thus destroying the human relationship with reproduction altogether. This expands beyond humans in the violent attempts at mastery over the Earth’s reproductive forces. The prerequisite of suffering to bring forth life in Genesis 3 justifies human attempts at manipulating, oppressing, and extracting resources from reproductive bodies. Bodies that perform the physical act of bringing forth children and food, as well as the functionality of complex ecosystems, have arguably been subdued and controlled through “justifying” messages in Genesis.

Still, in spite of anthropomorphism and misogyny, there is hope yet to find unscathed sacred femininity, as well as androgyny, in Genesis. Looking at the Earth in Genesis, the word for earth in Hebrew is eretz, a female noun. Biblical scholar David Carr writes in his book The Erotic Word, “Even Genesis 1, so focused on the creation of all things by one God, deviates to have the earth—not God directly—bring forth plants and animals. . . . God does not create alone but through connections with another part of creation—the earth.”

Through interconnection and collaboration comes life—the poetry of biology. Perhaps this is why Genesis 2 depicts the collaborative relationship between woman and man, before subordination and exile. In Genesis 1, God created humans in the divine image, “male and female he created them.” Feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible explicates that the Hebrew word for the first human, “adham,” is genderless prior to the creation of woman—“one creature incorporating two sexes.” “[‘A]dham” is an ambiguous term for humankind in Trible’s exegesis. Sharing in Trible’s interpretation, we can see past the shaming of “woman” and look deeper into the ecological ramifications of human action in the origin story. By destabilizing the focus on gender hierarchy, an organic intent to which humans could strive to return reveals itself.

Limits of Law

After the “fall of man”, the fundamentals of human law—the laws of patriarchy—are put in place. They are anthropocentric, hierarchical and ecocidal. It is a patriarch God and the sub-patriarch man that create a world of tiered order. This world order is framed by law. Nonetheless, even the finality of the law is subject to adaptation, driven by the moral imperatives of a given time. In an age of nearly 7.5 billion human inhabitants on Earth, with increased demand and competition for natural resources, the rights of the Earth-body are dire. It is time to unmute the voice of Earth. Humans must step in as stewards once more to protect creation from human violence and destruction.

Kahl challenges humans to “recultivate” a “non-ecocidal” and “non-imperial” reading of the primeval biblical narratives, implying that there are
counter-readings to the dominant, anthropocentric interpretations. As people are left to reimagine and move into a future where human action has irreparably changed the Earth and its systems, they look back at Genesis and are called to see it differently. It now calls for change.

Much of the human world still lives under societies informed heavily by the mores of Abrahamic traditions. Currently, “Crimes Against Peace” (as stated in the Rome Statute) are divided into four categories; the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. The crime of ecocide is not a category. The Bible criminalizes forms of violence between human beings, though justice for the Earth is written nowhere. The Earth is voiceless, and her sworn protectors have no accountability. In Genesis, violence against Earth is documented as the aftermath of fratricide and genocide. It is the afterthought-curse, the result of disobeying God’s law. The fact that harm done to the Earth not universally recognized and criminalized in secular, international law indicates that the anthropomorphic, Earth-silencing message of Genesis still permeates governance today.

On the other hand, Genesis 4 makes it quite clear that a crime against humanity—the murder of Abel—is in fact a crime against creation. Perhaps the further rupture between humanity and the Earth upon Abel’s death is indicative of how violence breeds violence, between bodies of the same species as well as within ecosystems and geosystems. It too can be interpreted in the inverse, where crimes against the Earth are crimes against humanity. Indeed, harming the Earth’s body leaves the human species in a lonely, fearsome world of unknowns. Giant garbage islands drift in the oceans, glaciers melt and crack, and CO$_2$ levels rise, while droughts, floods and other extreme weather events increase around the world, and in many places wholly unprepared for such drastic changes. How are we to exist in a world rapidly losing biodiversity, clean water, and the overall ability to sustain a booming population of humans? Imaginably, to begin to address the colossal question(s) of how humanity should proceed, these crimes of ecocide should be recognized as intertwined with the other crimes against peace, as they are in Genesis.

Hope, Humans, and Holy Earth

“. . . then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

Nevertheless, the events of Genesis 3 and 4 cannot negate the messages of preceding chapters. Scripture knows not the bounds of chronology. Humans can still be the keepers. Humans were and are still connected to creation. Humans will always be from from the ground, the Earth.

If humans are to heal their relationship to the Earth, what sacred texts such as Genesis say about human origins must be considered. Some might argue this is futile, as science and secularity are seemingly paving the way into the future. Yet, ideologies do not die easily. The world still holds on to an anthropomorphic dogma, whether it be explicitly religious or not.

To take healing action requires healing the psyche. How we view humanity in relation to the Earth is vital to creating new laws that protect against ecocide. We cannot feasibly change policy and systems if we cannot reframe our understanding the human’s role in creation, or in secular terms, on Earth. Focusing on stewardship over dominion is an ethical shift that humans must take to care for the future of all life. Otherwise, humankind will drill and lay waste to the waters and the land until there is nothing else to dig up, taste, or trade.

God said creation was “good.” Human beings are both of creation and its caretakers. Patriarchal desire for power and dominion does not have to be the final word for the species. Humans do not have to be in opposition to the Holy Earth. The aforementioned psycho-spiritual wound can be looked at through these early Abrahamic texts. Genesis shows what human qualities and drives ultimately cause ecocide, along with the scores of violence against women, marginalized peoples, and other species. Nevertheless, the future is often illuminated by the wisdom of the past.

What makes Genesis 1–4 a relevant text in a time of ecological crisis is the dramatic loss and exile from the Earth, and presumably from each other.
Having now witnessed the global threat of climate change and ecological degradation, Genesis appeals to a holistic discussion of human action and human nature. If humanity is to still see itself as a reflection of the image of God, a God that cared to create life, humans must work to move beyond their transgressions to then break cycles of harm and destruction. This is the ethical labor of an Anthropocene Age. Otherwise, humanity might continue to blindly operate out of an old paradigm, forever thinking itself inherently and permanently separate from the complex ecologies of creation.

Perhaps, despite everything humans have done, and all the work ahead, there is hope for finding the voice of the Earth, forgiveness, and restoration.

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An African Religious Worldview and the Conservation of Natural Environmental Resources: A Case Study of the Sengwer in Embobut Forest in Kenya

Mamati King’asia

ABSTRACT

This research article is about the African religious worldview in conservation of natural environmental resources using the Sengwer tribe as a case in point. The Sengwer are a hunter-gatherer tribe who inhabit the Chereng’any Hills forests in the northwestern part of Kenya. The current environmental situation in the area is worsening due to the destruction of the water catchment area, which threatens human existence in the region. Measures laid down by the government and various stakeholders to tackle environmental degradation have not yielded the expected results. This prompted research to ascertain the Sengwer religious worldview on natural resource conservation and the challenges they face in utilizing their indigenous religion to combat environmental crisis. The findings of the study established that the Sengwer religious worldview dovetails with environment conservation. The main components of the Sengwer worldview, the Supreme Being, ancestors, the universe, the community and their social system provided a framework for sustainable utilization and conservation of natural resources. The study identified the various challenges that the Sengwer face, and the measures they have taken to ensure that they can utilize their religion to tackle the environment crisis. This paper provides salient recommendations on how various stakeholders can partner with and utilizes the indigenous African religion in conservation efforts, and is expected to benefit government agencies, policy makers, and researchers in environment matters and religion.

Keywords: Indigenous African religion; natural environment conservation; Sengwer.

Introduction

The environmental crisis that the world is facing today threatens human existence. The wanton destruction and indiscriminate overexploitation of natural resources which man has always depended upon endangers the survival of human race. Current techniques put in place to conserve natural resources seem to be at best a mirage because they have not yielded the desired outcomes.

Scholars have noted how friendly African religion is to the environment. Senghor explicitly writes that: “As far as African ontology is concerned, too, there is no such thing as dead matter: every being, everything—be it only a grain of sand—radiates a life force, a sort of wave-particle; and sages, priests, kings, doctors, and artists all use it to help bring the universe to its fulfilment.” This means that everything that was found in the universe has a religious purpose for its existence, hence, a reason for the conservation of the natural resources. The ascription of supernatural and psychic powers to natural environmental resources is the backbone of African religion. This type of animism has played a significant role in ensuring that natural resources have been well conserved through observance of taboos and totems (animals and birds being part of the tribe kindred) related to natural environmental resources. This belief has overtly or covertly promoted the conservation of natural environmental resources such forests, animals, rocks, snakes, and birds.

Traditional African religion permeates all facets and spheres of the human life. J. S. Mbiti has cogently described Africans as “notoriously religious and each people have its religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it.” In African spirituality there is no dichotomy between the spiritual world and the natural world. This is further described by Mbiti when he writes:

It is religion, more than anything else, which colors their understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe. That is the philosophical
understanding behind African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions and social relationships.3

African traditional religion has the ability to positively influence resource conservation. Oladeji opines that “Local knowledge (LK) and traditional practices have great cultural significance and their applications have been found to be relevant in studies relating to contemporary medicine, food production, biodiversity conservation and management, hence, they should be maintained in a manner that ensures that the future generations live to witness them.”4

Despite the fact that African traditional religion is cohesive with the conservation of natural environmental resources, little attention has been given to African traditional religion by the government agencies and various stakeholders involved in conservation of the environment. The aforesaid, precludes African traditional religion from playing an active role in the conservation of natural resources. It is on this basis that this paper seeks to ascertain the African religious worldview on natural resource conservation by taking a case study of the Sengwer traditional religion and the challenges they face in conserving the environment. Therefore, the objectives of the study are:

a. To explore the Sengwer religious worldview on natural resource conservation
b. To determine the challenges facing the Sengwer in utilizing their indigenous religion to conserve the environment
c. To identify how African religion is coping with the challenges
d. To recommend possible ways of promoting African traditional religion in conservation of natural resources.

Methodology

This section presents where and how data was collected, interpreted, and analyzed. The study is descriptive and explorative in nature as it seeks to identify the challenges African religion face in conserving the natural environmental resources with the focus on Sengwer indigenous religion.

The Study Area

Embobut forest is located in Elgeyo Marakwet in Rift Valley, Kenya. It is the largest reserve among the thirteen forest reserves that make up the Cherang’any Hills water catchment. Embobut forest is located within an area defined by 1° 16’ North, 35° 26’ East. The altitude ranges from 2,000 to 3,365 meters above sea level, with the highest point at Cheptoket Peak in the north-central section. Embobut forest forms the largest part of the Cherang’any Hills forest, which is one of the five water catchment areas in Kenya. It covers approximately 120,000 hectares and rises about 3,500 meters. Cherang’any Hills receives 1,200 millimeters of rainfall throughout the year; the rainy season is March to September with maximum rainfall in May and August and minimum in January. The forest is characterized by indigenous species, including Afro-alpine vegetation above 3,300 meters.

The indigenous Sengwer people are an ethnic minority who are tradition-ally hunter-gatherer people. Their ancestral lands are located in the Rift Valley province in western Kenya, in and around the forests of the Cherang’any Hills. Currently they are characterized as marginalized, oppressed, poorly represented, not well educated, poor, powerless, and discriminated. This is evident through the recent forced displacements and evictions of the community from the forest by the Government of Kenya which disregard their basic human rights as enshrined in the constitution of Kenya 2010.5 Just like the Kalenjin sub tribes such as the Nandi and Kipsigis who trace their migratory route from Egypt,6 the Sengwer people are also believed to have originated from Misri, present-day Egypt. During their migration they followed the river Nile and first settled on the slopes of Mount Elgon and later on the plains of Uasin Gishu.

Study Design

This study is a descriptive qualitative study. Through field work the researcher obtained first-hand information and observed the Sengwer religious life, sacred sites and various environmental resources. The interview schedule
was used as a guide by the researcher in both open ended and unstructured interviews which allowed the extraction of detailed data for the study. Focus group discussion was important because the information given by the participants was able to be challenged and corrected by the participants in the group; they were also able assist in memory recollection and dealing with vested interest and bias by the members. Hence the dynamics in a focused group became an instrument for testing reliability. The targeted population for the interview was Sengwer found within Cherang’any hills. The Sengwer traditional leaders, elders, rainmakers as well as a traditional herbalist were the key participants in this study. A field assistant helped the researcher to translate and conduct the interview process in situations where the informants lacked competence in English or Kiswahili.

Sampling Procedure

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit informants for the study. Snowball sampling was also used as the researcher was referred by the locals to people whom they considered to be knowledgeable about the Sengwer people and their natural environment. As initial participants were interviewed, they referred the researcher to more participants who were also deemed useful for the study.

Methods of Data Collection

Data for this study was drawn from both secondary and primary sources. Methods of data collection for this research article included personal interviews, focus group discussion, archival documents, internet publications, books articles, and journals.

Data Analysis

Qualitative techniques of data analysis were used to analyze data collected from the field. Data collected from both primary sources and secondary sources were analyzed under various themes of relevance to the study. Findings of the study were presented through narration.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented according to the study objectives and the discussion centers around the findings. This section provides a detailed presentation of the Sengwer religion, which is an instauration of the Sengwer worldview on natural resource conservation. Later the findings and discussions center on the challenges that the Sengwer face in utilizing their religious worldview in conserving natural resources. How the Sengwer have coped amidst the challenges has also been presented. Lastly, practicable recommendations for various stakeholders in this matter have been presented.

1.0 The Sengwer Religion

The Sengwer people had a robust religious system before the introduction of Christianity via agents of colonization. Unlike major world religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism that trace their origin to a founder, the Sengwer religion has neither known founder nor written scripture. This has been buttressed by Awolalu when he says that “the founders cannot be found no matter how far we go back to history.”

African religion is the product of thinking and experiences of our forefathers. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs, they observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myth which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individual and his community.

In similar vein other African scholars have written widely about African traditional religion. For instance A. G. Leonard vividly says that “the religion
of these natives [Africans] is their existence is their religion.” This therefore means that the life of the Sengwer is interwoven with their religion; religion provides meaning for their lives and existence.

The Sengwer people believe that they originated from a common ancestor called Sengwer who was created by Assis. They don’t have a conclusive story of how creation of the universe and everything in it happened but they believe that everything in the universe originated from God.

Most of the participants claimed that the Sengwer believe and recognize the existence of a supernatural being called Assis who is represented by the sun. All prayers are directed to Assis to whom they pray. Mostly, prayers were done in three intervals; in the morning, at noon time and in the evening. They prayed to God for blessings as they went hunting, for protection and healing. This belief has been supported and emphasized by Mbiti that, “most of the prayers are addressed directly and specifically to God. He is normally mentioned by his personal or attributive name but sometimes he is addressed only by implications.” Under a few circumstances prayers and sacrifices are addressed and dedicated to other spiritual beings such as Illat, spirits and ancestors depending on the context. This view is also buttressed by Mbiti when he says, “A few, not more than ten per cent, are addressed to divinities, spirits, the living dead and personification of nature (trees, rivers, earth etc). . . . In a few cases we have prayers addressed to national heroes and founders.”

The Sengwer indigenous religion was made up of deities with hierarchical ranking. The most important and supreme deity being Assis (the sun), sometimes fondly referred to as Chebetob chemataw who is associated with blessings and good will. Another deity is Illat (god of thunder) who is associated with rain. During dry seasons, sacrifices were made to Illat to appease him to bring rain. He is also associated with fury and vengeance whereby he causes droughts or strikes people with lightning if he is angered. This belief compelled the community to always endeavor to live and be in harmony with the spiritual world.

The Sengwer revered and venerated spirits especially ancestral spirits. The belief in ancestors is intrinsically connected to the Sengwer religion. According A. E. Orobator “an ancestor is a blood relative of a living community; this relationship could be of common parentage or shared ancestry.” The belief in ancestors is linked to the community’s close attachment to the forest because they believe that the ancestral spirits live there.

The Sengwer religion formed the basis of their worldview on natural resource conservation as presented in the next subsection below.

1.1.0 Sengwer Worldview on Natural Environment Resource Conservation

Many scholars have defined worldview in different ways: Barker defines worldview as the way a person tends to understand his or her relationship with social institutions, nature, objects, other people and spirituality. Worldview is also defined as a set of assumptions and presumptions that a person holds consciously or unconsciously about how they perceive reality. A worldview provides people with the foundation for behavior, thought and assumption that govern how people live.

The Sengwer are part of the many tribes that are found in Africa. In order to understand their worldview we will start by understanding first what African worldview means. Makwe defines African worldview as “an abstraction which encompasses the total way of life of the African society. It is a psychological reality referring to shared constructs, shared patterns of belief, feeling and knowledge which members of the group that subscribe to this reality carry in their minds as a guide for conduct and the definition of reality.”

Therefore, the Sengwer worldview can be defined as a set of belief systems and knowledge about the universe, the supernatural being and the place of human beings in the world. The Sengwer worldview encompasses religious beliefs and practices centered on four main components: the Supreme Being, the ancestors, the universe, the community and the social system. These components have been discussed in detail in the next subsections.
1.1.1 Supreme Being

As aforementioned the Sengwer believe in a supreme being called Assis whose origin is always a mystery but is represented by the sun. The Sengwer believe that the sun is the eye of the Supreme Being who cannot be seen. They believe Assis to be the creator of the macrocosm and sustainer of life. This knowledge helped them to be always aware of the surrounding. They have given God different attributes for instance; God is viewed as omnipresent (present everywhere), Omnipotent (all powerful) omniscient (all knowing). God exercises his powers through his main agent Illat; this is seen through lighting, and rain. They viewed God as the provider as he provides rain for wild fruits to grow and trees to flower for the honey production and food for wild animals.20

They believe that God uses his Chief agent Illat to bring order in the universe and also to warn people. Illat also acted as an intermediary between God and the Sengwer. Mbiti postulates that Africans “held that God specifically created the spirits to act as intermediaries between Him and men.”21 The Sengwer offered sacrifices and prayers to God through the intermediaries by invoking the spirits through the use of natural resources such water bodies, plants, sacred sites found within their environment to appease the spirits. Illat being the chief agent was responsible for accepting or rejecting the sacrifices.

1.1.2 Ancestors

The belief in primordial ancestors is a key component of their worldview. Commenting on ancestors in Africa Phelps rightly observed that: “The spirit of the ancestors is a vital part of the African concept of the community, in which the collective power of all members of the community—the living and the ‘living dead’—energizes and pervades the daily life of everyone. Those ancestors who exhibit special moral virtue and strength in life are held up as spiritual guides for the living.”22 This belief played a significant role among the Sengwer in the conservation of natural environmental resources. It is held that the destruction of natural resources could lead to the fury and vengeance of the ancestors befalling upon the community.

Nyariti, asserts that in Africa ancestors are believed to “enjoy a sacred super human status with special magico-religious powers that can be beneficial or even harmful to the earthly kin.”23 Therefore, human beings did everything right to avoid the fury of ancestors descending upon the community for destroying natural environmental resources. The ancestors rage was avoided through rituals, sacrifices, libations, prayers and incarnations. The Sengwer held a belief that the ancestors gave them the forest to provide them with all the needs and wants for the community’s existence as long as they utilized resources in a sustainable manner.24 Hence it was the responsibility of the community as whole to ensure peaceful coexistence with nature.

Ancestors were also a linkage between the living and the Supreme Being. Due to the proximity of ancestors to God, they perform various mediating roles. Hence, ancestors were entitled to constant communication with the living. Different totemic objects found within the environment acted as a commemoration of the ancestors; this made totems to have a sense of sacredness therefore advancing the conservation of various animals and birds that were totems. Nyamiti postulates the relationship between human beings, ancestors and the environment when he vividly writes that “solidarity is lived and shared through prayers and rituals, whereby human and cosmic solidarity is engaged.”25 This human environment relationship motivated the community to respect natural environmental resources to avoid the wrath of God through Illat and the ancestors. The peaceful coexistence between the supernatural beings and human beings enabled the preservation of natural environmental resources. The indigenous religion of the local people has been diminishing and this can be cited as one of the reasons why Kenya today is facing disastrous consequences such as floods, prolonged droughts and so forth. Given these elements of the Sengwer worldview, a great deal of inspiration can be drawn from the Sengwer worldview with regard to natural resource conservation.
1.1.3 The Universe

The universe involves everything in it including, man, animals, plants, trees, birds and insects. The Sengwer viewed the universe as a creation of God who is always concerned about what is going on here. All the natural environment resources have a place in the universe and man is in charge of ensuring that all are in harmony by not tampering with the environment.26

For instance, the Sengwer revere trees as they believed that trees were the abode of spirits which should not be harmed. It is out of this belief that whenever the Sengwer fell a tree for certain religious or cultural purposes they had to pray to that tree.27 The concept of trees being the abode of spirits enabled the community to conserve trees since they did not fell trees unnecessarily lest they risk the wrath and punishment of Assis. The Sengwer accorded nature great reverence and respect.

The Sengwer believed that all natural resources found in the universe had a role to play in peaceful coexistence of the world. This led them to attach beliefs to animals, trees, hills, water bodies, birds and snakes. This was used as a way of conserving and ensuring sustainable utilization of natural environmental resources.

1.1.4 Community

The community formed an important part of the Sengwer worldview; individuals found their meaning in the community. This is echoed in the words “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am.”28 Decisions and social activities such as hunting, harvesting of honey and gathering fruits were done communally. Obligation to the family and the community went beyond personal needs and obligations. This is affirmed by O’Donovan that “Africans tend to find their identity and meaning in life through being part of their extended family, clan and tribe. There is a strong feeling of common participation in life, a common history, and a common destiny. The reality in Africa may be described with the statement: “I am because the community is.”29 To the Sengwer being human is belonging to the community and one belongs to the community just as in any African community by “…participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundations, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence.”30

The relationship between the Sengwer as a community and nature is symbiotic in nature. They ensure efficient and sustainable utilization of natural resources for the wellbeing of the community and this directed their worldview towards nature. The Sengwer worldview towards nature was founded on religious views and attitudes rooted in the moral obligation of each member towards nature. The worldview is underpinned by their religion and all that is found in the universe such as plants, animals, birds and sacred places such as hills, caves and rivers provide the fundamental elements given by Assis to sustain the human life.31 The council of Elders has the divine sanction to ensure that God’s creation was well taken care of.

The universe is viewed in religious terms as God’s creation; it is this that informed the Sengwer worldview about nature and all that is in the universe. Mbiti makes a similar observation when he writes “African religion sees nature as a friend of man (humans) and vice versa. He (humanity) is an integral part of nature and the priest of nature. The destruction or pollution of nature (including air, water, forest, land, animals, trees, plants and useful insects) brings harm to all life in general and injuries to human welfare in particular. Therefore, man [humanity] has to preserve nature and use it wisely, indeed mercifully, for his own and its survival.”32

The Sengwer view man as the paragon of God’s creative work. This view comes with the responsibility of man ensuring that the rest of God’s creation is in harmony. Therefore, man was obliged to observe the rules and beliefs that fostered conservation of the natural resources. This ensured that there is equilibrium between the physical and spiritual world. It is religion that asserted the greatest influence in the lives of the Sengwer as it reminded them of their obligation to the environment and connected them to the spiritual world.
Natural environmental resources that had religious connotations were treated with utmost respect and awe. The same respect was transferred to all institutions that were established in the community to facilitate preservation and conservation of environment. The most important and powerful institution that ensured the conservation of natural resources was the council of elders.

1.1.5 The Sengwer Social Systems

The Sengwer had a complex social system that valued collectivity and communalism. This is derived from the sense that they, Sengwer, came from one man called Sengwer. The complex social system infused natural resource conservation and environment management practices and beliefs into their social life. Initiates were taught important life skills and what it meant to be a Sengwer. Henceforth, sustainable use of the natural resources was cultivated into the fabric of the community through their members at a younger age. This was made possible through various forms of oral literature that were passed on in the evening under the bien tree or in the house.

Collective responsibility was emphasized. Whenever hunters made a kill, they would share the hunted animal, however small it was, and regardless of the number of hunters. Sakas (collective hunting) demonstrates the Sengwer emphasis on communalism. This norm extended to natural environmental conservation as people grew up knowing that they belonged to the community and they are the community which was given the mandate by God to be the custodians of the natural environmental resources. Hence, it was their communal responsibility to ensure that the environment was well taken care of. The clan elders were the custodians, overseers and spiritual leaders who policed and provided guidance on natural environmental resource utilization.

The Sengwer communities were hunters and gatherers; they neither possessed animals nor agriculture. Hence they met all their nutritional requirements through collecting honey, trapping animals, and gathering various fruits and vegetables. They developed various religious practices and beliefs that formed their religious worldview which help them avoid undue exploitation of the natural resources found in Embobut forest. Thus, the Sengwer through their religious worldview understood well their place in the universe. The importance of the forest led the Sengwer to have a deep respect and reverence towards nature.

2.0 Challenges Facing the Sengwer

The following section presents the various challenges hampering the Sengwer in utilizing their religion in conserving natural environmental resources.

2.1 Christian Religion

The majority of respondents indicated that Christianity has affected the indigenous beliefs of the Sengwer people in regard to conserving the environment. Christianity has dismissed most of the Sengwer beliefs and practices as backwards, forgetting that the Sengwer religious worldview has been the force behind a harmonious coexistence between human beings and the natural environment as pointed out in the preceding sections.

The first settlers who came destroyed the forest by clearing it for large-scale farming. They pushed the Sengwer people farther into the forest. When the missionaries arrived, they tried to separate the Sengwer converts from others. Missionaries taught them to disregard indigenous beliefs and practices such as festivals, customs, traditions, and the observance of rituals. Jomo Kenyatta was undoubtedly writing about the missionary’s attitudes toward African religions and culture when he wrote:

As far as religion was concerned the African was regarded as a clean slate on which anything could be written. He was supposed to take wholeheartedly all religious dogmas of the white man and keep them sacred and unchallenged, no matter how alien to the African mode of life. The Europeans based their assumption on the conviction that everything that the African did or thought was evil. The missionaries endeavored to rescue the depraved souls of the Africans from the” eternal fire “; they set out to uproot the African, body and soul, from his old customs and beliefs, put him in a class
by himself, with all his tribal traditions shattered and his institutions trampled upon. The African, after having been detached from his family and tribe, was expected to follow the white man’s religion without questioning whether it was suited for his condition of life or not.35

Sengwer elders, who imparted the moral and religious education, were often dismissed by the missionaries. The missionaries imposed a religion on the Sengwer that was out of touch with their local environment, perhaps because most of the religious beliefs of the missionaries traced their origin to the desert.

The missionaries’ attitudes towards African beliefs still persist today: most churches encourage their members to disregard their indigenous beliefs and practices. This is particularly true in modern evangelical and Pentecostal churches which do not accommodate African religious beliefs and practices. These contemporary churches view African indigenous religious practices, such as veneration of sacred sites and ancestors, as idolatrous or even satanic.

The modern churches have been the force behind the onslaught against Sengwer sacred sites in the forest. For instance, an early missionary attempted to build a church on top of the Kiptaberr Hill which is a sacred hill for the Sengwer people. It is believed that the church did not stand the test of time because the wrath of Assis through Illat came down and destroyed the church. The Catholics later attempted to install a cross on the same Kiptaberr Hill which was also brought down and thrown far away by the power of Assis.36

The repeated attempts of modern churches to destroy the Sengwer’s sacred sites and to ensure that the Sengwer people’s religious and cultural practices are forgotten clearly show their disregard for indigenous beliefs. Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmentalist who won the Nobel peace prize, expresses the effect on indigenous people when she says:

That tree inspired awe, it was protected, and it was the place of God. But in the 60s, after I had gone far away, I went back to where I grew up, and I found God has been relocated to a little stone building called a church. The tree was no longer sacred. It had been cut down. I mourned for that tree.37

Thus, Christianity can be cited as one of the main challenges facing the Sengwer people in their attempt to conserve the natural environmental resources. The wave of Christianity deeply affected the traditional institutions and systems that were in charge of safeguarding the utilization of natural resources.

Modern Christianity’s attitude has contributed to a systematic destruction of Embobut forest. Many people who have converted to Christianity don’t respect the sacred places nor the traditional systems put in place to protect them. They believe that Sengwer culture has been surpassed with the passage of time. Therefore, the social systems and means of controlling natural environment resources have been destroyed. Chinua Achebe in his book Things Fall Apart, fictionalizes the impact of Western religion’s cultural imposition on Igbo religion when Obierika says,

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion; we are amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.38

Just like the Igbo, things have fallen apart as a result of Christianity getting more converts who disregard their traditional Sengwer religion. This has led to a far-reaching effect on the influence of the Sengwer beliefs in natural resource conservation as many local people started casting aspersion to their indigenous religion.
2.2 Colonial and Post-Colonial Government Oppression

Most of the participants pointed to the colonial and post-colonial government oppression as their main challenge. The Sengwer people have been disadvantaged since the advent of colonialism in Kenya. The challenges they faced during the colonial government are still being experienced today. In fact, they have now worsened. Government oppression halts their attempts to conserve the environment using religious beliefs and practices like they could in pre-colonial times.

During pre-colonial times, the Sengwer clan elders and the council of elders, who had the divine sanction from Assis and Illat, to enforce the observance of community’s regulations, customs, and religious practices. The clan elders played a vital role in ensuring that the community’s natural resources were used in a sustainable manner to avoid overexploitation.

The colonial government disregarded both the clan elders and the existing traditional rules and regulations of the Sengwer people. They came up with various legislations that alienated the Sengwer people from their ancestral land. The separation hampered the Sengwer people from utilizing their rich religious beliefs and ethics to conserve the natural resources.

The Sengwer people were subjected to a lot of colonial injustices by the British colonial government. These injustices aimed to diminish the Sengwer identity and assimilate the community into extinction:

The Dorobo problem has risen because these people, living in small scattered groups, spread over large areas without any property . . . lived from hand to mouth by hunting and bee keeping . . . there’s no reason in modern times for this precarious mode of existence and with the protection afforded by the government of these people.

The then-acting provincial commissioner, Mr. C.H. Adams, went on to state in his memorandum to the Kenya Land commission that “I agree then the recommendation reported in the prescription that – wherever possible the Dorobo should become members of and be absorbed into the larger tribe which they have most affinity.”

This effect of the colonial government is still being experienced today because various ethnic communities such as the Marakwet and the Pokot claim that the Sengwer are part of their clans.

The colonial government was concerned with the preservation of the forest, but at the expense of the Sengwer identity. This is evident through the various colonial letters and publications by the colonial administrators who were after the extinction of the Sengwer people as aforementioned. They did not see the Sengwer people as a people with the right to identity, the right to live, nor the right to profess and practice their religion.

The colonial government alienated the Sengwer people from their ancestral land in the forest. To achieve their objective of extinguishing the Sengwer ethnic group, they facilitated other communities (such as the Marakwet, Pokot, and Nandi) to access the Sengwer ancestral land. Various parts of the Cherang’any forest were cleared for farming and settlement by these dominant tribes.

Furthermore, the British government altered the Sengwer ancestral territory boundaries. They divided the Sengwer people into two administrative units: Trans Nzoia and Elgeyo. Later, these administrative boundaries were further divided into four administrative units–namely, the Trans Nzoia, West Pokot, Uasin Gishu and Elgeyo Marakwet counties. This alteration of the boundaries led to encroachment of other communities into Sengwer ancestral and forest land, leading to the destruction of the forest and natural resources. The new administrative units favored the governmentally recognized communities. This has had a negative impact on the Sengwer cultural and religious life.

To ensure that the main objective of wiping out the Sengwer people was met, the colonial government converted the Sengwer community’s land and homes into government forest. This is evident in the many letters that colonial masters exchanged. For instance, Assistant Conservator of Forests letter (Natives in Kapolet Forest) to the district commissioner Kitale on 7th January.
1943 states that “I understand that some of the Cherangani Dorobo are once more in Kapolet Forest Reserve in spite of the police raid there in last February and the severe penalties imposed in them. I would be glad if you could arrange for them to be shifted once and for all from Kapolet into West Suk Reserve before the end of the year.” The post-colonial government continued Sengwer oppression by violently evicting the Sengwer from the Sengwer land as shown in the succeeding sections.

Among the Sengwer, the management and conservation of the environmental resources was tasked by clan elders from each Sengwer sub tribe. The colonial government interfered with the indigenous Sengwer communal ownership of land and the tribal systems responsible for controlling hunting, habitation, and utilization of resources in the forest. Members of each sub tribe were obliged to respect the sub tribe territories by not hunting, gathering, or collecting honey from another sub tribe’s territory without permission from the elders.

These systems ensured that the natural resources were conserved for continuity and future generations without causing extinction of the various plant and animal species. These systems were destroyed by the colonial government as they forcefully evicted the Sengwer people from various parts of the Cherang'any Hills forest which is a major water tower in Kenya. This is still being propagated and perfected by the current government as there are still ongoing evictions of the Sengwer people from the forest they call their home.

Furthermore, the colonial government made several attempts to erase the traditional lifestyle of the indigenous Sengwer people. The Sengwer people were known, and are still known, as an aborigine community of hunter and gatherers, but the colonial government introduced potatoes and cattle ranching as an attempt to change their lifestyle. This is found in the letter by the assistant district commissioner in charge of Elgeyo Marakwet to the provincial commissioner. He emphatically says this concerning the colonial government efforts.

It is of course argued that the Cherangani were bushmen who were induced to leave their forests. It is true that all Government officers in charge of this district have striven to persuade the Cherangani who remained in the forests to leave their Dorobo haunts and habits and become cultivators on the slopes, owners of cattle, payers of taxes, and respectable members of society.

The colonial government position on its intention concerning the alteration of the Sengwer lifestyle is buttressed by Mr. Hoey in his evidence before the land commission where he states that: “it is given on the grounds that the Cherangani when I first came into the country had no stock, but the Administration Officers did their utmost to persuade the Cherangani to adopt an entirely different mode of life and become stockowners, and to cultivate a good deal more than they had done in the past.” The colonial government also converted part of the Sengwer land in Trans Nzoia into a game reserve that is currently known as Saiwa Swamp National Park. This was a home for many wild animals where the Sengwer people went for hunting. The colonial effect is still being felt today as the government insists on evicting the Sengwer from their ancestral land found with the forest which will affect successively their lifestyle and identity as hunters and gatherers. The aforementioned has occurred through violent evictions and disrespect of basic human rights.

Immediately after independence, the Sengwer people believed that their oppression and lack of identity would finally come to an end. On the contrary, the government that egressed from colonialism worsened the situation. The post-colonial government, led by President Kenyatta, President Moi and President Uhuru, have followed the footprints of colonial government in their continuous oppression, marginalization, discrimination, and denying of the Sengwer people’s rights. Rather than returning the land and forest reserves that the colonial government had taken from the Sengwer, the post-colonial government gave that land to other communities and political cronies. This affected the Sengwer people since it mixed them with different communities who had different cultural and religious practices.

Lack of recognition of the Sengwer people as a distinct ethnic tribe has left their attempts to conserve the environment unsupported and unappreci-
In 2010, the Kenyan constitution recognized the rights of the minority communities in the following sections: articles 19, 21, and 26 in the Bill of Rights; article 63 on community land; and article 67 on the National Land Commission. However, the government has not respected the constitution nor the above-named articles as they have presided over forceful evictions of the Sengwer people from Embobut forest.

Furthermore, the independent government failed to come up with comprehensive environmental policies that were in line with the local people’s religious worldview. This has led to a vicious circle of conflicts between the government and the indigenous Sengwer tribe. Hence, there is need to bolster and resuscitate traditional institutions that were in charge of natural resource management.

The Kenyan government has used the World Bank-financed forest conservation program in western Kenya’s Cherangani Hills, popularly referred to as, “Natural Resources Management Project” (NRMP) as a means by which to continue with the violation of the Sengwer constitutional rights through violent evictions. The World Bank has left a trail of misery among the Sengwer as they are responsible for the evictions which they have vehemently denied in dire contradiction with what is happening within the Sengwer ancestral land. The Kenyan government has failed to recognize that the Sengwer community is environmentally conscious because their religion does not allow the destruction of natural resources in the forest. They have failed to realize that the Sengwer people coexisted sustainably with their environment since time immemorial and that their religious practices are rich in environmental ethics as revealed by the current study. This study shows how the government and the stakeholders should change to a holistic approach of involving the Sengwer people in the management and conservation of Embobut forest that is under threat.

The alienation of the Sengwer people from the forest threatens their survival and continuation of the generations since the forest is where their ancestral spirits live. The Sengwer people used the forest to appease and honor the ancestral spirits. The forest was also used by the community to teach adolescents during initiation ceremonies about the environmental knowledge of efficient and effective natural resource utilization. This eviction away from their ancestral land therefore threatens them on a spiritual and environmental level.

2.3 Development Initiatives and Cultural Differences

Development initiatives are also being undertaken on the sacred Sengwer sites without consulting the Sengwer elders. This undermines the contribution of the Sengwer beliefs in resource conservation. For instance, the recent harnessing of water by the Kitale county government without consulting the Sengwer elders undermines their authority in the society.

Rapid social, cultural, and economic changes have disadvantaged and eroded the Sengwer religious beliefs and practices. This has subsequently affected their contribution towards natural resource conservation. Many communities have moved into the Sengwer ancestral land, leading to cultural dilution that has undermined the traditional Sengwer institutions that presided over conservation and preservation of natural environmental resources. These communities have no respect for the Sengwer elders, making it hard for the elders to impose the traditional Sengwer rules on resource utilization and conservation.

2.4 Population Growth

Ever-increasing population has an overwhelming effect on the natural resources as it puts more pressure on the earth’s finite resources. The effect of overpopulation is felt not only in the country but also in Embobut forest. Population growth has led to depletion of natural resources as people clear forest to establish homesteads and farmland.

The influx of other tribes into the Sengwer ancestral land has contributed to the destruction of the forest and the natural resources. Communities such as the Keiyo and the Marakwet, who don’t share the beliefs of the Sengwer that are associated with natural resources found in the forest, have no regard to conserving the forest. The Dominant communities neighboring the Sengwer have interfered with sacred sites of the Sengwer people and destroyed sacred trees found there.
Members of the focus group discussion emphatically averred that dominant tribes, mentioned above, have invaded the forest to harness timber, firewood, and charcoal for economic purposes. This has led government agencies to believe that the Sengwer people are the force behind the destruction of the forest. Additionally, those same government agencies, such as Kenya Forest Service personnel, are involved in the timber business. Both groups are destroying the homelands of the Sengwer people and make the Sengwer seem unfriendly to the environment.

Respondents pointed out the need to have the Sengwer community as the only homogenous ethnic community residing within the forest and be allowed to take care of Embobut forest. This is the surest way of protecting the natural resources. The surety comes from the fact that this group of people has a common shared religious system and a common accepted traditional authority.

Overgrazing is also another challenge brought forth by increase in population. Dominant tribes that have settled around the forest rear many animals on limited land, which has led to people invading the forest for grazing which destroys many plant species that are found in the forest.

The above challenges have had an immense impact on the role of the Sengwer religion in conserving the natural resources in Embobut forest. It is an undeniable fact that the modern forces of social change have undermined the effectiveness of the Sengwer religion in natural resource conservation. This has led to the destruction of the forest and the natural resources found therein.

3.0 How the Sengwer Have Coped with These Challenges

Despite the Sengwer people facing the above-named challenges, they have continued to influence natural resources through the beliefs and practices that guide them. Under this section the researcher presents different ways of how the Sengwer community ameliorates and copes with the above-named challenges.

3.1 The Sengwer Cultural Center

The majority of the participant highlighted that the Sengwer people have established the Sengwer Cultural and Information Centre (SCIC) and the traditional “KopSengwer” houses at Kapolet to protect and preserve their culture and religious practices. The SCIC also seeks to appreciate and acknowledge the Sengwer people’s culture through the documenting and showcasing artifacts and work tools of the Sengwer people as a museum would. The SCIC reminds the people about their history, culture, and the environment. They hold annual cultural meetings at the SCIC. It is one very important step in ensuring that the unique environments under which most minority tribes live are preserved, maintained, and, above all, remain true to cultural and traditional characteristics.

3.2 Legal Action

The Sengwer have taken legal action against the government for forcefully evicting them from the sacred forest which is their ancestral land. They have taken their case to both local and international courts, seeking to protect their identity and existence within the forest. The Sengwer have sought the intervention of global organizations such as the World Bank and European Union to involve them in all decision-making regarding the conservation of Embobut forest. They have also written memoranda airing their objection for not being involved, including the statement: “European Union will be perfecting continued oppression, marginalization, torture and discrimination of Sengwer Indigenous Peoples if it will go ahead and fund the identified projects in Cherang’any Hills of Marakwet district without consultation and participation of Sengwer Indigenous Peoples.”

Despite their legal efforts in the local courts, the government has not honored the court injunctions. For instance, the government has disregarded injunctive conservatory orders issued by Eldoret High Court in March 2013. The Kenyan government has forcefully evicted the Sengwer people from their
ancestral land by burning their houses and torturing them, not respecting their human rights as pointed out under section 2.2.

3.3 Syncretism

The word “syncretism” comes from the Greek word *synkretismos* which means “to combine.” Schreiter defines syncretism as the “mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, of the systems loses basic structure and identity.” Syncretism therefore refers to the amalgamation of two or more religious beliefs. It also refers to the accommodation of two belief systems towards the beliefs, rituals, and practices of each other. The Sengwer people have coalesced their indigenous belief systems with that of Christianity to ensure that their religion does not die off. Research participants affirmed that, despite many members of the Sengwer community aligning themselves to one of the Christian churches (such as the Catholic Church, the Seventh-day Adventists, and African inland churches), the majority of them still practices their indigenous religion. This is seen through cultural practices such as the singing, language, dancing, and prayers they make to Assis whenever there is a problem. Mbiti emphasized this when he postulates that “on the cultural level, like the naming ceremonies, initiation rites and marriage procedure, traditional elements become partially Islamized or are remodeled.” Many members of the Sengwer community have adopted Christian beliefs and practices that suit their traditional beliefs and practices. During Christian services they sing, dance, and pray in their local language.

Furthermore, many converts take their children to undergo the traditional rites of passage. During this period, they are taught about the Sengwer religion and culture and the importance of the forest to the survival of the community. Christian churches should be encouraged to embrace Sengwer traditions that are in line with biblical teaching so as to foster interreligious cooperation in natural resource conservation.

3.4 The Place of Council of Elders

Findings from the field reveal that the Sengwer elders are still respected and feared by members of the community. Despite the many challenges that the Sengwer elders face, they have continued to play an active role of providing direction for the community and interceding for the community whenever there is a calamity. They are still consulted whenever a major decision involving the usage and utilization of the natural resources found in the forest. This has strengthened the Sengwer religion. There is need to empower the community elders so that they can continue to effectively ensure that natural resources are protected and utilized in a sustainable manner. Sengwer elders who have lobbied and petitioned the government to respect their rights to the ancestral land as stated in article 63 of the Kenyan constitution.

3.5 Informal Education

The Sengwer people have transferred the indigenous environmental knowledge and their religious practices from one generation to another through informal education that takes places at home in the evening and during the various cultural practices that take place in the community. Boys are taught by their fathers during hunting and in the evening as they wait for food to be ready. Girls are taught by their mothers in the evening while cooking. During rites of passage for both girls and boys, various ecological knowledge, religious beliefs, and indigenous practices centered on the community’s worldview are passed on to the initiates. Boys were also taught how to mend beehives from trees without destroying the trees. This has helped to build the identity of the initiates and make them feel proud of their culture and religion. Traditional herbalists also transfer important herbal knowledge to selected members of the community. They are taught how to harness drugs for different diseases in a sustainable manner that does not harm the environment.
Recommendations

In view of the study findings, the researcher recommends the following:

Since traditional African religion shapes human behavior, actions, beliefs, and attitudes in relation to environment, the same can be used to encourage environmental ethics for the future. Therefore, there is a need to both integrate indigenous religion and involve the locals in decision-making concerning the conservation of natural environmental resources.

The government should come up with policies that recognize and empower the indigenous religion of the local people in conserving and managing natural resources. The policies will provide a framework on how the indigenous religion can be fused with modern ways of conserving natural environmental resources.

Religious leaders, especially from the Christian faith, should recognize the undisputed role that the indigenous religion has played in ensuring a conducive environment free from pollution, degradation, and hazards. They should seek to create partnership instead of condemning and demonizing the indigenous Sengwer religion.

There is need to empower the council of elders so they can carry out their duties effectively as divinely sanctioned caretakers of the natural resources found within their jurisdiction. This can be done through legislation and incentives given to the traditional authority to motivate them in their work.

Conclusion

This study has delineated the Sengwer worldview in relation to natural resource conservation. The findings of the study have enunciated a worldview so interwoven with nature that it promoted the conservation of natural resources during the pre-colonial time. The study has also described a wide range of challenges that face the Sengwer religion in their attempt to conserve natural resources.

The Sengwer religion has devised mechanisms to tackle the challenges and to ensure that they are actively involved in the conservation of the forest and the natural resources found there. Sengwer religious beliefs and practices are precepts of nature stewardship in the modern society. As opined by Oladeji, there is a need to create a decision-making framework that integrates a multiplicity of approaches to effectively manage and conserve the natural environment.66

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Furthering an Intercentric Environmental Ethic: Moving Beyond Anthropocentrism and Biocentrism to Focus on the Ecological and Spiritual Reality of Interconnection

Nathan Empsall

ABSTRACT

Anthropogenic climate change is humanity’s first truly global problem: it has many causes, will require many solutions, transcends all political boundaries, and makes demands of both individuals and communities. Current environmental ethics, designed with individuals and nations in mind rather than the whole of humanity are inadequate for addressing this problem. Anthropocentric ethical models helped create the climate crisis, while biocentric ethical models often fail to make adequate room for humanity to address its own needs. A more holistic environmental ethical approach is needed, one that centers the interconnected reality of each piece of the earth, including humanity’s place in ecology. This interconnected reality is both an ecological fact, reflected in the way that earth’s systems and species impact one another in ways big and small, and a spiritual truth, recognized by many Buddhist, indigenous, and Christian teachers, among others. This paper draws on the work of environmental ethicists and spiritual leaders such as Willis Jenkins, Holmes Rolston III, Buddhadasa Bhikku, Pope Francis, and others to advocate for an intercentric environmental ethic that builds on elements of existing biocentric and anthropocentric ethics while learning from the lived experience of billions of religious humans. This ethic sees value not only in each species, individual creature, and ecosystem, but also in the relationships between those entities and systems.

Keywords: religion and ecology, climate change, Christian ethics, environmental ethics, interconnection, interdependence

I. Introduction

Climate change is not just an environmental problem, but an everything problem, caused by and impacting every sector of society. It is unprecedented in its boundary-defying causes, solutions, and risks. Current Western ethical, theological, political, cultural, academic, and economic systems do not respond well to challenges that have no precedent, and were not designed to respond to such an all-encompassing threat as anthropogenic climate change. Contemporary human structures, including ethics, must be reconfigured and even replaced with new worldviews that value the earth’s interconnectedness and acknowledge the resulting complexity of climate change.

Because all species, individuals, and ecosystems share a common source, coevolved together, and are locked in interdependent relationships with one another, it is the case that all species, individuals, and ecosystems hold value. Climate change requires an ethic not of anthropocentrism or even of biocentrism, but of interconnection, foregrounding the relationships between the earth’s systems and the value of all that resides within them. This paper therefore proposes the development of an intercentric environmental and religious ethic.

Most current ethical approaches are certainly necessary for building a comprehensive approach to the climate threat, but none can accomplish the task on their own. It is short-sighted to locate value only in humanity via an anthropocentric ethical model, but also futile to locate value primarily in non-human nature via a biocentric ethical model. Both approaches neglect the ecological and spiritual webs of connection that exist, and limit our ability to understand the full threat that climate change poses to all things of value. A more holistic approach is needed.

The second section of this paper will examine the limitations of current ethical systems in addressing the climate crisis. Sections three and four will discuss the scientific and religious arguments for interconnection as the nature of reality, and discuss the importance of an intercentric ethic centered on that
Section five will acknowledge questions and challenges that require further examination.

II. The Limits of Existing Ethical Systems

Within both the political field of environmental advocacy and the academic field of environmental ethics, there appears to be near-universal agreement that climate change is unprecedented, that current ethical systems were not designed with such a pervasive challenge in mind, and that a new approach is needed. In the documentary history of the environmental movement, *A Fierce Green Fire*, Jennifer Morgan of the World Resources Institute called climate change “the problem from hell,” explaining: “There are so many sources of the problem. You can’t just laser in and solve one specific piece and it’s done. You have to go at the cars and the oil and the power plants AND the way that we farm and which food we eat. It’s everywhere.”1 Ethicist Willis Jenkins has similarly explained why this kind of pervasive problem is too much for current ethics to handle:

Ethics seems overwhelmed by climate change. None of our inherited moral traditions anticipate practical responsibilities for managing the sky, nor construct institutions of justice to discipline power across cultures and generations, nor imagine harming and loving neighbors through diffuse ecological flows.2

The complexity of climate change is as present in its effects and impacts on society and the earth as it is in its causes. As atmospheric scientist Katharine Hayhoe told attendees of the Trinity Institute theological conference “Water Justice” on March 24, 2017, climate change does not need to be one of society’s most pressing priorities. Instead, all we have to do is look at those things that are already on our priority list and learn how climate change will impact them.

This section will examine several existing environmental ethical systems to show why they are insufficient for addressing climate change. In their attempt to be monolithic or universal, many ethical systems often build and then enforce artificial boundaries around the way they interpret the world. These artificial boundaries can be useful for guiding human thinking, but that usefulness only exists as long as the thinker remembers that the boundaries are indeed artificial. Unfortunately, ethics’ enforcement of these boundaries often comes across as rigid and strident, ultimately limiting their ability to highlight the interdependent nature of ecological reality or respond to boundary-crossing problems such as climate change. To be clear, this is not meant as a critique of the ethics themselves. None deserve to be wholly dismissed, and many will be used as building blocks in the formation of the larger intercentric ethic. The point is only that in and of themselves, they are too limited to address the modern ecological crisis.

The Limits of Anthropocentric Environmental Ethics

Anthropocentric ethics center humanity, arguing that the environment’s worth is in its utilitarian value for homo sapiens. According to Clare Palmer: “Anthropocentric approaches do not necessarily suggest reckless exploitation of the environment; they may instead maintain that natural resources should be very carefully managed for human benefit [emphasis added].”3

One important and positive manifestation of anthropocentric environmental ethics is environmental justice, defined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”4 All too often, the same marginalized human communities bear the repeated brunt of environmental degradation, creating a compounded, exponentially harmful effect that denies their value both as individuals and as members of the human species. No environmental ethic can be complete with including an anthropocentric component of environmental justice.

Yet while an anthropocentric element of environmental justice is necessary to environmental ethics, it is not sufficient. Yes, the environment has value to humans—but it also has value in and of itself, as ecology demonstrates and as numerous biocentric ethicists have argued. To focus only on the environ-
ment’s value to humans can imply that if humans ever invent the technology to harm the earth without harming themselves, or to move the entire species to another planet, then destruction of the earth would then become acceptable—and, given the arrogant nature of many common Western anthropocentric ideologies (such as market capitalism), quite likely. As ethicist Larry Rasmussen notes, no matter how much “sustainability” or “greening” is added to a neoliberal system of expanding markets and fossil fuel extraction, such a system itself is still ultimately destructive to both humans and the earth. As ethicist Larry Rasmussen notes, no matter how much “sustainability” or “greening” is added to a neoliberal system of expanding markets and fossil fuel extraction, such a system itself is still ultimately destructive to both humans and the earth.5

What Rasmussen argues is needed instead is a fundamental revolution that restructures society around community and “ecological design,” i.e., learning from and copying the earth systems that have worked since well before humans came on the scene.6

The Limits of Biocentric Environmental Ethics

While anthropocentrism is an incomplete environmental ethic, so too is biocentrism. Biocentrism locates value in the whole of nature rather than in humanity as a species, emphasizing nature’s intrinsic or inherent value rather than its utilitarian value. Sierra Club founder John Muir wrote extensively about this intrinsic value, but it was Aldo Leopold who developed the first famous ethic around it, writing, “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. . . . In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”7 The biocentric approach has particular appeal within the political environmental movement, as evidenced by the widespread successful use of wolves and polar bears in fundraising and public relations.

There is deep insight to the biocentric approach, but it too has its limits. According to Palmer, biocentrism is an approach in which “the community, rather than the individual, is the focus of moral significance.”8 Where anthropocentrism is wrong to focus solely on nature’s utility, biocentrism is wrong to ignore or even simply downplay that value. It cannot be denied that humans need to use the environment, necessitating a certain amount of (temporary, limited) destruction similar to that which other animals also inflict on their habitats. Not a single species on earth can survive without food and shelter obtained from nature; in this regard, human beings are no different than beavers building their dams or lions hunting their prey. An environmental ethic that does not actively acknowledge the necessity of use separates itself from reality as it is lived, and will never be put into practical use by humans seeking to meet their basic needs. What is truly needed to address climate change and the ecological crisis is an approach that finds both intrinsic and utilitarian value in nature, and thus recognizes the moral significance of the biotic community, the human individual, the relationships between and within them, and the ecosystems that make these relationships possible.

Another approach to biocentrism emphasizes value not in nature per se, but in the planet itself. This approach back began with James Lovelock’s “Gaia hypothesis,” that the earth “behaves like a single living organism.” Holmes Rolston III developed a similar view, arguing that valuing humans requires valuing animals, which in turn requires valuing all organisms, which in turn requires valuing species, then ecosystems, then the earth, and finally nature. Rolston’s thesis was that value exists in each of these levels, whether or not there is anyone to do the valuing.9 His biocentric arguments are spiritually moving and compelling, but such an ethic is of little practical use in addressing the current pressing climate crisis. Humans are responsible for creating climate change and will ultimately be responsible for responding to the crisis. Any ethic that seeks to effectively highlight the value of earth and nature will need to build on Rolston’s point that value is found in every level of earth systems, while also taking into account how humans interpret value. Otherwise, the ethic will fall on deaf ears and be of no consequence to climate change.

The Limits of Pluralism

It could be argued that the existing ethics are not mutually exclusive—that the utilitarian value of the environment in anthropocentrism and the inher-
ent value of the environment in biocentrism can coexist if only we find a way to limit neoliberalism. While this is certainly in true in theory, it is not necessarily true in terms of lived reality.

At an introductory level, ethics, like most academic fields, is taught in terms of its component building blocks. Ideas are presented in their most distinct forms so that the student can learn them as individual concepts. Yet while it is possible to synthesize these initially divergent ideas or to hold them together in a form of ethical pluralism, such an approach is not emphasized in the introductory lessons to the field itself. That synthesis only becomes the focus in advanced courses that most students will never take. Therefore, the environmental movement and political process are filled with students who took one or two ethics courses as part of a broader degree program. These activists and political staffers are inclined to focus on animal welfare or environmental justice, rather than balancing the concepts, because that is how they were taught. The result is that few public policies, church sermons, or cultural innovations are offered that are suitable for addressing the complexity and size of climate change. Critiques of ethical monism thus have an important point—and yet, there may be no other way to teach ethics to students who are new to the field and will not study it deeply. This is not a failing of ethics or even of a specific class; it is the nature of introductory academia.

The solution is not the development of ethical pluralism, since most students will never learn more than one or two of many ethics allowed under such a system, but of a pluralistic ethic. Anthropocentrism and biocentrism need to be blended, not just balanced, so that they can be taught as a single ethic to those future practitioners and decision-makers who will only learn the fundamental building blocks. That single ethic is the ethic of intercentrism.

III. Earth’s Interconnected Reality

Western society, and in particular Western academia, is filled with artificial boundaries and walls. These boundaries are often strictly enforced as if they were a reflection of reality, rather than something that society has super-

imposed on reality for navigation purposes. As a result, they ultimately serve to divorce humans from the interconnected nature of reality, defeating their intended purpose of helping us navigate the world and limiting our ability to respond to the climate crisis.

One example of this is the resistance that interdisciplinary academics face in their fields. Speaking as a guest lecturer in a recent Yale University course, one of the founders of the interdisciplinary field of ecological economics told students that he has received enormous pressure and personal stress from his economic colleagues for blurring disciplinary lines. I have heard previous sentiments from several other professors who also work in multiple fields.

When the academy sidelines interdisciplinary scholars like these, it does so not just at its own peril, but at that of the climate. To insist on using only one approach at a time to any given issue, especially climate change, ignores the larger complexity of that issue. This is a common problem in both the academy and the NGO world. As numerous anthropologists have observed, people are likely to look for solutions to problems that fit their organizational mission or personal worldview. For example, scientists see problems as being hard science problems, politicians assume there are political solutions, and sociologists look only for social causes.

Academic scholars, policymakers, activists, and cultural leaders must become trained to use all of these lenses at once, or they will miss the larger whole of the ecological crisis and come up short in their proposed solutions. The reality is that all things within the earth—its systems and every species and individual that resides within them—are interconnected and must be studied and valued as such. As John Muir famously said, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” What Muir identified in 1911 has been confirmed by countless scientists and religious leaders, both before and since.

Environmental Science

The earth and its many species and systems are defined by the myriad ways that they are locked together, influencing and depending upon one
another. This fact has been recognized since the pioneering ecological work of Alexander von Humboldt, Ernst Haeckel, and Charles Darwin, and further confirmed by Rachel Carson’s research into pesticides and studies of coevolution by Paul Ehrlich and Peter Raven.

As Rolston explained in his ethical defense of the inherent value of ecosystems:

“Everything will be connected to many other things, sometimes by obligate associations, more often by partial and pliable dependencies; and, among other components, there will be no significant interactions. There will be shunts and criss-crossing pathways, cybernetic subsystems and feedback loops…. We cannot make sense of biomolecular life without understanding ecosystemic life, the one level as vital as the other.”

Coevolution is a particularly fascinating phenomenon of the dependencies that Rolston identified. This is the phenomenon that occurs when two species depend on one another so much for so long that they literally begin to evolve in response to one another. Examples include the shapes of hummingbird beaks and the flowers they consume, the emotional bond between humans and dogs, and the details of countless predator-prey relationships.

Rolston’s observations about the interconnection of ecosystems are also true of broader earth systems including the hydrosphere, atmosphere, geosphere, and biosphere. Though we separate these spheres from one another for ease of understanding, they are in fact permanently locked in relationship with one another. The rocks and soil of the geosphere are shaped by atmosphere’s air and the hydrosphere’s water in the process called weathering. The hydrosphere carries sediments and chemicals around the world, which are consumed by the biosphere. When the biosphere’s plant life breathes, it creates the oxygen of the atmosphere. All four spheres combine when weathered rocks, air, water, and decomposed carbon matter combine to form soil, which in turn support different biological life. We may refer to the water cycle, rock cycle, soil cycle, nitrogen cycle, and carbon cycle as separate systems, but they are as interlocked together as the five Olympic rings.

Perhaps the finest example of planetary interdependence is climate change itself. The current anthropogenic warming trends are caused by the greenhouse gas emissions from society’s transportation, agricultural, and industrial sectors. The behaviors that cause these emissions are temporarily locked in place because of cultures, politics, and national boundaries. They are influenced by art, traditions, tribalism, and spirituality; and they are reinforced by human relationships and the patterns of our individual daily lives. Not one piece of these human systems can be changed without impacting the others: If these industries and social systems were not connected before in human history, they are certainly connected now via the climate crisis that they have co-created.

The reason that we humans are so interconnected with our atmosphere and its climate is that, as an earth system, it is the climate’s nature to be interconnected with the rest of the planet. When taking even an introductory physical science course, a typical student might find themselves struck by the presence of temperature in many different equations, from the Arrhenius equation that explains the reaction rates for many chemical processes (including how soils form) to the ideal gas law that governs the volume and pressure of gas, including the earth’s atmosphere. Because the ideal gas law means temperature plays a role in air pressure, it thus also plays a role in the creation of precipitation patterns like monsoons and hurricanes, and everything in human society that such weather events impact, from agriculture to the insurance industry to whether or not a child’s outdoor birthday party will be cancelled. Temperature also plays a role in the rate of evapotranspiration, the stability of glaciers and ice sheets, determining what plants or animals can thrive in which locations, and even the pH of water. Therefore, whenever any individual emits fossil fuels that increase the planet’s greenhouse effect and thus its temperature, that person has an impact—no matter how small—on countless other species and countless earth systems. The temperature-increasing actions of billions of individuals, cultures, nations, and corporations add up into a giant aggregate, resulting in the negative feedback loops of anthropogenic climate change that
demonstrate further global interconnection. When our cars and farms emit more carbon dioxide and methane, record levels of Arctic permafrost thaw. As the permafrost thaws, partially decomposed carbon in the soil also thaws, releasing more carbon and increasing temperatures even further. In turn, bigger wildfires tear through forests, releasing the carbon stored in the trees. Temperatures continue to increase, meaning the Antarctic ice sheets dissolve and the earth’s sea levels rise, wiping out thousands of lives and billions of dollars. With each release of carbon and further increase of temperature, more and more earth systems are affected, and it becomes harder and harder to restore the previous status quo.

All of this brings to mind Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis that the earth functions to appear like an organism. Carbon, water, soil, nitrogen, and rock cycles no more exist independently from one another than do a human body’s respiratory, circulatory, reproductive, and digestive systems. If one shuts down, there is a cascading effect and the larger whole ceases to exist—as do all the valuable living things within it. Another similarity between the earth and other organisms is that of consumption. When humans eat healthily and get enough exercise, their heart is healthier, their skin clearer, they are less likely to get cancer, they have more energy, and their reproductive systems are more fertile. One diet affects countless bodily function, but a diet of junk food can kill. Similarly, an unhealthy diet of fossil fuel can distort the atmosphere and poison the biosphere—yet when allowed to function naturally, the planet can at least partially heal itself over time.

Religion and Spirituality

While ecology has observed the planet’s interconnected reality over the past two-and-a-half centuries, other ways of knowing observed that same reality thousands of years earlier. When it comes to the reality of interdependence, science is playing catch-up to the world’s religions, including Buddhism, Native American Indian lifeways, and Christianity. This is especially relevant for climate change, given that, by some estimates, as much as 97.7% of the world’s population practice some form of religion—nearly the whole of humanity. With numbers like that, if any solutions to climate change are to be found, then religious communities will not only be impacted by said solutions; they may also help provide and popularize them.

Since the life of Gautama Buddha, the “normative core” of Buddhist ethics and philosophy has been that “the ethical person conceive[s] of their dependence on others.” This sense of interdependence is described via the jeweled net of Indra, a deity shared by Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. Every node of the net is a jewel, which has a shiny surface that reflects all the other jewels around it, including their own reflection. Each image is a thousand different reflections, showing the depth of reality and its connections.

Interdependence surfaces repeatedly throughout Buddhism’s 2,500-year history, beginning with the Buddha’s teaching taught that all “the various elements that constitute reality” share a “dependent co-origination.” The Lotus Sutra, written 500 years later, proclaimed that Dharma rain falls everywhere and that Buddha-nature pervades all reality. More recently, in the twentieth century, the Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu beautifully wrote:

The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise . . . then we can build a noble environment. If our lives are not based on this truth, then we shall perish.

Most Native American Indian tribes also view the world with a similar sense of interconnection. According to scholar John Grim, indigenous communities do not build the same divisions as Western societies but rather integrate spiritual insights with “economics, arts, religion, medicine, education, [and] sciences.” To that end, many indigenous tribes expand their sense of relatives to include a relationship with all animals and plants, and even all the earth, including rocks and rivers. This is evident in the Lakota Sioux concept of Mitákuye Ogás’íŋ, roughly translated as “all my relations.” The White Earth
Ojibwe activist Winona LaDuke chose the phrase “All Our Relations” as the title for her nonfiction book about Native American Indian resistance to environmental degradation.\(^\text{28}\)

The Standing Rock Sioux scholar-activist Vine Deloria, Jr., has observed that part of the way Western society was able to so thoroughly devastate Native tribes was by imposing compartmentalization where only a sense of interconnection had previously existed. Tribal religion, according to Deloria, “integrated the functions of tribal society so that life was experienced as a unity. Christianity has proved to be a disintegrating force by . . . allowing the important movements of living [to] go their separate ways until life has become separated into a number of unrelated categories.”\(^\text{29}\)

While Deloria provides an accurate depiction of nineteenth century North American Christianity, the broader Christian religion has often fostered a sense of interconnection throughout its 2,000-year history, including in the present day. Academically, the academic field of religion and ecology remains heavily shaped and influenced by its Christian pioneer, the twentieth-century Roman Catholic priest and scholar Thomas Berry, who frequently pointed to the spiritual relationship between all things by saying: “The universe, and in particular planet earth, is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”\(^\text{30}\)

Religiously, the most notable global Christian leader to speak on the theme of interconnection is Pope Francis, who devoted an entire encyclical—one of the most prominent mediums for Roman Catholic doctrine—to the theme of climate change. The pope wrote,

> These ancient stories [from Genesis], full of symbolism, bear witness to a conviction which we today share, that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others . . .

> It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation. Just as the different aspects of the planet – physical, chemical and biological – are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand… Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.\(^\text{31}\)

Pope Francis may be the most prominent recent Christian leader to connect Christian Scripture and doctrine with the interconnected reality of the earth, but he was not the first. He himself made this clear by quoting the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow... Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.”\(^\text{32}\)

A contemporary of Pope Francis, former Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori (herself an oceanographer), has similarly taught that in both scientific and religious explanations for the world, “everything that is partakes of the same stuff—all that is, is related, connected, in ways ultimately beyond our full comprehension. The dusty interconnections remind us that the human being’s true character ought to be one of humility, created of and connected to the earth—and the stars.”\(^\text{33}\)

Berry, Pope Francis, and Jefferts Schori are contemporary figures, but their theological arguments for interconnection are founded upon centuries of Christian tradition. In his thirteenth century hymn “Canticle of the Sun,” Saint Francis of Assisi, the pope’s namesake, gave numerous examples of how the different elements of the earth are interconnected through God: It is “by” the wind and air that “You [God] cherish all that You have made,” and it is “Mother Earth who sustains and governs us, producing varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.”\(^\text{34}\)

Finally, multiple Christian denominations have for centuries held Ash Wednesday worship services that remind worshippers of the earthly sentiment from Genesis 3:19, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”\(^\text{35}\)
The sense of interdependence in various spiritual and religious traditions shows us that interconnection is not just a scientific observation; it is the lived reality of most human experience, arising from distinct traditions in every millennium and every corner of the globe. When something is that widely observed by that many people who have no influence on one another, it suggests that there may be a fundamental underlying truth at play. In this case, that truth is the reality of planetary interconnection.

Existing Environmental Ethics

Many of the ethical systems critiqued above do in fact acknowledge the existence of interconnection. Interdependence within the human community is an abiding part of environmental justice and, as noted above, broader interconnection is a central tenant of Rolston’s search for value in nature.36 Rasmussen makes a similar observation:

All that exists, co-exists . . . We are all part of a larger organism, our cultures, and our cultures are all part of an even larger organism, the biosphere. Thus ‘what we do for the earth, we do for ourselves.’ This requires a holistic pragmatism that marries economics, physics, biology, and ethics.37

Yet while interdependence is acknowledged by many ethics, it is not their primary focus. This leads to the emphasis of value in some locations more than others as well as the inevitable formulation of walls and faulty pedagogies discussed above. The solution is not to include interdependency as one feature among many within environmental ethics, but to make it the primary focus of a climate ethic.

IV. The Intercentric Ethic

I have shown that interconnection is the fundamental nature of reality according to science and many world religions alike, as well as a central aspect of the causes of and solutions to climate change. I have also argued that current ethical systems neglect interdependence as a primary focus, either because they were established before modern ecological understandings were discovered or because they still locate their primary value elsewhere. The work that remains is to bridge this divide and establish an environmental ethic focused on interdependence and interconnection, simultaneously locating and affirming value at every level of planetary function and life: the individual, the species, the ecosystem, and nature itself, both intrinsically and usefully. The nature of reality and of lived experience is, and thus the nature of ethics needs to be, that everything is bound up with everything else and no single strand can be pulled out as the primary strand.

The intercentric ethic, while centering the interdependence of all things (including but not limited to humans), also acknowledges the value in nature and in earth systems, the need for humans to use nature, the impact of every human activity upon other humans and upon the environment and the climate, the role that every single sector of society must play in addressing the ecological crisis, and perhaps most importantly, the limits of human knowledge and thus the importance of acting carefully to avoid unseen harms. Nothing short of this blended combination will be capable of responding to the interconnected causes and required solutions to climate change.

A key difference between the intercentric ethic and ethics stressing a different center, such as anthropocentrism or biocentrism, is that it neither denies nor ignore the inherent value of anything. Even if a creature were to somehow lack intrinsic value, it is impossible to sever that creature’s connection to and impact on everything else in nature; therefore, the value of everything else is copied to and reflected in that creature. Every non-human element of nature has a useful value to humans, even if that value is only in its minor role of helping its coevolved ecosystem to flourish, thus supporting other elements of the ecosystem that humans more directly use. Similarly, humans have a useful value to nature. Not only can we be food to lions or sharks, but many other species—from dogs to microbes—coevolved with humans and thus owe their genetic makeup to human existence.38, 39 Less obviously, it is now up to us to
clean up our past pollution and to protect biodiversity from our own worst impulses, including fossil fuel extraction and limitless growth.

Inherently, it is a pre-supposed first principle that humans have value; it would be futile to seek climate action based on an ethic that suggested otherwise, since few individuals and virtually no society is likely to stop acting in their own self-interest at least some of the time the same way that all other species do. Any response to climate change must take this into account. The intercentric ethic thus accepts weak anthropocentric ethics’ inclusion of human needs, while rejecting anthropocentric ideologies that could allow humans to once again destroy the earth if new scientific or technological advances severed its usefulness to us. The intercentric ethic also foregrounds biocentric ethics’ intrinsic value of nature by drawing upon the lived realities of Asian religions and indigenous lifeways that focus on interconnection, Rolston’s analysis of the value in every ascending level of nature, and the experiences of transcedental personal moments in nature described by ethicists far and wide, including Muir, Leopold, and Berry.

By accepting the values found in both biocentrism and weak anthropocentrism, the intercentric ethic stitches together the positive statements of earlier ethical systems, blending them together and valuing the relationship between each value. This places them under one umbrella rather than a plurality of umbrellas, while leaving behind their more exclusionary expressions. To focus on (or to deny) any single strand of this interconnected web is to ignore the impact that it has on other strands, or that other stands have on it. This is why a focus on any centrism at all, other than intercentrism, is a futile denial of reality. No strand can exist on its own; therefore, every strand must be affirmed, setting aside biocentrism’s neglect of human emotions, desires, and existential questions, as well as weak anthropocentrism’s denial of the intrinsic value of the biotic community.

Practicality and broad appeal are not traditional focuses of ethics as a field, but what would the purpose be of a climate ethic that failed to make an actual difference for climate action? As Willis Jenkins has argued, the best way to form a viable ethic is to observe the moral responses of communities on the ground, because this is where true differences are made and practicality rules the day. Therefore, one practical strength of the intercentric ethic is that it will likely have a broad appeal. Both anthropocentric and biocentric ethics are limited in their ability to reach wide audiences. Biocentrism can capture the imagination of millions in a way that anthropocentrism cannot, as evidenced by the environmental movement’s success using images of polar bears and wolves to raise funds. On the other, biocentrism has a hard ceiling, as it excludes those humans whose own needs have not yet been met. Wildlife defenders and other ethicists often criticize anthropocentrism for its limits and its reliance on capitalism, whereas environmental justice advocates may criticize biocentrism for its privilege. Neither system ultimately catches on with the broader public, and the climate movement fails to play a central role in American politics. The intercentric ethic may be able to help solve this communication gap by speaking to both the values of biocentrism and to the lived reality of anthropocentric justice and economics. By showing the public that each individual’s needs and spiritual health are bound up in the needs and inherent value of the larger biotic community, perhaps the urgency and personal relevance of the climate crisis can finally take a central place in Western discourse.

Another important consideration for any ethicist, especially in light of environmental justice and environmental racism, is the question: Who is this ethic for? When it comes to climate change, the intercentric ethic, as one that speaks to the interconnection of all people and all things, may ultimately need to exempt certain oppressed individuals or those who are struggling to survive, but it is for every nation and every sector of society that is in a position to look beyond themselves and see their connections to one another. This approach draws on the writing of Thomas Berry, who said that every human age has faced a “great work,” a monumental transition requiring the energy of every sector of society. For today’s generation, that great work is climate change:

All human institutions, professions, programs, and activities must now be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore,
or foster a mutually enhancing human-earth relationship. The historical mission of our time is to reinvent the human at the species level with critical reflection, within the community of life systems in a timed developmental context.\textsuperscript{35}

Climate change is not just an environmental problem, but an everything problem, impacting everyone and everything. Greenhouse gas emissions are caused by every sector of society and every nation on earth, undergirded by the guiding Western ideologies of market Gospel, limitless growth, and profit at all cost. In turn, everything valuable to human society is threatened: jobs, water, economic stability, agriculture, peace and security, public health, and life itself. If such an interconnected threat created by every sector of society is to be addressed, then every sector of society must be engaged in the solutions. This is Berry’s great work, and this is the call of the intercentric ethic: The climate problem is interconnected, and thus so are its solutions. By acknowledging that everyone’s values are at stake, the ethic calls everyone to the table to take part in the solution. Politicians, academics, pastors, artists, voters, engineers, parents, journalists, entertainers, women, men, children, whites, blacks, Americans, Asians—no one can be left out.

V. Potential Criticisms and Limitations of the Intercentric Ethic

While the intercentric ethic seeks to embrace and synthesize the positive elements of most other environmental ethics, no system or worldview is perfect. I have already noted that this ethic will have to be developed in such a way that it does not place undue expectations on marginalized communities. This section will examine several other potential criticisms of the intercentric ethic that merit further study and work.

The first challenge facing the intercentric ethic is its implementation: How should the ethic address situations when climate change brings competing centers of values into conflict with one another? For example, when resources are finite, should humans spend money to protect biodiversity from climate change, or to build new infrastructure that may protect coastal communities from rising sea levels? Is it better to clean up pollution in a massive wilderness area where no people live but countless species thrive, or to focus the same resources on a smaller but more complicated urban area, helping more humans but less geographic space? Is it okay for humans to eat other animals now that agriculture has introduced other dietary options? Practical guidelines to these questions will need to be developed, but one immediate impact of the intercentric criteria is to change the criteria necessary to answer these questions. This paper is too limited in its scope and length to work out specific climate solutions and actions, but it does replace the dualisms of humans vs. animals and species vs. individuals with the new normative standards of interconnection and relationship.

A second, larger criticism of the intercentric ethic may be that it is a monistic ethic, singular in structure and universal in scope, and thus does not sufficiently honor the diversity of modern cultures and global contexts. Christiana Z. Peppard, a Christian ethicist who focuses on fresh water, has criticized such monistic ethics, writing: “In an era of profound diversity and plurality, it is insufficient to expound grand theories about humanity or human nature.”\textsuperscript{46} Instead of universal theories, Peppard proposes that ethicists “cultivate a resolute attention to the lives and needs of people who exist on the underside of history—an attention that begins with listening.”\textsuperscript{47} Similarly for Willis Jenkins, ethics in the face of climate change is not about developing a new moral framework, but about listening to the lived realities of frontline communities and learning from the ways that they draw upon their traditions to resist climate change. He writes: “Virtue reframes the challenge of climate change from solving a management problem to asking who humans are becoming within the roles and relations involved in global anthropogenic change—and who we should become.”\textsuperscript{48}

The intercentric ethic, while embracing the need for environmental justice and the results of the processes and traditions that Jenkins observes, is admittedly more traditional, crafting a moral framework centered around...
interconnection first rather than building a process from which new ethics and actions may emerge. However, that framework is partially based on the lived realities Jenkins looks to, as seen above in the discussions of Native lifeways and Buddhist and Christian teachings. Moreover, in emphasizing the connections between all cultures, this ethic does not desire to erase those cultures, but instead seeks to help them bring their distinct, intact identity and voice to a common, global climate movement where they can show other communities how they too are connected.

While there is no universal culture, there is a universal truth that all cultures are connected. During a talk at Yale Divinity School in October 2017, the Rev. Jim Antal responded to the question posed to Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” According to Antal, climate change means that everyone in the world is now one another’s neighbor. What one person or culture does to worsen or mitigate the crisis will impact every other person or culture. Within this web of climate connection, marginalized communities have a special incentive to develop their own responses to the ecological crisis, given that these communities all too often bear a disproportionate share of catastrophic climate consequences.

With that in mind, the intercentric ethic does not dictate to any culture what specific response it must take to climate change, but it does reflect to the world the way in which all climate actions are woven together like Indra’s net or locked together like the Olympic rings. For specific actions, intercentrally-minded ethicists should partner with other ethicists, especially those working in eco-justice and eco-womanism, to highlight the connections between their many valid works. With the interdependence of all climate responses in mind, such an approach could potentially guide privileged individuals to buy expensive green technology for their homes and encourage wealthy nations to fund the Paris Agreement’s Green Climate Fund for developing nations, while also creating space for poorer communities to focus on their own survival first. This could mean the ethic supports the poor as they continue to eat large amounts of carbon-intensive subsidized meat or drive old, gas-guzzling vehicles because the current global structure gives them no other path to survival, while also supporting their political and cultural leaders as they seek assistance from wealthier nations to change that system. The intercentric ethic may be monistic in its principles, but it opens the door to thousands of connected climate actions.

VI. Conclusion

Anthropogenic climate change has no center. Its causes are spread across ideologies, agriculture, transportation, industry, and more, just as its solutions will be found not just in politics and technology but also in art, culture, education, and religion. Therefore, any ethical system that seeks to respond to climate change must be focused on the interconnection of this complex, boundary-defying interdependence. If climate change has no center, then neither can the future of environmental ethics. If value is diffuse throughout all levels of life and reality, spread from one entity to the next through their interdependence and interconnection, then ethics must not neglect one form of value in its praise or protection of another. The time has come not just to balance anthropocentrism and biocentrism, but to merge them into an intercentric ethic, founded on science and world religions alike.

NOTES

6 Ibid., 342.
9 Ibid., 25.
12 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 1089.
32 Ibid.
33 Katharine Jefferts Schori, “Sermon: The seas and all that is in them,” (Indianapolis, IN: Christ Church Cathedral, July 31, 2016).
37 Rasmussen, Earth Community Earth Ethics, 324, 346.
43 Jenkins, The Future of Ethics, 8–10.
44 Berry, The Great Work, 1–11.
47 Ibid., 8.
Influences of Human Exceptionalism on Humans’ Concern for and Perception of Nonhuman-Animals

ABSTRACT
Humans have long grappled with the concept that nonhuman animals not only share the ability to reason, but that they have any theory of mind at all. Even today, having made significant progress from our days of thinking that nonhuman animals are no more than machines, humans as a whole struggle with deciding which nonhuman animals “matter.” This paper will explore how the concept of human exceptionalism—that is, that humans are intrinsically the most valuable of any species—has influenced our relationship with nonhuman animals. It will look specifically at how we use language to separate ourselves from them, the history of exceptionalism in the creation of anthrozoology, and factors that we consider when determining which nonhuman animals deserve our moral concern. It will also briefly consider emerging research which suggests that language may also be used to affect more positive attitudes toward nonhuman animals.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, animal, personhood, language

“I think, therefore I am.” These famous words from René Descartes signaled the beginning of the modern human-animal divide with his assertion that the capacity to reason is unique to humans over all other species. Humans have long grappled with the concept that nonhuman animals not only share the ability to reason, but that they have any theory of mind at all. Even today, having made significant progress from our days of thinking that nonhuman animals are no more than machines, humans as a whole struggle with deciding which nonhuman animals “matter.” Human exceptionalism is still a widely believed concept and is particularly present in Western societies. This concept can be defined by scholar Paul Waldau as “the claim that humans are, merely by virtue of their species membership, so qualitatively different from any and all other forms of life that humans rightfully enjoy privileges over all of the earth’s other life forms.”1 Human exceptionalism is deeply rooted in Western culture by religion and even societal structure. Many people quote the Bible as their justification for animal use, stating that humans were granted dominion over other animals and therefore, we may use them as we wish. The very structure of Western societies perpetuates this “right to dominion,” constructed in a hierarchal fashion wherein one always has power over someone else, and the being with less power is also usually equated with less value. This mindset, resulting in racism, sexism, homophobia, and other such prejudices throughout history, easily translates across the species line, leading to the belief of many that nonhuman animals are not deserving of humane treatment or moral consideration.

This paper will explore how the concept of human exceptionalism has influenced our relationship with nonhuman animals. It will look specifically at how we use language to separate ourselves from them, the history of exceptionalism in the creation of anthrozoology, and factors that we consider when determining which nonhuman animals deserve our moral concern. It will also briefly consider emerging research which suggests that language may also be used to affect more positive attitudes toward nonhuman animals.
Linguistic Implications

Language and the way in which we speak about something has immense power to influence one’s entire perspective regarding the subject. For example, when people speak about groups they are a part of versus groups they are not a part of (ingroups versus outgroups), linguists and social psychologists have discovered a subtle language strategy called the Linguistic Intergroup Bias, or LIB. The LIB describes humans’ tendency to use abstract terms to describe positive behaviors of ingroup members and negative behaviors of outgroup members, and concrete terms when describing negative behavior of ingroup members and positive behavior of outgroup members. Abstraction causes us to generalize a behavior across different situations and times, leading us to believe that a certain behavior is indicative of a person’s or group’s fundamental disposition. Concretion, on the other hand, linguistically attributes a behavior to the circumstances of a particular situation. By using abstract language to describe positive ingroup behaviors and concrete language to describe negative ingroup behaviors (and vice versa for outgroup behaviors), the Linguistic Intergroup Bias serves to perpetuate the perception of ‘us versus them’ in human social groups. In other words, “the LIB might be both cause and consequence of prejudice toward other groups.” It makes sense that this concept could then be extrapolated to at least partially explain our prejudice toward other nonhuman groups. In other words, “the LIB might be both cause and consequence of prejudice toward other groups.” It makes sense that this concept could then be extrapolated to at least partially explain our prejudice toward other nonhuman groups as well. And in fact, while exacerbated by Descartes, the human-animal dichotomy has existed since the beginning of human history—recorded in Genesis 1:26 where it is written, “Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.”

Even in relatively recent years as the field of animal studies is attempting to be more sensitive to how nonhuman animals are discussed, language continues to promote human exceptionalism. The very word, ‘language’, is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “the method of human connection, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way” (emphasis added). Even more specifically, The Study of Language lists the communicative properties that must be present to qualify as language: displacement, which “allows language users to talk about things and events not present in the immediate environment”; arbitrariness, the idea that “there is no ‘natural’ connection between a linguistic form and its meaning”; productivity, meaning “that the potential number of utterances in any human language is infinite”; cultural transmission, the “process whereby a language is passed on from one generation to the next”; and duality, wherein human language is organized at two levels simultaneously so that “at one level, we have distinct sounds, and, at another level, we have distinct meanings.” By defining language in such a way, in human terms, we are excluding all other animals from being able to qualify as having ‘language.’

The argument that we are the only creatures with language is a common one among human exceptionalists, yet the point they are attempting to make with it is fundamentally flawed. English philosopher Stephen Clark wrote,

“We remain doubtful that animals could be said to have a language. In part, this doubt is a mere device of philosophy: it is not that we have discovered them to lack a language but rather that we define, and redefine, what language is by discovering what beasts do not have. If they should turn out to have the very thing we have hitherto supposed language to be, we will simply conclude that language is something else again.”

If we constructed the definition of the word specifically around the parameters of our own form of communication, then of course we will be the only species who will meet the qualifications for having ‘language.’ However, as Clark points out, if it is discovered that other animals also meet those qualifications, we will redefine them until humans are once again set apart, suggesting that human exceptionalism is necessary for our species to define what makes us distinct.

Regarding this apparent conundrum, a linguistics student offered the image of a phylogenetic tree: ‘language’ is the human subphyllum of a larger
‘communication’ phylum that encompasses all animals; we simply have not yet assigned words and definitions to other species’ methods of communica-
tion. One possibility for this lack of appropriate terminology is that we still know relatively little about how other species’ communication is structured. For example, we have hundreds upon hundreds of recordings of whale voices which have been listened to and analyzed by a multitude of researchers. We know that they have signature calls for each other (in other words, names), and that different communities have different calls and dialects—so different in fact, that they do not interact with other whales outside of their communities. While discussing killer whale vocalizations, ecologist Carl Safina summarized the idea nicely:

Perhaps it’s all babble; though that seems unlikely considering how rich and varied the sounds and how much energy they spend vocal-
izing. Perhaps as humans gained our exceptional skills at syntactical language and its immense powers, we lost the ability to compre-
hend a different way of approaching and using vocal information. Perhaps each species has its own languages and dialects and we don’t understand because they work differently from ours and from each others’ and it’s much more complex than it seems.9

These communicatively separate and distinct whale communities could potentially be compared to humans in an English-speaking community and in an Arabic-speaking community; they are the same species but lack the knowl-
edge of the other’s language that is necessary for sophisticated communication between groups. To expand upon the phylogenetic communication tree visual-
alization, Arabic and English could be considered subphylums of ‘language’, which could then be broken down into even smaller subphylums classified by dialects. Using this example of distinct human language communities around the world, it would be foolish to assume that a particular species of whale, or any other animal, communicated exactly the same way wherever it was found throughout the world. There is substantial documentation of other animals communicating differently depending on where they live. Great tits living in southern Germany, for example, have been found not to recognize the calls of great tits of Afghanistan because their dialects are so distinct.10 The human species alone has 7,097 documented living languages, and even when we are speaking the same language, different dialects can prevent us from understanding each other.11

Language as many people use it serves to perpetuate the false dichotomy of ‘humans’ and ‘animals.’ Regarding this issue, scholar Paul Waldau stated,

Although virtually everyone is aware that the word “animal” in the best-known modern human languages has dual meanings in ten-
sion with one another, many circles bury this tension in counterpro-
ductive ways. Ironically, some science-focused enterprises promote what amounts to antiscientific language practices along the lines of “humans and animals” to eliminate the likelihood of ethical chal-
lenges. In everyday situations, too, even though we sometimes talk of humans as animals, far more often we talk in ways that separate humans from all other animals. . . . Choosing [a] scientifically cor-
rect option [such as “human animals”] or alternatives such as “other living beings” or “other-than-human animals” is, in some circles, viewed as antagonistic, even politically incorrect. This is so because the science-based way of speaking contends with the fashion of separating humans from the larger community of life.12

This separation of humans and animals is present in the very terms that describe the field of study aiming to close that gap, most commonly called “human-animal studies” or “anthrozoology.” The terms “anthrozoology” and “human-animal studies” add another subtle layer of exceptionalism by, in both instances, listing humans before other animals. These linguistic inequities are but the tip of the iceberg concerning humans’ historical trend of diminishing other animals’ intrinsic value in favor of our own superiority.

The Shaping of Anthrozoology

Anthrozoology, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as the study of the psychology of interactions, connections, and relationships between humans
and other animals, and is synonymous with “human-animal studies.” It brings varied approaches together in an attempt to form a more comprehensive understanding of other animals’ realities. Anthrozoologist Hal Herzog offers the following perspective:

> Anthrozoology transcends normal academic boundaries. Among our numbers are psychologists, veterinarians, animal behaviorists, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. As in every science, anthrozoologists don’t always see eye to eye. We differ in our attitudes toward some of the thorny moral issues that arise in human-animal relationships. We don’t even agree on the name of our discipline. (Some prefer to call it human-animal studies.) But, despite these differences, researchers who study our interactions with other species are an important component of human life and hope that our research might make the lives of animals better.\(^\text{13}\)

Anthrozoological research, often aiming to understand nonhuman animals’ psychological states, is finding psychobiological similarities between humans and other animals and is beginning to use our knowledge of human psychology to assess nonhumans. For example, captive elephants who have traumatic histories are being diagnosed with PTSD and dogs who present symptoms of anxiety disorders showed improvement when treated with a combination of anti-anxiety medication and behavior modification.\(^\text{14,15}\) Yet acknowledging that other animals even have minds, let alone studying this concept, is a relatively new development in science.

The Perpetuation of Human Exceptionalism by René Descartes and Immanuel Kant

A harmful and still commonly-held concept regarding the minds of nonhuman animals that anthrozoologists are combating was put in motion by French philosopher René Descartes. His writing regarding his thoughts on the nonhuman animal mind, or lack thereof, was the catalyst which caused a disconnect in thinking about humans and other animals that is still being felt today. He lived from 1596 to 1650 and was history’s best-known dualist, believing that the body and mind (or “soul”) were completely separate entities. Descartes believed that reasoning was a uniquely human ability, and that bodies by themselves were essentially machines. Psychologist C. James Goodwin writes on this mechanism of bodies:

> One implication of this dualism has come to be called the Cartesian dichotomy, which divides humans and animals. Descartes argued that animals were simple machines, incapable of reason and language, and therefore lacking a mind. Humans on the other hand, combined a mechanical body with a mind that could reason. Thus animals consist only of bodies, whereas humans combine both bodies and minds.\(^\text{16}\)

This led to the widespread belief that animals were not self-conscious beings. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, supported this view, confident that because nonhuman animals lacked self-consciousness, they exist simply as a means to an end: to serve humans. Kant denied that humans as “moral beings” were responsible for any duties to nonhuman animals. Instead, he asserted that “our duties to animals are duties only with reference to ourselves.”\(^\text{17}\) However, Kant did not travel very far outside of his hometown of Konigsberg between his birth in 1724 and his death in 1804 and therefore could never have witnessed nonhuman societies in their natural environment nor any abilities they were free to display in such a context.

Charles Darwin’s Contributions to Early Comparative Psychology

English naturalist Charles Darwin was born five years after Kant’s death, in 1809. Best known for his Theory of Evolution, Darwin also played a role in shaping the origins of comparative psychology with his cross-cultural study of emotional expressions. The findings from this study enabled him to compose a theory about the origins of emotional expressions, consisting of three principles: the principle of serviceable associated habits, meaning that certain expres-
essions “originated in bodily actions that served some adaptive function, helping
the organism to survive the struggle for existence”; the principle of antithesis,
wherein “emotions that are just the opposite of each other are expressed in
bodily reactions that are similarly opposed”; and the principle concerning the
direct action of the nervous system, meaning that some “expressions are side
effects of the physiological arousal that accompanies strongly felt emotions.”
Darwin’s book “made it clear that humans shared traits with animals and that
continuity in mental and emotional processes existed.” 18 He disagreed with
Descartes and Kant; his research had led him to believe that minds were not
solely of human nature. In 1871, Darwin stated that “[t]he difference in mind
between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree
and not of kind.” 19 As influential as Darwin’s Theory of Evolution is, it is
interesting that this aspect seems to have gotten lost in history. The majority
of students enrolled in an Introduction to Anthrozoology course as part of the
anthrozoology Master of Science program at Canisius College had not previ-
ously known that Darwin had supported the idea of an animal mind, and even
wrote about animal emotionality. 20

Anthropomorphism and George Romanes

Darwin’s work inspired George Romanes (1848–1894) who is credited as
the founder of comparative psychology. In 1882, he published Animal Intelli-
gence, a catalog of nonhuman animal behavior spanning from insects to pri-
mates. Psychologist C. James Goodwin writes:

Romanes argued that just as the specialist in anatomy made com-
parisons among the anatomical features of various species, to exam-
ine the evolution of physical structure, so the comparative psychol-
ogist would study differences among the psychological (i.e., mental)
features of different species, to examine mental evolution. 21

A common critique of the book is Romanes’ heavy use of anecdotal accounts
and tendency towards anthropomorphism regarding nonhuman animal behav-
ior. Romanes was quite radical for his time when he wrote about nonhuman
animals’ intellectual capacity and ability to reason. Below is an example of his
belief that dogs are capable of logical inference:

Coming now to cases more distinctly indicative of reason…, dogs
indisputably show that they possess this faculty. Thus, for instance,
Livingstone [the African explorer] gives the following observation.
A dog tracking his master along a road came to a place where three
roads diverged. Scenting along two of the roads and not finding the
trail, he ran off on the third without waiting to smell. Here, there-
fore, is a true act of inference. If the track is not on A or B, it must be
on C, there being no other alternative. 22

Anthropomorphizing a nonhuman animal used to be a cardinal error
for scientists, and even though acceptance of certain psychological similari-
ties between humans and nonhumans in the scientific community is growing,
there is still a level of hesitation among researchers. Of course, we cannot infer
other animals’ intentions with abandon, but ignoring our commonalities is just
as irresponsible and leads instead to mechanomorphism, which strips non-
human animals of their ‘aliveness’ and prevents us from developing a deeper
understanding of them. 23 We know now that we are not so drastically different
from other animals that our mental lives have nothing in common, and critical
anthropomorphism is a crucial aspect of responsible anthrozoological research.
Ecologist Carl Safina proposes the following mindset:

We never seem to doubt that an animal acting hungry feels hun-
gry. What reason is there to disbelieve that an elephant who seems
happy is happy? We recognize hunger and thirst while animals
are eating and drinking, exhaustion when they tire, but deny them
joy and happiness as they’re playing with their children and their
families. The science of animal behavior has long operated with that
bias — and that’s unscientific. In science, the simplest interpretation
of evidence is often the best. When elephants seem joyous in joyful
contexts, joy is the simplest interpretation of the evidence. Their
brains are similar to ours, they make the same hormones involved
in human emotions – and that’s evidence, too. So let’s not assume.
But let’s not bury evidence. 24
One possible explanation for our aversiveness toward anthropomorphism is that to anthropomorphize both natural and artificial entities facilitates empathy. To empathize with other animals would mean admitting to ourselves that there are serious issues with the way we treat them. English philosopher Jeremy Bentham first challenged this discomfort in 1823 when he wrote, “The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” Emerging research suggests that critical anthropomorphism, that is, the attribution of human-like behaviors and mental states to nonhuman animals based on scientific evidence, can actually be utilized to create feelings of inclusion and more positive attitudes toward nonhuman animals. It will be interesting to see if critical anthropomorphism of other animals can become common practice and start to affect widespread change in humans’ perceptions of them.

Determining Moral Concern

Humans have a tendency to only pay attention to the “nice” parts of our relationships with other animals. Speaking particularly with regards to the livestock industry, there is a huge cognitive disconnect for people between the clean, sealed package of meat one buys at the grocery store, and the nonhuman animal from which it came. People’s “concern for animal welfare and acceptance of animal sentience” tends to be correlated with the perception of an animal’s position on the phylogenetic scale relative to humans:

A study from the US asked respondents to rate 33 species in terms of intelligence and lovability. It found that the highest rated were primates and larger mammals; the lowest rated were spiders, insects and some mammals. Food animals, such as chickens, lobsters and trout, were rated the lowest on intelligence and rated next-to-lowest on lovability.

Another study found similar results, stating that “the type of animal appears to have had an important influence on the participants’ responses...the participants were more likely to attribute cognitive abilities to wild animals, dogs and cats, and higher mammals, but not to farm animals.”

This phenomenon appears across many human-nonhuman animal relationships. Anthrozoologist Hal Herzog points out that “[t]he debate over whether human morality is based on emotion or reason goes back a long time.” He explains how people can have such contradictory opinions:

Most people’s views about the treatment of other species exemplify what psychologists call “non-attitudes” or “vacuous attitudes.” These are superficial collections of largely unrelated and isolated opinions, not the coherent belief system that we see in people... who have thought deeply about moral problems involving animals. The ethical issues associated with our relationships with other species are complex, and most people, even people who say they are animal lovers, are somewhere in the middle.

Because dogs and cats are cute and have personal bonds with us and wild animals awaken our appreciation for nature, but because farm animals are hidden away in feedlots and slaughterhouses, we find it difficult to care about the latter in the same way as the former two. This question of animal intelligence does not involve scientific evidence of a rubric we use for measuring it but instead is created based on proximity to a person. When it comes to thinking about the intelligence of nonhuman animals, and especially livestock animals, our opinions are not scientifically supported; because of this myopic view of nonhuman animals, the majority of our society continues to live as human exceptionalists. Humans are comfortable continuing to believe that we are better than all other living beings and are unwilling to take part in any significant amount of critical thinking that may prove us wrong. For many in society, the implications of such a paradigm shift are too broad and far-reaching to be seriously considered.

Despite these challenges, we have managed to make progress regarding the treatment of nonhuman animals we cherish most: companion animals. Humans’ emotional relationships with the nonhuman animals they share their homes with have been changing as well. Anthrozoologist John Bradshaw writes that historically, “[w]ith the exception of a small number of animals
kept by aristocrats solely for the purpose of companionship, domestic animals generally filled a practical role first and then, occasionally, an emotional one as well.”

As Western populations become increasingly urban, our need for working cats and dogs has decreased drastically, yet our desire to keep them is increasing. Bradshaw posited that:

We crave a connection not just to animals but to nature in general. Urbanization has taken most of us out of the wild but evidently has not eradicated our yearning for it. The animals (and plants) we keep in our homes, the pleasure that many of us obtain from tending gardens and visiting “wilderness” locations, all speak to an urge to engage with the “natural” world.

The way we train them to live in harmony with us and our increasingly urban world has become more humane. While traditional animal training relies largely on “force, intimidation, and pain,” a new training technique rooted in operant conditioning has increased in popularity over the last few decades.

This new technique, called ‘clicker training,’ utilizes behaviorist B. F. Skinner’s concept of positive and negative reinforcement—not punishment—to encourage or extinguish a certain behavior. It promotes a more equal relationship between companions and is a welcome alternative to the days of choke chains, shock collars, and domination. One theory for this shift relates back to the idea that familiarity fosters empathy; because our companion animals’ primary function is increasingly becoming an emotional one, we spend more time developing our relationship with them and in doing so, investing in their personal wellbeing.

As important as this victory is, there are so many more aspects of our relationship with nonhuman animals that must be considered. If we agree that dogs are intelligent and emotional, then what about pigs? Pigs are often compared to dogs in terms of intelligence, yet if a dog lived a pig’s life, there would be a societal uproar over the inhumane conditions in which that dog was forced to live. One study illustrated this inconsistency when they researched how people use information about other animals’ intelligence. They found that:

When presented with foreign or fictitious animals eaten by distant or nonexistent people, we see intelligent animals as worthy of our moral concern. When those animals are closer to home and we are the eaters, intelligence becomes conveniently irrelevant. Smart animals deserve our moral concern, unless, of course, we want to eat them.

Different from actively denying an animal’s intelligence, people avoid potential moral dilemmas by simply disregarding relevant information concerning animals they consume. This study may also help explain why Western societies are so vocal about other countries’ consumption of certain animals, such as dolphins in Japan or dogs in Korea: we can acknowledge those animals’ intelligence and summon up our own moral concern for their wellbeing because we have enough distance from them, both geographically and culturally.

Another aspect to consider is the use of nonhuman animals in laboratory research. We experiment on them, often at great harm to them, to avoid performing the same experiments on fellow humans. We argue that it is not ethical to perform such experiments on humans, but that animals such as mice are biologically close enough to us to be a suitable replacement. Yet in the same breath we also argue that they do not have the same rights as us, that their pain is inconsequential, that the ends justify the means. Philosopher Carl Cohen wrote, “If, in evaluating a research program, the pains of a rodent count equally with the pains of a human, we are forced to conclude 1) that neither humans nor rodents possess rights, or 2) that rodents possess all the rights that humans possess. Both alternatives are absurd.”

Yet as anthrozoologist Hal Herzog points out, “the justification for animal experimentation . . . ultimately rests on the premise that organisms with bigger brains have the right to conduct research on creatures with less developed mental capacities.”

Conclusions

As the scientific community moves toward a more welcoming stance on other animals’ cognition and intelligence, and research continues to reveal their
mental lives, humans will be forced to confront this premise and others. This will likely prove difficult, particularly with regards to animals toward whom we have a history of exploitation. Instead of continuing to psychologically manipulate ourselves into believing that our mistreatment of them is acceptable, acknowledging these animals’ value will require us to finally alter our behaviors to align with our new perception. Continued research on the use of critical anthropomorphism as a technique to improve attitudes toward nonhumans, especially when applied to animals typically viewed as unintelligent and/or beneath our moral concern, will likely be interesting and beneficial. However, humans’ high regard for themselves makes even this tricky. Studies have found that when animals were framed as being similar to humans, people’s moral concern for them increased; however, when humans were presented as being similar to animals, humans’ concern for those animals actually decreased. In other words, only by elevating animals’ perceived value to that of humans produced greater moral concern; simply stressing similarity was not enough—the directional framing of those similarities was essential. These studies and other aforementioned in this paper suggest that language can be used as a power tool in influencing human-nonhuman animal relationships and overcoming some of the damage caused by an extensive history of human exceptionalism.

The concept of human exceptionalism has shaped our experiences since the beginning of our history. It is our oldest tradition. It is embedded in Western cultures, perpetuated in our languages, and rooted in our psyche. To question human exceptionalism is to challenge what we believe makes our species unique. It is to encounter psychological discomfort about the way we are living our lives. It is to resolve cognitive dissonance by changing ourselves instead of disregarding truths. As we continue to learn more about how nonhuman animals experience the world, we must be constantly challenging ourselves to think critically about our treatment of them, to set aside destructive exceptionalist perspectives, and to find innovative solutions to conflicts that can benefit both nonhuman animals and ourselves. Even if the progress is slow or the steps are small, nonhuman animal-minded thinking is crucial to furthering our knowledge and improving the world in which all of us live.

NOTES
4 Gen 1:26 NABRE
8 Jasper Wallen, in discussion with the author, September 11, 2017.
12 See note 1 above, 16–17.
13 Hal Herzog, Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It’s So Hard to Think Straight About Animals (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2010), 17.
18 See note 9 above, 143–144.


21 See note 9 above, 146–147.


25 See note 23 above, 711.


30 See note 8 above, 51.

31 Ibid, 240.


33 Ibid, 20.


37 See note 13 above, 213.

Kieran Campbell

Review of Norman Wirzba’s Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating

ABSTRACT

The following is a book review of Norman Wirzba’s Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating. It acknowledges the content and method of the book as well as some of the project’s strengths and weaknesses.


Keywords: food, theology, eating, review

Christian life is often portrayed as bland and flavorless. Norman Wirzba shatters this hollow understanding, replacing it with an elucidation of faith that is abundantly festive and immensely delightful. He locates the life of faith within the larger cycle of life, suggesting that a healthy faith life depends on a realistic, informed, and intentional relationship with food.¹ I left Food and Faith deeply satisfied by its development of theological themes in relation to food, stirred by the many questions it seeks to answer and those it provokes, and refreshed by its engaging prose.

Wirzba, professor of theology, ecology, and rural life at Duke Divinity School, offers a series of essays that, though capable of standing alone, when read together bear narrative fruits larger than the sum of their parts. Wirzba’s extensive and varied academic and personal (he is, after all, an avid gardener) contributions to the intersections between agrarian life and the life of faith confirm his expertise. The brief preface frames Wirzba’s piece as an extended reflection on a communal meal in which vestiges of trinitarian love are present. Food is necessarily communal and perichoretic insofar as relationality constitutes reality, rather than merely characterizing it.² Food becomes the primary way in which we participate in this integral economy of love (Chapter 1).

Wirzba develops an ontological theme that emerges throughout: God as Gardener. God’s creative and nutritive nature, which continually sustains all of Creation, suggests that gardening enables us to best understand our creatureliness by revealing our relational dependence on God and creation.³ While gardening, we, like God, “make room” for others to be nurtured and to flourish. The teleological framework of the text is that of the Sabbath rest, the “goal of all existence,” which provides a glimpse of the heavenly banquet (Chapter 2).⁴ Our status as “exiles” and the many ways in which we have distanced ourselves from the intentionality of the gardener and the refreshment of the Sabbath are then, quite painfully, illuminated. Sin, ecological devastation, economic disease, and psychological disorder (e.g. obesity, isolation, body shaming) are identified as some of the innumerable “dysfunctions in the world of food” (Chapter 3).

The chapters following explore the theological themes of sacrifice, eucharist, and thanksgiving in relation to food practice. Wirzba reframes sacrifice as a self-offering in which we who offering sacrifice do so with the understanding that what is offered is first given and then passed on, in order that others might live abundantly (Chapter 4). This sacrificial reframing provides the ground for a eucharistic communion reflective of trinitarian love. Here, at the eucharistic table, all things become sign and sacrament of God’s love.⁵ As we consume, so too are we consumed by Christ, brought into participation with that which is infinitely larger than ourselves.⁶ When we eat eucharistically we are transformed, with all of creation, in Christ (Chapter 5). Maintaining a sense of gratitude and celebration for such a transformation enables us to continue delighting in our participation in this taste of heaven on earth (Chapter 6).

In his final chapter Wirzba convincingly argues that those in heaven will eat, though the nature of such eating remains uncertain: “Rather than denying
eating altogether, what we need are new ways to imagine eating, fresh ways to conceive what a renewed and reconciled creation productive of food looks like.\textsuperscript{7} Because eating is so intimately tied with our nature and existence, it is impossible to know what the heavenly banquet might look, smell, feel, taste, and sound like (Chapter 7).

The book is limited in two ways. Firstly, it engages only the Christian tradition. This is an intentional decision acknowledged from the outset. Nonetheless, a broader study of the relationship between food and non-Christian faiths proves a worthy future task. The other more inhibitive limitation is the narrow audience to whom the book is addressed. Wirzba presumes that those reading the book have enough to eat. By addressing those who live with surplus and superabundance (the Global North), Wirzba fails to address the intersections between food and faith for those who hunger. How might experiences of poverty and hunger transform the relationship between food and faith? I am left wanting, eager to broaden the scope of the conversation.

Food and Faith provides a stimulating introduction to the questions surrounding the relationship between discipleship and dining, the cross and cuisine. The book is accessible to a broad audience without sacrificing academic rigor. I heartily recommend this title to anyone who desires to think more deeply, to love more fully, and to eat more decadently. I left this theological feast unsettled by our exilic state, though wholly confident in the all-consuming love of God who is intimately present in all of Creation.

NOTES
2 Ibid., 9.
3 Ibid., 36.
4 Ibid., 45.
5 Ibid., 158.
6 Ibid., 159–60.
7 Ibid., 225.