Christians understand "nature" as "creation," the world and life that in its origin and development as well as in its transience exists out of its relation to God. God is regarded as the creator of everything between heaven and earth, and classical theology has interpreted God's work as a making, preserving and fulfilling of nature. The doctrine of creation offers the horizon for the whole understanding of Christian faith even if it historically often has been opposed to the doctrine of salvation. A general challenge for Christian theology therefore is to relate God's creation and God's salvation to each other. Are human beings as "images of God" placed above or among creatures? Are nature and man/woman in need of liberation?

The view of nature and the use of it have undergone several changes in the history of Western civilization. In ancient and medieval times, the notions of "physis" and "natura" signified everything that existed, and the so-called "natural theology,” eg. of Thomas Aquinas, shaped the path for modern science by investigating God's being through studying nature and by explaining the world from the image of God. The view of nature changed markedly in the 19th century. Man and nature are distanced radically from each other and the human identity was no longer understood as a divided between divine-spiritual and natural-bodily spheres of reality.

The "roots of our ecological crisis" cannot be identified in one single historical period in the history of Judaism and Christianity. Instead one needs to understand a complex historical process of almost 2000 years where the present problems have been developed and accumulated in different "waves" and regions. The anthropocentrism of
western European Christian theology in its mainstream has contributed in this process to legitimate a sense of superiority over nature and a consumerist life-style, even if undercurrents such as mysticism tried to resist the historical reductionism of creation spirituality.

In time with a progressing secularization and modernization the change of the life-systems, for example in climate, reveal with increasing clarity man's régime over nature through reason and technology. Human codes of knowing about, and acting in, nature are out of balance with the codes of nature. Older natural theology no longer addresses this situation, and late modern theology is challenged to reconstruct the traditions of creation theology and to interpret in a new key the God who acts in, with and for a world threatened by the human being who God once created in his/her own image.

Since the 1970s, churches and theologians in Europe have addressed the ecological challenge in three ways. First, the environmental crisis has been regarded simply as a reason to reformulate conventional doctrines of faith. Second, elements from ecological science have eclectically mixed with selected elements from Christian tradition. A third way has sought for critical-constructive mediations of ecological insights and interpretations of God. In the latter, theology works as a part of a larger ecological discourse and asks for specific Christian reconstructions, represents the mainstream of creation theology in Europe in the second part of the 20th century. The understanding of God itself is challenged by the suffering of nature caused by men and women who are supposed to be images of God the Creator. Methodologically, one can discern two modes of doing theology, one dogmatic in a direction from faith to
environment (ecological doctrine of creation) and another contextual, departing from the state of nature and moving towards the reflection on God (theological ecology).

While process philosophy offered an important background for ecotheology in the USA, European theologians have met this with a far more skeptical attitude. German biologist and theologian Günter Altner (from 1974) was the first to interpret environmental degradation in the light of a Christian theology of the Cross, where nature revealed a civilization at crisis. Altner proposed a dialogue with environmental science and worked out an influential ethics of dignity in widening Albert Schweitzer's approach.

Another among the pioneers of ecotheology, German physician and theologian Gerhard Liedke (1979) profiled the clear challenge to the churches and theology. He focused on the conflict between man and nature in creation, using the Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung's theory he argued for minimizing the violence constituted by an asymmetry in the relation of humanity and nature. This claim was made into an obligation for the Ecumenical Movement and its church bodies (the international, inter-denominational church movement founded in 1925 to promote reconciliation and cooperation, and represented most prominently by the World Council of Churches). Several theologians related the conflict between man and nature to the conflicts between different classes, regions and people, and also to the conflict between the sexes, and a wide-open perspective of liberation and reconciliation was brought into the heart of the ecumenical social ethics after 1970.

A first extensive and influential re-interpretation of Christianity was offered 1985 by Jürgen Moltmann in his "ecological doctrine of the creation.” Different themes from Christian tradition were loosely linked to new insights in ecological science and green
social movements in order to work out the relevance of Christian faith for finding ways out of the contemporary crisis of society and nature. Disciples from different confessional traditions tried to respond to the ecological challenge, even if they did not always succeed in finding synthetic correlations with their fathers of tradition and the challenge of the new situation. The question for example whether Karl Barth's neoorthodox theology of God's revelation can contribute to a positive understanding of the creation and its spirituality is highly controversial because of Barth's dependence on the dualistic thinking of his times and his tendency to develop theology as a preaching monologue.

After the widening of the academic ecotheological discourse from the first to the third and fourth world in the 1990s the vision of an ecological theology of liberation emerged. German-Swedish theologian Sigurd Bergmann developed such a normative approach where soteriology and ontology are interpreted in the notion of the "God's liberating movement in creation." The approach was developed in a constructive correlation with Early Church theology especially its greek orthodox traditions on the Trinity and the Holy Spirit. The four issues of sociality, motion, suffering and the life-giving Spirit are occuring as main problems in late antiquity theology as well as in the ecological discourse and in late modern ecotheologies. By an ecological widening of the criteria of contextual and liberation theology this approach develops an ecotheology of liberation that focuses on the trinitarian view of God, a new theological thought of motion, the theology of the cross of nature and humankind, and a topologically shaped spirituality. The theme of the whole "Creation set free" is in this approach at the centre of God's acts and Christian theology reflecting it.
The ecological challenge was taken up by theologians from all confessions. Ecotheology was in Europe from the beginning an ecumenical affair. The Eastern-Orthodox contributions to the new discourse on nature were developed in the institutions and in the conferences of the ecumenical movement, especially in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC). It was due to the Orthodox representatives at the WCC assembly 1983 and especially to the Syrian-Orthodox theologian and church leader Paulos Mar Gregorios that the WCC programme on "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" (JPIC) was enriched with the environmental issue so that the main agenda for ecumenical social ethics since then could focus on peace, justice and ecological problems as the most prioritized challenges for Christians. Orthodox theologians enriched the somehow limited perspectives of Protestant and Catholic thinkers with themes like sacraments, liturgy, trinity and beauty. A breakthrough for ecumenical ecotheology in Europe adapted by the churches took place at the Concilium in Basel in 1989. For the first time after the schism between Eastern and Western Europe, all churches met in one common conference, and they were even able to make a strong consensus on the need for a more just and ecological order of world economics. The heritage of this strong ecological commitment in the European churches is developed in the "European Christian Environmental Network" (ECEN). The European Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women has a sub-group on Ecofeminism and Ecology.

While ecofeminism has created a significant potential in the United States, it is just slowly following in Europe. Catharina Halkes, Dorothee Sölle, Anne Primavesi and Mary Grey have from different feminist angles produced alternative visions of humanity's
encounter with nature were highlighted. Ecofeminism highlights the link between women and nature, for example, in the model of analogy, where the idealization of the feminine and nature on the one hand is related to the suffering of both on the other hand.

Together with an academically vital and manifold reflection, the best of this discourse could be read in the British journal "Ecotheology." The ecumenical movement in Europe consisting of both many independent Christian groups and networks and of institutionalized church bodies constitutes a strong and sustainable basis for the further development of ecological constructive and critical theology and praxis. This development is not only about ideological reconstruction, but also about the reacting and renewal of Christian community-life and mission. Alternative church banking, forests and land owned and ecologically used by churches, green parish economy, and Christian church aid for women preserving nature are just a few among lots of examples where ecotheology and ecopraxis are in an inter-mutual exchange. The dignity of the question where and how God acts in the ecological destruction and reconstruction is increasing in accordance with the increasing environmental problems.

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Further Reading


Sölle, Dorothee, and Cloyes, Shirley A. *To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation.*