

Eschatological naturalism and ecological responsibility: troubling some assumptions

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Abstract

The connection between ecological responsibility and differing conceptions of Christian eschatology is widely observed. It's often assumed that the necessary response to Christian environmental inaction is affirmation of a strongly this-worldly vision of new creation (so, influentially, N. T. Wright). However, recent systematic theology has seen retrieval of elements of eschatology that foreground discontinuity and transcendence (e.g., Boersma). Moreover, there are exegetical challenges to continuationist claims (e.g., Bockmuehl and Adams) and doctrinal reactions to 'eschatological naturalism' (Sonderegger and Allen). Where does this leave the connection between ecological witness and the content of Christian hope? Doubtless, continuationist accounts have some salutary emphases, but on exegetical, doctrinal, and moral grounds I seek to disentangle the assumed compact of particular construals of this-worldly continuity and ethical commitment. Finally, drawing on James Cone's meditations upon black spiritual traditions, I explore how discontinuous interpretations of the life to come themselves need not undermine responsible action.

Keywords

Eschatology, environmental ethics, hope, resurrection, heaven

Introduction

The relationship between responses to the ecological crisis and differing conceptions of Christian eschatology has been widely observed over recent decades. It is a connection that can be researched on a range of different levels: the sociological, the historical, and the theological, to name but three. Though they are clearly enmeshed, it is primarily the third of these I would like to explore in this essay, with a focus upon its own interlinked exegetical, doctrinal, and moral strata.¹ I want to start with the biblical. Yet the starting point apparently available to us as we begin with scriptural interpretation may seem distinctly unpromising. As Stephen Barton writes, much reflection on our question often exhibits the ‘suspicion that New Testament eschatology – in some of its aspects, at least – is fundamentally *pessimistic* about the future of the world; that, if heaven and earth are to pass away (even if to be transformed into something better), a positive theological and psychological commitment to environmental care is undermined’.²

Precisely in response to this kind of misgiving, a number of biblical scholars have offered bracing, even caustic, critiques of traditional eschatological hopes, offering in their place robust affirmations of a strongly this-worldly vision of new creation. This perspective – we might clunkily term it ‘continuationist’ – has been widely influential beyond the academy, through the work of N.T. Wright and Richard Middleton in particular. In an arguably half-heard form, it represents the favoured eschatological outlook of many who preach and teach in our churches today. The position surely has its merits, and to it we can perhaps attribute some salutary effects upon the ethical practices of some Christians. Yet, unbeknown by many in the church, the scriptural interpretation this sensibility is said to derive from is not without serious exegetical contestation within

¹ This essay originates in a paper presented to the ‘New Testament and Christian Theology’ stream of the British New Testament Society’s annual conference, in September 2023. I am grateful to the convenors of that group, Erin Heim and Jamie Davies, as well as to other attendees for discussion of the ideas contained here, especially Susannah Ticciati, and to conversation partners back in Durham, including Nick Moore, Sarah Millican-Jones, and Robert Song.

² Stephen C. Barton, ‘New Testament Eschatology and the Ecological Crisis in Theological and Ecclesial Perspective’, in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. David G. Horrell et al (London/New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 262-282, p. 268. Italics original.

the guild of New Testament studies. Moreover, the most significant contemporary voices in systematic theology by contrast press towards constructive eschatological visions of a more discontinuous or transcendent kind. In fact, they often they do so by way of thoroughgoing retrieval of exactly those traditional elements of Christian hope deemed inauthentic and irresponsible by the writers I have mentioned. And the systematicians are aware of the semi-popular continuationist consensus: these writers mount a serious critique of what they perceive in it as a modern trend towards ‘eschatological naturalism’, that is, the reduction of scriptural eschatological vision to the immanent frame.

It seems, then, that we have both exegetical and dogmatic reasons to pause, and to investigate the apparent self-evidence of this continuationist position as grounds – or, at least, when presented as the principal grounds – for Christian ecological responsibility. But, necessary though it is, where would this troubling of assumptions leave us in terms of any sense of a positive articulation of the link between eschatology and environmental ethics? At first glance, it would seem to sever a vital connection. On closer scrutiny, however, I suggest that the presumed coupling of a particular construal of new creation with ecological responsibility in fact trades upon simplistic assumptions about how different theological commitments connect to moral reasoning. Furthermore, stated positively, what if we discover that more discontinuous and transcendent visions of the life to come are not only not always ethically enfeebling, but might in their own way be able to inspire moral imagination and faithful witness? Going beyond first impressions, what if these otherworldly hopes are able to animate and sustain earth-keeping practices and the struggle for ecojustice in our time – just as they have before now motivated other struggles for justice?

In what follows, I begin by outlining the salient features of the continuationist compact, before presenting its exegetical and doctrinal detractors in turn. In the final section, I draw on James Cone’s eschatological meditations to explore how discontinuous interpretations of the life to come need not undermine responsible action, and might even in some cases be such action’s necessary imaginative condition.

The continuationist compact

First, then, let us review the pertinent features of what we might call the continuationist compact. Because the general lineaments of this perspective are well known, and because I want to press on to explore the critical and contrastive voices, which are perhaps less well known, I will be relatively brief. The key claims are quite easy to grasp, and that is surely part of the attraction.

For N.T. Wright, a properly formed Christian hope nourished on the scriptures is focused upon ‘a renewed body living on a renewed earth’.³ Besides an exegetical case, Wright has a polemical concern to overcome (even ridicule) what he describes as a widespread understanding – shown in hymns and songs, for instance – of ‘escapist salvation’.⁴ Evidently, part of this concern is ethical in nature. Wright’s treatment prosecutes two questions he sees as inseparable. In his words: ‘First, what is the ultimate Christian hope? Second, what hope is there for change, rescue, transformation, new possibilities within the world in the present?’ For, he writes, ‘as long as we see Christian hope in terms of “going to heaven”, of a salvation that is essentially away from this world, the two questions are bound to appear as unrelated’.⁵

As Dale Allison observes, then, Wright is characteristically ‘anxious about an other-worldly escapism that might deflate social responsibility’.⁶ It is central to Wright’s argument that a construal of scriptural expectation as focused upon God’s renewal of creation furnishes ‘every possible incentive, or at least every Christian incentive, to work for the renewal of God’s creation and for justice within God’s creation’.⁷ (A comparable

³ N.T. Wright, ‘Response to Markus Bockmuehl’, in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N.T. Wright*, ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard Hays (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), pp. 231-32, p. 231.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of the Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove, 1999), p. 12.

⁵ Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 5.

⁶ Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), p. 126.

⁷ Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth*, p. 21.

and now also somewhat influential perspective is offered by J. Richard Middleton, though sufficiently similar that we do not need to rehearse it here.)⁸

Now, such portrayals of eschatological redemption do appear attractive as a – even at first blush *the* – theological premise for Christian environmental responsibility. Notably, these accounts are motivated in part by a well-merited allergy to over-heated fundamentalist prognostications and predictions of cosmic demise that have undeniably so often been caught up with egregious disregard for God’s creation. Against such a backdrop, we should at the very least appreciate the sense in which these continuationist interpretations are conceived as reparative in relation to the dualisms of crassly dispensationalist schemes. Just so, we can be grateful for their re-discovery of theological concern for the flourishing of non-human creation and rejection of narrowly anthropocentric accounts of salvation, their holistic notion of Christian mission, and their commitment to the goods of embodied and relational existence, including – under the influence of neo-Calvinism⁹ – the Christian vocation within cultural, social, and political life. In some ways, without wishing to reduce the exegesis to a mere cipher, we could say that the exegetical shifts exemplified by Wright and his generation of scholars are of a piece with salutary developments in Protestant evangelical social ethics, which the interpretive moves are perhaps in some ways designed to secure within more-or-less biblicist constituencies.

However, and leaving aside the ethics for a moment, it is striking to notice that recent years have also seen countervailing trends within biblical and doctrinal scholarship: trajectories of interpretation and contemplation issued sometimes in direct critique of the kinds of accounts just canvased, or sometimes by foregrounding contrasting (or complementary) themes within projects of retrieval and construction. I

⁸ J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014). If anything, Middleton goes further than Wright.

⁹ This inheritance is explored insightfully in Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentring Christian Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018). See also J. Todd Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord’s Table* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018). Further discussion among neo-Calvinists has emphasised just how attenuated a reception of this tradition an immanentised eschatology represents.

will turn first to the headlines of exegetical contestation, before noting some of the key contributions within contemporary systematic theology that stand at variance with the continuationist compact.

Exegetical contestation

It seems to me that there are essentially two areas where scholarly demurral from the position indicated above – at least as expressed in its less nuanced articulations – should be noted. In different ways, both relate to continuity and discontinuity. Roughly speaking, we might term one a matter of ‘positive’ discontinuity. That is, a question of the heavenly and the transcendent. The other we can call a question of ‘negative discontinuity’. In other words, the issue of the disjunctive (even destructive, or at least radically purificatory) nature of the passage of creation from this order to the next. This pair of queries are voiced well within New Testament studies by Markus Bockmuehl and Edward Adams respectively, and I will highlight salient features of the arguments of each here.¹⁰ Before observing the disagreements, however, to be charitable and proportionate we should recall that much scholarly dissatisfaction with Wright and his fellow travellers – and this is true of our two interlocutors – is prefaced with appreciation for his and their attempts more generally. Bockmuehl is representative when he writes that the ‘broader concerns of Tom Wright’s eschatological scheme seem to me wholly laudable, perhaps above all in his argument that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is the fundamental pillar of the Christian story of salvation.’¹¹ What is at stake in the parting of ways, then, has to be specified more carefully. It is not so much, if at all, about what Wright et al wish to safeguard; it is principally about what they imagine they need to jettison in order to do so. And, for my ultimate purposes here, it is not least about the veracity and persuasiveness

¹⁰ A third good example would be Andrew T. Lincoln, ‘Heaven as Home in Christian Hope’, in *A Sort of Homecoming: Pieces Honoring the Academic and Community Work of Brian Walsh*, ed. Marcia Boniferno, Amanda Jagt, and Andrew Stephens-Rennie (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), pp. 23-37.

¹¹ Markus Bockmuehl, ‘Did St Paul Go to Heaven When He Died?’, in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God*, pp. 211-231, p. 211.

of the moral propositions involved in continuationist arguments for what must be made fundamental and what must be ditched.

Let us turn first to Bockmuehl's questioning of Wright's position in the aptly titled 'Did St Paul Go to Heaven When He Died?' As we have established, Bockmuehl suggests he shares quite a bit with Wright, so far as Pauline eschatology goes, but seeks to interrogate the 'conviction that an affirmation of the bodily resurrection necessitates a denial of the traditional Christian belief that the faithful "go to heaven" when they die.'¹² Rehearsing some of Wright's stronger claims, he comments:

While Scripture is hardly systematic on this point, a number of texts ranging from the Gospel of John (e.g., Jn 3.14 with Jn. 12.32; 14.2-3; 17.24) via Ephesians (e.g., Eph. 2.6) to Hebrews (e.g., Heb. 12.22-24) do seem at least *prima facie* to imply what Wright denies: it is precisely because of Christ's resurrection and ascension that Christians too gain access to the heavenly Jerusalem as the eternal dwelling place of the exalted Christ which in the new creation will be universally revealed, redeeming and subsuming the old.¹³

The key issue is Wright's parsing of references to the heavenly solely to the intermediate state rather than the final destination of the glorified, and therein his forthright eschewal of any 'use of the word *heaven* to denote the *ultimate* goal of the redeemed'.¹⁴ Bockmuehl proceeds to address the relevant texts (2 Cor. 5, 1 Thess. 4, 1 Cor. 15, Phil. 3), showing that they need not be interpreted that way. Further contextualising these references in relation to other New Testament texts (Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Timothy), he writes: 'Such heavenly places clearly seem in these texts a permanent, not a temporary destination, however much it may be the case that the world to come will render these universally present and visible'.¹⁵ Bockmuehl concludes by reviewing how interpreters in the early centuries of the Church took Paul's claims: once again, 'the church fathers did

¹² Bockmuehl, 'Did St Paul Go to Heaven', p. 213.

¹³ Bockmuehl, 'Did St Paul Go to Heaven', pp. 214-215.

¹⁴ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 180, as quoted in Bockmuehl, 'Did St Paul Go to Heaven', p. 213. Italics original to Wright.

¹⁵ Bockmuehl, 'Did St Paul Go to Heaven', p. 223.

not regard the expectation of “going to heaven” as a corruption of the hope of bodily resurrection (or vice versa), but firmly held on to both convictions without compromising either one.’¹⁶ All told, then, by seeking to make us choose:

in certain pivotal denials Wright seems paradoxically to subvert a number of vital affirmations about the Pauline hope, appearing repeatedly to insist on the abiding importance of an earth-heaven distinction, and thus allowing for an ultimate eschatological space that is in some sense God’s new world but emphatically not “heaven”.¹⁷

Interestingly, Bockmuehl is also attentive to the moral dimensions of Wright’s case, detecting that his ‘strong resistance to the idea of a heavenly dimension seems at times compelled as much by understandable fears about Christian ecological and political escapism as by the biblical texts themselves.’¹⁸

Another important dissenting voice from within biblical studies has been Edward Adams, who made a substantive entry into the discussion with his study *The Stars will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World* (2007).¹⁹ Adams’ enquiry focuses on New Testament texts that employ language of cosmic catastrophe (Mk. 13.24-25 + par.; Heb. 12.25-29; 2 Pet. 3.5-13; Rev. 6.12-17), reading them within their textual contexts and comparatively in relation to Graeco-Roman and Jewish texts. He concludes that the ‘evidence contradicts Wright’s claim that early Christians never contemplated such a thing’: ‘the expectation of the end of creation is an important strand of New Testament cosmic-eschatological thought’.²⁰ We can discern ‘two distinct cosmic-eschatological schemes’ in the New Testament: ‘destruction and

¹⁶ Bockmuehl, ‘Did St Paul Go to Heaven’, p. 225. See Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

¹⁷ Bockmuehl, ‘Did St Paul Go to Heaven’, p. 230-231.

¹⁸ Bockmuehl, ‘Did St Paul Go to Heaven’, p. 215. See further the discussion of William Wilberforce in p. 215 n. 15.

¹⁹ Edward Adams, *The Stars will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World* (T & T Clark, 2007).

²⁰ Adams, *The Stars will Fall*, p. 254, p. 255.

creation anew', such as is envisaged in these texts, and 'non-destructive transformation', as anticipated in Romans 8.18-25.²¹

Adams too is alert to the moral import of interpretation. In fact, he finishes his book with a very brief reflection on the significance of all this for environmental ethics, concluding as follows:

The catastrophic expectation we find in the New Testament is not ultimately a pessimistic one; it is part of an eschatology of hope. In 2 Peter and Revelation, that hope is for a new heavens and earth, brought about by God's redemptive action. This hope is one that can inspire action for change and justice and in a world and society where God is not "all in all".²²

In a more recent article, Adams offers a convincing further case study of 2 Peter 3.5-13 and reflects at slightly more length on the implications for environmental ethics. His sober summary of the exegetical results is as follows: 'Attempts to retrieve the passage for the environment based on the claim that what is envisioned is transformation and not destruction fail to persuade'.²³ Therefore, any 'seeking to derive from the Bible a positive environmental ethic need to acknowledge that the Bible has more than one way of conceiving the cosmic future and that the various statements cannot be pressed into a singular vision of non-destructive transformation'.²⁴

Yet the intention of Adams' study is not to undermine such attempts at deriving what he describes as a 'biblical theology and ethic of the environment', but rather to complicate some of the binary interpretive possibilities imagined by what I have called continuationist accounts. Where the perspectives available to the scriptural authors were thought to be incompatibly siloed into expectations of either 'annihilation' or 'transformation', this dichotomy is complicated by the apparent view of the author of 2

²¹ Adams, *The Stars will Fall*, p. 256. This is perhaps a slightly different judgment than Bockmuehl's, who allows for different angles of vision but writes of the 'complex consistency to Paul's thought' (p. 222).

²² Adams, *The Stars will Fall*, p. 259.

²³ Edward Adams, 'Retrieving the Earth from the Conflagration: 2 Peter 3.5-13 and the Environment', in *Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Horrell et al, pp. 108-120, p. 118.

²⁴ Adams, 'Retrieving the Earth', p. 116.

Peter, for whom ‘the dissolution of heaven and earth is part of a process of renewal, which brings about a new heavens and new earth in continuity with what has gone before’.²⁵ Moreover, whereas for Wright, Adams suggests, ‘the very idea of the world coming to an end betokens a world-negating, dualistic cosmology’, in the view of the epistle, ‘the expectation of a cosmic destruction does not entail a negative assessment of the present creation as innately evil’.²⁶ And, relatedly, ‘living in the light of the end and re-creation... does not mean the abandonment of ethical obligations’, but if anything the intensification of them.²⁷

So, in sum, we find from within biblical studies plenty of reasons to pause over the exegetical claims undergirding the more undialectical continuationist perspective. We also encounter, already, a clue to the complexity of the attendant moral implications.

Doctrinal reservations and departures

At the same time, recent forays in eschatology from within systematic theology have pursued constructive trajectories which would seem really quite surprising from the pew, in view of the pervasive influence of the continuationist vision on popular perception of the *status quaestionis*. We might note in particular Michael Allen’s *Grounded in Heaven*, Hans Boersma’s *Seeing God*, and an essay ‘Towards a Doctrine of Resurrection’ by Katherine Sonderegger.²⁸ To these Reformed and Anglican (though certainly ecumenically-minded) contributions we can add three significant treatments written from squarely within Catholic theology, from Matthew Levering, John Thiel, and Paul Griffiths.²⁹ Central to many of these examples, both Protestant and Catholic, is the

²⁵ Adams, ‘Retrieving the Earth’, p. 117.

²⁶ Adams, ‘Retrieving the Earth’, p. 116.

²⁷ Adams, ‘Retrieving the Earth’, p. 117.

²⁸ Hans Boersma, *The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018); Katherine Sonderegger, ‘Towards a Doctrine of Resurrection’, in *Eternal God, Eternal Life: Theological Investigations into the Concept of Immortality*, ed. Philip G. Ziegler (London: T & T Clark, 2016); Allen, *Grounded in Heaven*.

²⁹ Matthew Levering, *Jesus and the Demise of Death: Resurrection, Afterlife, and the Fate of the Christian* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012); John E. Thiel, *Icons of Hope: The Last Things in Catholic Imagination* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013); Paul J. Griffiths, *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

patient retrieval of the tradition's rich theology of the beatific vision as the highest hope of Christian eschatology. Accompanying this doctrinal republication, and perhaps most arrestingly for contemporary believers, is unembarrassed commendation of 'heavenly-mindedness' as a concomitant virtue and orientation for the spiritual and moral life.³⁰

Importantly, also common to most of the above is the sense that the dogmatic inheritance they are receiving – and, to a greater or lesser degree, self-consciously elaborating upon or extending – consists at its heart in compelling conceptual amplifications of scriptural promises, and perhaps supremely 'the biblical promise that after death believers will see God face-to-face'.³¹ To be sure, none of these projects are flatly exegetical, even as they are all nourished by the Scriptures. They evince various levels and styles of engagement with the philosophical presuppositions of patristic, medieval, reformational, and modern eschatologies (for instance, the authors are more-or-less inclined to explicitly espouse a Christian Platonism within which, for some, the biblical claims might best hang together). But I trust that it should go without saying that none of the authors could accurately be described as exchanging the hope set out in the biblical texts for some kind of ethereal escape of the sort the continuationists often seem to allege.

Certainly, the various projects do perhaps exhibit some differences in how they gesture towards the correlation of the principal theme of communion with God with other eschatological teachings, including the resurrection of the body, the reconciliation of creatures with one another, and the kingdom reign of justice and peace. Significant synthetic questions remain: about the extent to which the transcendent strands knit well with an essentially continuationist account of the life to come; about, for example, whether and how you can or should put such notions of transformation 'within' an overarching motif of restoration (and restoration of what exactly?); or about whether we

³⁰ On which also see, in a Thomist key, David Elliot, *Hope and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³¹ Boersma, *Seeing God*, 4, and see especially footnote 3, which details the many biblical passages that are frequently meditated upon within the patristic and medieval sources central to contemporary efforts at eschatological *ressourcement*.

are permitted to depart a little further from what Allison describes as Wright's 'geocentric faith'.³² Meanwhile, questions will also arise about whether any such tidy synthesis is in itself a fitting goal of theological enquiry into the ineffable mysteries of the eschaton.³³ Of the contemporary systematians adduced above, it is Levering's contribution that perhaps weaves the threads together most tightly, seeking their convergence in a Thomistic tapestry of hope in which 'the vision of God fulfils our embodied life on earth and is profoundly united to bodily resurrection and the new creation of the cosmos.'³⁴ Evidently, with all this in mind, my shorthand of 'continuationist' is not by itself sufficiently fine-grained a category to differentiate perspectives at that further level of possible commitments. We have already seen that Adams among the exegetes would seem to locate the narrative arc of disjunction within a larger story of renewal, though this renewal could not entail simple material perdurance. The same kind of incorporation of themes would hold true for some of our systematic theologians.

What I want to draw particular attention to here, though, is that these dogmatians are not innocent of the development of 'this-worldly' eschatologies in the work of biblical theologians like Wright and Middleton. Rather, while they often acknowledge some of the salutary broader emphases – on the resurrection of the body, say, or the cosmic scope of redemption – their constructive projects are often conceived

³² Allison, *Night Comes*, p. 126.

³³ On the one hand, as magnificent an eschatological vision as that of St Gregory of Nyssa arguably contains within it different strains that are difficult to harmonise with strict analytic precision. There we find discussions that affirm the continuities of the resurrection body quite literalistically; we also encounter meditations that bespeak the unutterable unlikeness of the life of the world to come as they contemplate the journey of the soul into the divine life. According to Rowan Greer, these 'various glimmers Gregory offers as ways of imagining what eye has not seen or ear heard ... are coherent in the sense that they can be regarded as complementary rather than contradictory. But, it seems, their true coherence will become apparent only when human hopes are finally replaced by their fulfilment.' Rowan A. Greer, assisted by J. Warren Smith, *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015), p. 225. The mysteries of the kingdom of God are more gifts to be received, than puzzles to be solved. On the other hand, we should probably seek, on some level, modestly to constellate these different objects of hope's longing with reference to an undergirding dogmatic affirmation that can hold them together – and I would take that anchorage to be, at its core, christological; as directions for this, consider Heb. 13.8 and 1 Jn. 3.2. (I am thinking here of something akin to that which Khaled Anatolios proposes in relation to soteriological motifs, in *Deification through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

³⁴ Levering, *Jesus and the Demise of Death*, p. 125.

in direct and critical dialogue with exactly such voices. As I have intimated, the key charge laid by contemporary systematics at the continuationists' bureau is the one Allen terms 'eschatological naturalism'.³⁵ The biblical theologians, on this view, are much more conditioned than they realise by what Sonderegger in her extraordinary sketch calls 'the modern pre-occupation with this-worldliness'.³⁶

Now, these doctrinal accounts have not, themselves, tended to address the implications of their theological proposals for ecological ethics. Some do gesture towards the import of 'heavenly-mindedness' (Allen's phrase) for the moral life as such; in the title of Christopher Morse's book, to *The Difference Heaven Makes*.³⁷ Remarkably, Griffiths' proposal, *Decreation: the Last Things of All Creatures*, directly courts an eschatologically-inspired quietism – a sensibility decidedly and deliberately opposed to the mainline ecclesial concerns of our time!³⁸ In general, I suppose we might be inclined to urge the systematians to be more concrete in showing us how their constructive visions can orient the struggle to live faithfully here and now. Nevertheless, it is again important to observe that many of these projects are conceived as correctively theocentric and therapeutically anagogical; and as that in a moment where we are susceptible to what Thiel narrates as an 'imaginative reduction' to 'immanentology'.³⁹ As Rowan Greer wrote, the theological productions of our secular age often run 'the risk that the last things ... become no more than a way of talking about the meaning of the here and now'.⁴⁰

We should note one more feature observable in recent theological handling of eschatological themes, and that is the apophatic reserve which marks quite a few projects

³⁵ Allen, *Grounded in Heaven*, p. 7, p. 17.

³⁶ Sonderegger, 'Towards a Doctrine of Resurrection', p. 127.

³⁷ Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as Good News* (London/New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2010). A wise book that could be more widely consulted in this respect is Margaret B. Adam, *Our Only Hope: More than We Can Ask or Imagine* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2014).

³⁸ Griffiths, *Decreation*, Part VII §35, 'Quietus'.

³⁹ Thiel, *Icons of Hope*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Rowan A. Greer, *Christian Hope and Christian Life: Raids on the Inarticulate* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2001), p. 3.

in contemporary systematics.⁴¹ Enquiries into the nature of eschatological transformation are, at present as they are perennially, attended by important disagreements not just about what should be said but about how much can or should be said at all. Plainly, nobody claims that their faltering intellectual approximation of the glories of the life to come arrives at certainty with regard to the exact qualities of the kingdom of heaven. The ‘epistemological chasm’ between Creator and creature that conditions all theological speech⁴² is, if anything, heightened when we turn to the eschatological, peering as we do into ‘a mirror, dimly’ (1 Cor. 13.12). Scripture’s symbolic world does invite us to contemplate a panoply of images, ‘a dizzying array’,⁴³ and the theological imagination can work with these constructively by piecemeal analogical apprehension. Yet we must be cautious about a kind of theological ‘rationalism, submitting to the familiar canons of human reasoning mysteries that lie beyond our fallen experience of space and time’ (Sergius Bulgakov).⁴⁴ Ultimately, as St Macrina says to St Gregory of Nyssa in their dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection*: ‘The truth about this is stored up in the hidden treasury of wisdom and will be disclosed at the time when we are taught the mystery of the resurrection in deed’.⁴⁵ In current theological discourse, there exist palpably divergent perspectives on what would constitute ‘misplaced apophaticism’, on the one hand, or a fitting ‘imaginative restraint’, on the other (so Karen Kilby, in critical conversation with Thiel).⁴⁶

As it happens, and perhaps by comparison with a theologian such as Kilby, most of the doctrinal theologians I have named above seem remarkably sanguine about pursuing what St Maximus the Confessor called ‘good and pious speculation’ or ‘reverent

⁴¹ More broadly, see e.g., E. Jerome Van Kuiken, “‘Ye Worship Ye Know Not What?’ The Apophatic Turn and the Trinity”, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19/4 (2017), pp. 401-420, which explores the work of Sonderegger, Karen Kilby, and Sarah Coakley.

⁴² David Bentley Hart, ‘Creation, God, and Evil: The Moral Meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*’, *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 3/1 (2015), pp. 1-17, p. 6.

⁴³ Boersma, *Seeing God*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 283.

⁴⁵ St Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), p. 113.

⁴⁶ Karen Kilby, ‘Eschatology, Suffering, and the Limits of Theology’, in *Game Over? Reconsidering Eschatology*, ed. Christopher Chalamet et al (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 279-291, p. 280.

conjecture'.⁴⁷ But – and here is the crucial analytical point – none of them seem to do so in the same univocal manner as do the continuationist biblical theologians as regards the familiarities of the new creation. It suffices to say here that some of the continuationist depiction we have touched on may be 'over-luxuriant' in its 'anticipation of the future of the earth' (as Celia Deane-Drummond writes of Moltmann's admittedly fairly different proposals).⁴⁸ And in that sentence we might underscore or italicise *the earth*. It is the over-confidence about this-worldly – meaning in this case *this-earthly* – continuity that is the issue, not necessarily the liveliness of the eschatological imagination as such, or the joyful hope for the full renewal of the cosmos by its Creator.

However we judge such discussions about the legitimacy or otherwise of these various accounts' epistemological confidence, however we might or might not settle the compatibility of various eschatological hopes, whatever taste we have for possible systematic configurations of them⁴⁹ – I suggest that we have seen enough to crystallise a modest but not insignificant conclusion. Namely, that considerations of genuine eschatological discontinuity and transcendence seem to trouble any account that offers a univocal or materially literal notion of a 'world without end'. Just so, it is not sustainable for continuationist accounts to proceed ironclad, oblivious to other exegetical and doctrinal concerns (let alone philosophical or scientific questions, which may outstrip the theological in the strength of their pressure towards the stringently apophatic).⁵⁰ And, to

⁴⁷ See Paul M. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 89.

⁴⁸ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: DLT, 2008), p. 176.

⁴⁹ With particular reference to ecotheology, Ernst Conradie maps four ways in which the connection of the present order to the new creation can be articulated: (i) replacement, (ii) recycling, (iii) restoration, and (iv) elevation. See Ernst M. Conradie, 'What is the Place of the Earth in God's Economy? Doing Justice to Creation, Salvation and Consummation', in *Christian Faith and The Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology*, ed. Ernst M. Conradie et al (London/New York, NY: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), pp. 65-96.

⁵⁰ A whole range of significant considerations present themselves here, in regard to which we might find surprising resonance between the kinds of questions which vexed patristic theologians and those which trouble philosophical theology today. It is intriguing to read Allison's anecdotal account that, when pushed on 'all the old riddles, such as the puzzle of shared matter', Wright in fact 'opined that Origen long ago had solved most of the issues' – 'the great modern apologist for resurrection turned out to be less than a full literalist'! Allison, *Night Comes*, p. 29.

arrive at the particular limited point of my argument in this article, if this is so, then what is often presented as a straightforward moral argument, running something like, 'because the new creation will be this-worldly, we ought to care for it now', will begin to look a little bit more complicated.

Where does all that leave us?

All told, it seems both exegetically and doctrinally responsible to ease apart a little the assumed compact of a particular eschatological construal of this-worldly continuity and a commitment to ecological responsibility. The diversity of scriptural witness; the presence within that testimony of heavenly hopes, not to mention the predication of discontinuous transformation; the extensive elaboration of Scripture's more transcendent themes throughout the Christian tradition; the acknowledgment of the need for some apophatic disciplining of our eschatological imagination: each of these would caution against over-easy contemporary correlation of exegetical position with ethical programme. Yet, if this un-coupling of claims may at first glance seem to threaten a theological rationale for environmental action that many hold dear, on closer inspection it may turn out to be quite helpful.

First, to disentangle the two allows eschatology to take its place within a much wider set of theological commitments that can motivate Christian action on ecological issues, rather than bearing all the weight. These commitments include, of course, the doctrine of creation. But they would also feature the doctrines of sin⁵¹ and providence, as well as the incarnation, and moral teachings such as the preference for the poor. Along with a more subtle grasp of the exegetical issues, then, we need to seek a more sophisticated understanding of the multiplicity of doctrinal wellsprings that can foster ethical responsibility, and which, through worship, prayer, preaching, and so on, can

⁵¹ Conradie notes that the doctrine of sin is a valuable focus because it 'helps, for example, to maintain the primary focus on the anthropogenic causes of ecological destruction'. Conradie, 'the Place of the Earth', p. 92.

imperfectly but genuinely shape the moral affections required for us to act with ecological justice.⁵²

Second, it means that the more transcendent aspects of a full-orbed Christian eschatology – motifs caricatured by the continuationists in their cruder rhetoric as ‘Greek’ corruptions – can be properly contemplated without having at every turn to answer the charge that by meditating on them we are exchanging authentically apostolic hope for ‘gnostic’ flight.⁵³ I would argue that we can hold *both* that the imagination of new creation should inform ethical action in the present, *and* that there are aspects of eschatological – spiritual – longing that cannot be ‘cashed out’ without remainder in ethics and need not issue in a morally deleterious *contemptus mundi*.⁵⁴

And third, it affords the latitude for a theological and moral case to be made for ecological responsibility which can take in not just those who have subscribed to academic (or more likely popularising) accounts of a continuationist kind, but also persuade those whose eschatological imagination encompasses more discontinuous or transcendent elements. In the final section of this essay, then, I want to offer a brief example which demonstrates just such a case.

In this respect, I suggest that we take encouragement from the witness of black theological traditions, as conveyed in the writings of, among others, Howard Thurman and James H. Cone.⁵⁵ I will focus on Cone’s work here, though Thurman’s reflections in

⁵² Barton’s article cited above closes in this vein with case studies of liturgical practices.

⁵³ For a classic and persuasive interrogation of the ‘Hellenisation thesis’, see Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ That is, to comprehend ‘the force of the traditional teaching that in some profoundly important sense, heaven makes no difference whatsoever—and that itself makes all the difference’. So Donald Wood, ‘Response’ [to Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*], *Theology Today* 68/1 (2011), pp. 71-75, p. 73.

⁵⁵ The theme could be explored in relation to many other textual traditions and communities of witness. In his book *Ecologies of Grace*, for instance, Willis Jenkins observes that Anabaptist theology ‘keenly appreciates worldly evil and intensely anticipates a new creation’, but expresses its commitments in ‘Christian communal practices’ that show how ‘nature ... shapes the faithful living of a particular people in a particular place’. This ‘suggests that redemptionist soteriology, even accompanied by strong senses of

Deep River are also highly germane.⁵⁶ Cone wrestles with eschatology throughout his work, and especially in three key earlier books: *A Black Theology of Liberation*, *God of the Oppressed*, and *The Spirituals and the Blues*, where he devotes a chapter to ‘The Meaning of Heaven in the Black Spirituals’.⁵⁷ In what follows I intend to draw out some key features of Cone’s account as they bear on our theme, largely focusing on the latter two texts.

“Over-worldliness” and moral struggle in the present

Addressing the vivid eschatological imagery of the spirituals, Cone wonders frankly what to do with them. As he writes, he is emerging from the imaginative constraints of a world of Protestant scholarship that applied the acids of demythologising to biblical eschatology and had no time for traditional or ‘folk’ expectations of the life to come.⁵⁸ But Cone gains the courage to attend to the songs’ longings on their own terms: ‘the pre-scientific images of heaven in these songs point to a biblical emphasis usually glossed over by New Testament scholars. Black slaves are expressing the Christian contention that the death and resurrection of Christ bestows upon people a freedom that cannot be taken away by oppressors’.⁵⁹ His analysis identifies two main aspects of eschatological belief, each of which he connects to the contemporary struggle for liberation. I suggest that the way he does so holds for us a clue about how we might conceive the compatibility of, and even intimate connection between, our present life of

worldly evil, need not dislocate humanity from nature’. *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford/New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 91-2.

⁵⁶ Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975).

⁵⁷ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010 [fourtieth anniversary edition]); *God of the Oppressed* ([rev. ed.] Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1972).

⁵⁸ It is fascinating to note the extent to which Cone felt he had to reckon here with Bultmann and the German theologians involved in the ‘theology of hope’. For reflections on how he moved on from this intellectual world and developed both his own more integral set of conversation partners and with them his own distinctive theological voice, see James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018).

⁵⁹ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 83.

active witness and our hope for an eschatological future that is ‘more than we can ask or imagine’ (Eph. 3.20).

Heaven functions first of all, Cone observes, as ‘The Transcendent Present’. Here we see the sense in which ‘the spirituals employ eschatological language to express transcendence in the slaves’ present existence – not ‘passively waiting for the future’ but rather ‘actively living as if the future were already present in the community’.⁶⁰ In this aspect, he writes, we find ‘the realized dimensions of God’s eschatological presence’:⁶¹

These songs make clear that the future is not simply a reality to come. It is a reality that has already happened in Jesus’ resurrection, and is present now in the midst of the black struggle for liberation. To accept the future of God as disclosed in the present means that we cannot be content with the present political order. God’s eschatological presence arouses discontentment and makes the present subject to radical change.⁶²

Yet alongside this present aspect, which empowers struggle for liberation here and now in history, there is also what he describes as hope in ‘The Transcendent Future’: ‘the concept of heaven was not exhausted by historical reality or present existence... heaven was also hope in the future of God, an expectation that the contradictions of slavery were not ultimate’.⁶³ Significantly, in elucidating this second aspect Cone quotes 1 John 3.2: “‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is’”. He comments: the ‘not yet affirmed the *novum* of divine presence that was still to come. It was the

⁶⁰ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 83.

⁶¹ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 84.

⁶² Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, pp. 84-5.

⁶³ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 87.

expectation of the future of God, grounded in the resurrection of Jesus'.⁶⁴ 'This hope' is 'in a radically new future, defined solely by God the Liberator'.⁶⁵

He turns to the same biblical text and theme in *God of the Oppressed*: 'There is included in liberation the "not yet," a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. This simply means that the oppressed have a future not made with human hands but grounded in the liberating promises of God. They have a liberation not bound by their own strivings.'⁶⁶ In this book especially, Cone is in dialogue with other discourses of liberation, and realises that for many readers, 'talk about "long white robes" and "golden slippers" in heaven seems to be proof that black religion is an opium of the people'.⁶⁷ He knows that 'white oppressors did preach "pie in the sky" as a means to get black people to accept their exploitation'.⁶⁸ Yet based on his reading of the texts – and their historical subtexts – Cone insists that 'analysis of black eschatology as merely compensatory is too superficial'.⁶⁹ For him, the witness of luminous figures of resistance 'are enough evidence that such language about God and heaven does not always lead to passivity'.⁷⁰ Rather, he writes, "'The home over yonder," vividly and artistically described in the black slave songs, is a gift of divine freedom. If this "over-worldliness" in freedom is not taken with utmost seriousness, then there is no way for the oppressed to be sustained in the struggle against injustice'.⁷¹

We could say more; there is a lot going on in the songs, and in Cone's commentary more broadly. But we have attended to the two key eschatological aspects, and I want to draw particular attention to the profound connection in the second between "over-worldliness" – the hope for a 'radically new future' – and moral struggle in the present. I am cautious about appropriating Cone's summary and theological analysis of the spirituals

⁶⁴ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 88.

⁶⁵ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 88.

⁶⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 168. The allusion to 2 Cor. 5 here is also to the point.

⁶⁷ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 143.

⁶⁸ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 91.

⁶⁹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 169.

⁷⁰ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 170.

⁷¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 170.

tradition, a tradition which is not my own, which originates in situations of suffering that I have not undergone, and which is totally irreducible to its distillation in formal theology. But my reading is based on the conviction that we find here an acute (and hard won) set of insights, which I want to suggest might be taken as a witness the whole church can be instructed by. That is, importantly, not to draw any compassing equivalency between the struggle against racial oppression and the response to ecological crisis, though Cone himself wrote of the need in our understanding to connect ‘racism with the degradation of the earth’.⁷² It is also certainly not to imply that we could easily align Cone’s whole eschatology with the trends in contemporary systematics identified above. For one thing, while he was deliberately addressing doctrinal *loci* in these works, Cone was relating to a different era’s hermeneutical and philosophical assumptions. For another, he can be at times sharply critical of ‘elaborate speculations about the end... Too much of this talk’, he wrote, ‘is not good for the revolution.’⁷³

Nevertheless, I think that Cone’s interpretation, among others, can help us to see that more discontinuous and transcendent imaginaries of the life to come need not undermine action for justice here and now. It is in this focused sense that we can join the thought up with the particular topic of this essay, and extend the argument to ecological justice. And perhaps on the basis of what we have seen, we can also say a little more. Because it is in part precisely the transcendent element of Christian hope that, for many who have engaged in moral struggle, sustains commitment when historical trajectories appear unpromising and prospects of transformation in the present seem bleak. As Cone writes, quoting a spiritual: ‘The courage and the strength to keep on fighting in this world are based on the hope that “de udder worl’ is not like dis.”’⁷⁴ Andrew Prevot’s summary is apt:

⁷² James H. Cone, ‘Whose Earth Is It Anyway?’, *CrossCurrents* 50/1-2 (2000): pp. 36-46. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this reference.

⁷³ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 151.

⁷⁴ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 152. See also p. 140.

Cone's much-needed focus on the historical meaning of eschatology, as expressed in the this-worldly struggle for black liberation, does not prevent him from also hoping for a more absolute form of divine liberation beyond history. In fact, this absolute hope gives courage to those still engaged in the fight.⁷⁵

Transposed to the environmental issue at hand, this seems a timely reminder. In our rapidly out-of-control ecological emergencies, any number of empirical indicators may otherwise invite sheer pessimism, disillusionment, and detachment.

If Cone's concerns about the kinds of speculation that detract from present responsibility may be well taken, he can also help us to see that to 'hold before our eyes the vision of Another World', in the words of Sonderegger, can be part of the solution, not just the problem. She goes on:

Those of us made earnest by the Social Gospel and its allergy to an alienating wish for Heaven, may fear that a longing for Heaven above will cut the nerve to Kingdom work below. But not so! It is the deepening longing for true satisfaction, for Heavenly Rest and redemption, which opens, in truth, our hearts and minds to the longings and miseries of this age.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Altogether, then, I have sought in a limited way to trouble some assumptions about eschatology and ecological responsibility that are abroad in contemporary theology and the church. I trust that it is clear that this exercise of disentanglement is pursued not out of any desire to weaken Christian commitment to ecological action, but – quite the opposite – because of the conviction that we cannot allow Christian response to one of the great challenges of our time to be overly associated with a particular interpretive agenda, and thereby a hostage to critical exegetical fortune or ignored by those whose

⁷⁵ Andrew Prevot, *Theology and Race: Black and Womanist Traditions in the United States* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), p. 23.

⁷⁶ Sonderegger, 'Towards a Doctrine of Resurrection', p. 127.

eschatological imagination is formed otherwise. Whatever the attractions of the line of reasoning that ‘this-worldly hope = present responsibility’, we cannot allow our moral witness to be governed by pure pragmatics, but instead must maintain our pursuit, however uncomfortable, of theological integrity.⁷⁷ And we must trust that it is the truest grasp of the Lord’s promises that will prove most generative for our ethics in the long run; ‘since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness’ (2 Cor. 3.12).

⁷⁷ By analogy, I am reminded of hearing about a group of moral theologians who, allegedly, knew that the stronger forms of ‘social trinitarianism’ were now seen to be untenable within historical and systematic theology, but who admitted employing such models in their political and ethical thought because of the expedience of the ideas in generating attractive practical proposals. Let’s not make the same mistake in eschatology.



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