ARTICLE

The Kinship of Creation: An Anabaptist Ecological Anthropology

Nathanael L. Inglis

Introduction

There is a growing consensus today that the earth is facing an ecological crisis, and that human action is one of the primary causes.[1] However, there is more to this crisis than just the practical concerns of overconsumption, population growth, polluted air and water, the destruction of ecosystems, and the extinction of species. What humanity faces is a more fundamental crisis of self-understanding. In this essay I will critically compare and evaluate assumptions about the human-world relationship inherent in two contemporary theological anthropologies that rely on very different metaphors. Both anthropologies attempt to correct the dominion-based 'imperialistic anthropology' that continues to enable the ecological crisis.

In "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," Walter Klaassen identifies two largely unquestioned assumptions in Western industrial culture that order people's relationship to the world and to one another, which he sees as obstacles to solving the crisis. The first is the "passionate belief in the absolute right to private possessions," and the second is "the conviction of the unimpeded right to pursue wealth."[2] These two beliefs are made possible by and reinforced with "a trick of the mind devised by Western philosophy in which human beings are set over against

[1] Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, et al., "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (December 2007): 614-21. Steffen, Crutzen, and other environmental scientists identify human activity as such a significant factor in the transformation of ecosystems and climate today that they suggest our current geologic age should be called the 'anthropocene'.

[2] Walter Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed. Calvin Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000), 141.

The Conrad Grebel Review 30, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 162-187.

the world in which they live, making them the detached, subjective observers of objective nature and then taking a further step away in denying human kinship with the rest of creation."[3] The paradigm that Klaassen describes has become, in practice if not always in theory, the Western world's dominant anthropology.[4]

This dominion-based view of humanity is what I call an 'imperialistic anthropology' because it envisions human beings as the unaccountable rulers or monarchs over the rest of the natural world. It regards humanity in anthropocentric terms, maintaining a hierarchical dualism between human beings and the rest of creation. Anthropocentrism privileges human life, qualities, and experiences over other forms of life. It is a type of hierarchical dualism, which Elizabeth Johnson defines as "a pattern of thought and action that (1) divides reality into two separate and opposing spheres, and (2) assigns a higher value to one of them."[5] Imperialistic anthropology begins with human interests, defining and valuing other creatures to the degree that they are useful. Non-human creatures are treated either as property or as natural resources, while humans are rewarded for pursuing their own self-interest at the expense of others.

The ecologically destructive patterns of thought and action characterizing an imperialistic anthropology have far-reaching implications, particularly from a theological viewpoint. Klaassen proposes that the destruction of 'nature' is intrinsically bound to a degraded understanding of 'human nature.' As he somewhat provocatively explains it, "God comes to us here in [North] America with his truth to lay bare the terrible travesty we have made of human nature. . . . Human beings have been degraded from being created in the image of God, with all the richness and potential that implies, into consumers."[6] Klaassen affirms that the ecological crisis is in part a problem of human self-understanding. How we relate to the natural world depends greatly upon what we believe our nature and destiny to be—on our theological anthropology.

---

[3] Ibid.

[4] By 'anthropology' I mean the way individuals, cultures, or religions understand who they are as human beings, why they are here, and how they relate to the rest of the natural world.

[5] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 10.

[6] Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," 152.

Likewise, Carl Keener, a biologist and process theologian working in the Mennonite tradition, agrees that our problem with respect to nature is one of self-understanding. He suggests that what may be needed is

> a new root metaphor enabling us to focus our energies toward a more humane village ... a paradigmatic shift leading to a different outlook concerning the cosmos. All of us think and act and make moral decisions from within the context of some worldview, some overarching perspective, and it's my hope we can reflect thoughtfully on what such a perspective might be if Homo sapiens is to survive the 21st century.[7]

Like paradigm shifts in scientific inquiry, which occur when aging theories that can no longer make sense of emerging data are replaced by new ones, Keener suggests that the metaphors that Christians have used in the past to make sense of human life on earth may no longer be best suited to make sense of human experience today. In light of the ecological crisis, it is important for theologians and Christian communities at least to critically evaluate the inherent assumptions about the human relationship to the rest of the world in the anthropological metaphors they adopt.

Similar to Klaassen and Keener, historian Lynn White makes the connection between how we understand ourselves and how we treat our environment:[8]

> What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.... More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.[9]

---

[7] Carl S. Keener, "Aspects of a Postmodern Paradigm for an Ecological Age," in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, 1996), 116.

[8] Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (10 March 1967): 1203-07. Some ecofeminist theologians have also notably made the connection between anthropology and ecology, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

[9] White, "Historical Roots," 1205-06.

Identifying religion as a primary cultural influence on human self-understanding, White doubts that technology alone can save us from ecological disaster as long as a key driving force behind the crisis remains unchanged. For instance, if basic assumptions about the human place and purpose in the world are not transformed, no number of electric cars or composting toilets will help, since we cannot buy our way out of an overconsumption problem. Instead, by identifying in theological anthropology a link between how people see themselves and how they treat the environment, White argues that the crisis will not be averted until people begin to reevaluate how they understand human nature and destiny.

In related ways, Klaassen, Keener, and White each recognize that our ideas have functional value. The anthropological metaphors we adopt make a difference in how we live in the world, treat other creatures, and respond to the environmental crisis.

Theological Anthropologies and Metaphors

The first alternative to imperialistic anthropology I will consider is 'stewardship anthropology,' which imagines human beings as managers of property. As stewards over the earth, we humans have been given the special duty to care for and protect God's creation; we are not to use it or abuse it indiscriminately. The appeal of stewardship anthropology to some Christians is that it appears to be consistent with an understanding of God's will drawn from the Genesis creation accounts. However, by envisioning humans as property managers, stewardship focuses on human difference as a starting point for reflecting on our responsibilities toward other life. Stewardship is a metaphor that makes only superficial changes to the imperialistic human-world paradigm.

The second alternative relies on the metaphor of 'kinship,' which imagines all of life on earth as one extended genetic family. Taking inspiration from modern scientific insights about humanity's deep interconnection with the natural world, 'kinship anthropology' focuses on the many things we share in common with the rest of creation, rather than the few characteristics that make us distinct. Kinship is a metaphor that offers the prospect of expanding the Christian imagination to see the entire world as a community

of relations.[10]

Anabaptist communities have had differing degrees of environmental consciousness and ways of interacting with the land they live on. Of course, as Heather Ann Ackley Bean notes, "historically, environmental issues as we understand them today were not an Anabaptist priority (which is also true for most other Christian traditions)."[11] As people of their time and place, Anabaptists have often reflected broader social norms in their environmental values. Thus, their understanding of how humans should relate to the earth has evolved over time. Today, many Anabaptist communities, along with other Christians, appeal to stewardship anthropology as the right framework for promoting ecological responsibility. I suggest, however, that kinship anthropology is a better alternative for an Anabaptist ecological anthropology today.

For many Anabaptists, life finds its fullest expression in loving community, and thus their anthropology has often valued human relatedness and mutual dependence over individualism or separation. Kinship is a metaphor that, unlike stewardship, shares with Anabaptist anthropology these common assumptions about human relatedness to, and interdependence with, others. I will seek to show how the kinship metaphor not only is more consistent with the current scientific worldview but is also a natural extension of the Anabaptist emphasis on the fundamentally relational character of human nature.[12]

---

[10] For the categories of stewardship and kinship I am indebted to Elizabeth A. Johnson's argument in *Women, Earth, and Creator Sprit*.

[11] Heather Ann Ackley Bean, "Toward an Anabaptist/Mennonite Environmental Ethic," in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 183.

[12] Although this essay relies primarily on contemporary Mennonite scholars as sources, I use the more inclusive terms 'Anabaptist' and 'Anabaptism' when referring to the theological concepts and traditions that I draw from them. I recognize that the terms 'Anabaptist' and 'Mennonite' do not always equate, and that each term refers not to a single tradition but to an overlapping constellation of 'traditions' that have a rich diversity of belief and practice, from their 16th-century beginnings onward. However, I still find the usage of 'Anabaptist' to be appropriate, because the values and beliefs about humanity which I discuss are largely shared across present-day groups who identify as 'Anabaptist' (this includes, for example, Anabaptist-Mennonites but also the Anabaptist-Pietist descendants of the Schwarzenau Brethren, such as 'The Church of the Brethren'), and is thus relevant to the wider Anabaptist theological conversation.

Beyond a Romanticized Vision of Anabaptist Stewardship

The cultivation and farming of land is an occupation practiced by most Anabaptists to some degree until relatively recently.[13] Like every other area of life in many traditional Anabaptist communities, "no distinctions were made between secular and sacred work, [and] the plowing of the fields or assembling for worship" were each given spiritual meaning.[14] Especially now that fewer North Americans have any first-hand experience of farming, there is a tendency to romanticize traditional farmers as being 'closer to the land' and therefore more concerned about environmental preservation.

However, in his essay entitled "The Quiet of the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography," Royden Loewen challenges the idea that closeness to the land or communitarian values naturally go hand-in-hand with environmental concern. He draws upon a wide spectrum of the Mennonite tradition, specifically literature, poetry, and the local histories of farmers. His study shows that the environmental track record of Mennonite farming communities has been ambiguous, often reflecting norms and values of their time and place.[15] Local Mennonite histories, for instance, often contained contradictory accounts of "an affection for the environment and also a determination to 'subdue' it," both of which they understood to be consistent with their faith.[16]

In his comparative study of mid-20th century Mennonite farming communities in Kansas and British Honduras (now Belize), Loewen observes that while the Kansans were more individualistic – holding private property and increasing landholdings – they were deeply concerned with the health of the soil. Mennonites in British Honduras, by contrast, eschewed private property and put restrictions on social mobility, yet had little regard for the

---

[13] For instance, on changes in North American Mennonite demographics see Leo Driedger, "Alert Opening and Closing: Mennonite Rural-Urban Changes," *Rural Sociology* 60, no. 2 (1995): 323-32.

[14] Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 120.

[15] Royden Loewen, "The Quiet of the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 160-61; see also Ackley Bean, "Toward an Anabaptist/Mennonite Environmental Ethic," 186-90, where she describes several ways that the behavior of North American Anabaptists toward the environment have been inconsistent.

[16] Loewen, "Quiet of the Land," 157.

ecosystem that they clear-cut and bulldozed to create additional farmland.[17] Even in the Kansans' case, however, the interest in soil conservation was far from selfless.

In Kansas land was commodified and only available to a declining breed of successful farmers, some well-to-do from oil and gas discoveries and others from irrigated land. In British Honduras land was seen as a divine gift for the procurement of communitarian humility. Both places sought to profit from the cultivation of land, but because the profits were envisioned for different purposes – varying combinations of individual status and communitarian solidarity – the environment was also eventually considered in diverse ways.[18]

Loewen's point is that while these two communities related to their environments differently, they both prized their land mainly in terms of its profitability. The land was valued and protected not for its own sake but to the degree that it was useful to them. They did not seem to imagine the natural world as having an intrinsic value of its own.

The slash-and-burn agricultural practices of Mennonite farmers in Belize may especially strike people today as indicating a lack of concern for the environment. However, in a context in which humans had relatively little power over the natural world, they interpreted their subdual of nature as an act of faith. Loewen explains:

> Each of these communities pressed the land to yield a bounty and linked agriculture with the creation of order in nature, with the drawing of straight lines on the land. Huge effort was expended on semi-arid plain, intemperate prairie, or cleared jungle in the building of roads, fences and garden rows along cardinal points, thus giving testimony to Yi-Fu Tuan's observation elsewhere that social "harmony was ... believed to be a fruit ... of 'order on the land.'"[19]

In both of these contexts, Mennonite farmers saw their systematic subdual of wilderness into orderly and usable farmland as an authentic form

---

[17] Ibid., 160.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

of Christian stewardship.

Like Loewen, Walter Klaassen contends there is no intrinsic connection between the agricultural history of Anabaptists and what today we might consider to be an ecological consciousness. He notes that early Anabaptists became farmers not out of concern for the land, or even out of choice; instead, as a persecuted group, they farmed out of economic necessity. In fact, Anabaptism began as a largely urban movement. "It was the need to survive and not love of the land that produced the expertise and care of the land for which Mennonites became famous."[20] The need to survive continues to drive Anabaptist farming practices in large part today. Describing the current state of farming, Michael L. Yoder observes that for modern North American farmers, including Mennonites,

> [t]he pressure is to 'get big or get out.' Farmers can no longer treat farming simply as a way of life…. Farming has become a business, often a cutthroat business as farmers compete against each other to buy or rent more land, raising prices for both to uneconomic levels…. [In order to stay competitive,] farmers, Mennonite as well as non-Mennonite, have gradually become dependent on the technology of the modern world.[21]

Loewen, Klaassen, and Yoder demonstrate that the Anabaptist understanding of how humans should relate to the earth has evolved over time, and has varied according to the context and needs of particular communities. In each case, however, the survival of the community or the profitability of the land (two outcomes that are often related), took precedence over any additional concern or affection for the well-being of the environment for its own sake.

Loewen shows that while Anabaptist communities have displayed a certain degree of consciousness about responsibility toward the land, with some having "affection for the environment" or concern for the health of the soil, this sense of being 'good stewards' has not been consistently defined. At times, it has even resulted in behavior – such as the methodical destruction

[20] Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," 142.

[21] Michael L. Yoder, "Mennonites, Economics, and the Care of Creation," in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 74-75.

of ecosystems to bring them under human control as arable farmland – that appears more consistent with imperialist anthropology. Loewen's study does not seek to portray these particular groups as 'bad environmentalists,' but it does demonstrate the deep-seated ambiguity at the heart of stewardship anthropology itself, which points to one of its major limitations for addressing the ecological crisis today. Stewardship anthropology, like imperialist anthropology, is still inherently anthropocentric. If this anthropocentrism remains unrecognized, Anabaptists today who identify as stewards of the environment will have difficulty altering the power dynamic that continues to tacitly justify ecological irresponsibility.

Promise and Limitations of Stewardship Anthropology

Stewardship is a biblical motif that has broader application than just our relationship to the environment. Christians have perennially drawn upon notions of stewardship to encourage one another to live generously in the world, using their talents, resources, and social privileges in service to others rather than for personal ambition. In his study of biblical stewardship, Milo Kauffman suggests that stewardship consists of

> a special relationship between man and his God. God richly bestows upon man personality, abilities, and possessions and holds him responsible for their use. He is to use them to promote God's interests in the world…. A steward is entrusted with the possessions of another and manages them according to the will of the owner.[22]

While the term 'stewardship' is not commonly used in the Bible, the sentiment – what you have is not your own, it has been entrusted to you for the good of all – runs throughout, from the Garden of Eden to the parables of Jesus.[23]

In light of today's emerging ecological crisis, many concerned Christians, including Anabaptists, who are seeking greater theological justification to care for the earth are turning to stewardship anthropology. Christian portrayals of environmental stewardship differ, but they are

[22] Milo Kauffman, *Stewards of God* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1975), 19.

[23] Ibid., 20-21.

typically a variation on themes drawn from the Genesis creation accounts, in particular from Genesis 1:26-28:

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and 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, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (NRSV)

Working with concepts like the image of God, human dominion, and subdual of the earth, stewardship anthropology is often explained along these lines: Human beings were created uniquely in God's image and put in charge of this world. Although God gave humankind dominion over the world and commanded us to subdue it, we are not to live like gods or kings on Earth, doing with it whatever we want. Instead, God calls humanity to a loving and wise dominion, deputizing us to govern the world not according to our own will but in conformity to God's own heart. God created the world, saw that it was good, and intends for us as stewards to keep it that way, tending the garden and allocating the resources of the Earth for the benefit of all. Misusing the Earth's resources is a sin, since it goes against God's intention for the world.[24]

The influence of stewardship anthropology is evident in the 1994 Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) statement on the environment, "Stewards in God's Creation":

> We believe that human beings have been created good and have been called to glorify God, to live in peace with each other, and

[24] Cf. Ibid., 96-98, 109-10; and Pope John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility" in *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment,* ed. Drew Christiansen and Walter Grazer (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), 216-17 on two characteristic examples of 'stewardship anthropology' from a Mennonite and a Catholic perspective.

> to *watch over the rest of creation*. We gratefully acknowledge that God has created human beings in the divine image and has given the entire human family a *special dignity among all the works of creation*.[25]

Recognizing the extent to which human action is causing harm to the planet, the MCC draws upon stewardship anthropology to emphasize human *protection* of the natural world rather *dominion* over it. As Klaassen notes, Mennonites are beginning to recognize that 'the peaceful reign of God' is not limited to human relations but extends to the whole of creation.[26] By connecting our responsibility to 'watch over' the earth with our 'special dignity,' the MCC statement focuses on what makes us distinct from other creatures as the basis for understanding our relationship to the natural world. It is because of our 'special dignity' that we have been given a special purpose. This line of reasoning, with its focus on human uniqueness, is typical of stewardship anthropology.

Although the language of stewardship has had some success in motivating churches and individuals to take greater responsibility for how they live, it has significant shortcomings.

The goal of most Christians who promote stewardship is to encourage people to protect rather than exploit the earth, but stewardship anthropology is unable to fully realize this vision because it views the world anthropocentrically, maintaining a strict hierarchical dualism that imagines humans to be distinct from, and superior to, the rest of the created order.

As Milo Kauffman defines stewardship, a human steward is someone who manages another person's property. As a metaphor for our relationship to the natural world, our fellow creatures are 'owned' by God and our job is to 'manage' them. If we are the ones responsible for managing creation, then stewardship anthropology, no less than dominion-based imperialistic anthropology, is premised on a hierarchical dualism despite its best intentions. The rest of creation is thought of as property, which has instrumental value, and humans are thought of as persons, who have intrinsic value. It is also hierarchical because it claims that humans have been invested by God

[25] Mennonite Central Committee, "Stewards in God's Creation," in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 218. Emphasis added.

[26] Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," 143.

with power over the rest of creation. Although it has softer edges than the imperialist model that it tries to correct, it still focuses on human differences from other creatures rather than similarities as the motivating factor for concern for the world.[27]

Stewardship anthropology sometimes sees humans as servants of God and sometimes as servants of creation, but in either case it hides the fact that our relationships to other creatures are defined in terms of our privileged status. A similar tension arises in discussions of church leadership. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains:

> Insofar as ecclesial relationships are structured and conceptualized in such a way that the church, clergy, religious, and men still remain the defining subjects, a servant ecclesiology deceptively claims service and servanthood precisely for those who have patriarchal-hierarchical status and exercise spiritual power and control…. As long as actual power relationships and status privileges are not changed, a theological panegyric of service must remain a mere moralistic sentiment and a dangerous rhetorical appeal that mystifies structures of domination."[28]

The same logic holds true in our relationship to the world. As long as it is structured and conceptualized so that humans remain the defining subjects, stewardship deceptively claims servanthood for those who already have hierarchical status, power, and control. We can call ourselves stewards or servants, but the fact remains: if we consider humanity to be separate from and superior to the rest of creation, the power dynamic contributing to the ecological crisis will continue to operate, since it is far too easy to equate human self-interest with divine intent.

---

[27] Ibid., 30; Ackley Bean, in "Toward an Anabaptist/Mennonite Environmental Ethic," 185, argues that the lack of focus on the non-human world in the Anabaptist theology has not been an accident. Instead, it is the inevitable consequence of a tradition of anthropological reflection that focused on the human domination of nature in Genesis 1, rather than the Genesis 2 account that imagines humans as the servants of creation.

[28] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesiology of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 301. On power relations in the Mennonite church, see Dorothy Yoder Nyce and Lynda Nyce, "Mennonite Ecclesiology: A Feminist Perspective," in *Power, Authority and the Anabaptist Tradition*, ed. Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin W. Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 155-73.

In addition to maintaining that power dynamic, stewardship anthropology prevents us from seeing reality as it is. It overlooks the important fact that it is not simply human beings who steward the earth. More accurately, the earth stewards us. Trees are an obvious example. Elizabeth Johnson notes that, biologically, trees do not need humans to steward them – they thrived for millions of years before humans even came on the scene. Rather, humans are biologically dependent on trees: without them we could not breathe. So, she asks, "who then needs whom more? By what standard do human beings say that they are more important than trees?" [29] Fixating on humanity's unique and privileged status, stewardship anthropology cannot adequately appreciate the reality that humans are a part of creation and all of creation is deeply interdependent.

The stewardship metaphor fails to visualize our profound dependence on other life forms and thus cannot fully articulate our relational responsibilities toward them. While the isolated Belize community described by Loewen interpreted the world through the lens of Christian stewardship, it also struggled to survive in the jungle during the mid-20th century. Given the community's cultural context and influences, this was perhaps their only viable option. However, the reality of the collective impact of human actions on the environment today paints a very different picture. Humans are just one species sharing a fragile planet that, through our own willful exploitation or uninformed good intentions, we have consistently mismanaged. This reality not only poses an ethical challenge to consider the global consequences of our way of life but calls for a new theological interpretation of humanity's place and purpose within God's creation.

Kinship as an Ecological Anthropology

A theological anthropology based on the kinship metaphor begins not by reflecting on what makes humans different from other creatures but by emphasizing the many more ways we are related to, and an integral part of, the earthly biosphere. By adopting insights from the physical sciences about the nature of the universe, the earth, and our place within them, theologians Gordon Kaufman and Elizabeth Johnson suggest that interdependence rather than separation is a better starting point for understanding humanity's place

[29] Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 31.

in the world. They both propose versions of kinship anthropology as a root metaphor for interpreting the human-world relationship.

Kaufman argues that a viable theological anthropology cannot be at odds with the best science of the day.[30] As he says in his major work, *In Face of Mystery*: "We will come much closer to articulating the fundamental assumptions about the nature of the human which are widely accepted today if we speak of our interconnectedness and interdependence with all other forms of life . . . and of our cultural creativity in history, producing a thoroughly cultural form of existence."[31] Thus, he proposes a "biohistorical" understanding of human beings as creatures who relate to one another and experience the world within interrelated biological and historical spheres.

That humans are biological should come as no surprise. Yet Kaufman points out that much of the theological and cultural history of the West holds a dissenting opinion, focusing on human distinctiveness from the biological world rather than rootedness in it. This idea is symbolized in the dualistic concept of a soul that is separable and essentially superior to the physical body. Kaufman insists that if Christian theology is to make sense of the human place in the world as it is understood today, the idea of a discontinuity between the psyche and the body or humans and the world is no longer intelligible.[32] As he summarizes: "This intrinsic interconnection of world and human is one of the most fundamental conceptual presuppositions of

[30] While some Mennonite theologians do not view Gordon Kaufman's work as "Mennonite" theology, others do. For instance, see A. James Reimer, "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 33-55. Reimer, while skeptical of Kaufman's theological method, recognizes that Kaufman's work stands in continuity with the prophetic and ethical dimensions of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. See also Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1996), in which a variety of Mennonite theologians engage Kaufman's work as Mennonite theology. Regardless of one's views on Kaufman as a specifically Mennonite or Anabaptist theologian, my primary reason for engaging his work in this section, along with the work of Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson, is because of their thoughtful contributions to the dialogue between theology and science.

[31] Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 109.

[32] Ibid., 107.

our modern experience and knowledge."[33]

As significant and fundamental as biological life is for conceiving our place in the world, according to Kaufman human biology can never be understood apart from cultural life, nor history apart from genetics. As a species, he argues, we were bio-historical from our very beginnings; human beings could not have existed without a shared symbol system.

> In certain respects, the growth of culture—including an increasingly flexible and complex language, new forms of social organization … increasing use of tools, and so on—itself shaped the biological development of the predecessors of *Homo sapiens* over some millions of years…. So the biological organism that finally developed as human was 'both a cultural and a biological product.'[34]

Kaufman's biohistorical anthropology offers a viable alternative to the anthropocentric hierarchical dualism at the heart of both imperialistic and stewardship anthropologies. Instead of existing as if human life on earth is just a temporary stopover, Kaufman argues that human nature is itself the result of a deep evolutionary process of bio-historical development. Human history and biology cannot be separated, since they have each been indelibly shaped by the influence of the other.[35]

Elizabeth Johnson, in *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, also makes the case that kinship anthropology better matches the scientific-evolutionary world-picture than a stewardship approach. Discoveries in astrophysics, evolutionary biology, and quantum physics all point to a fundamental truth: "mutual interrelatedness is inscribed at the heart of all reality."[36] For example, we are genetic relatives to all other life on earth: "the genetic structure of cells in our bodies is remarkably similar to the cells in other creatures, bacteria, grasses, fish, horses, the great gray whales. We have all evolved from common ancestors and are kin in this shared, unbroken genetic history."[37] We are literally one extended family; our history as a species is part of the larger

[33] Ibid., 115.
[34] Ibid., 116.
[35] Ibid., 117.
[36] Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 32.
[37] Ibid., 35.

history of the planet along with the rest of the life on it.

We are not only related to the earth. We are also a dynamic part of the wider universe as a whole, since all the heavy elements comprising our bodies are products of the explosion of distant stars billions of years ago. "A crucial insight emerges from [the scientific] story of cosmic and biological evolution," says Johnson. "The kinship model of humankind's relation to the world is not just a poetic, good-hearted way of seeing things but the basic truth. We are connected in a most profound way to the universe, having emerged from it."[38] All of life on earth comes from the same source and our fates are intertwined. Thus, our relationship with other kinds of life is most accurately described by a familial metaphor like kinship.[39]

Johnson insists that even human intelligence and free will, two concepts which Christians have traditionally used to stress humanity's distinctiveness, need not be taken as setting us apart from or above nature. "Human spirit expressed in self-consciousness and freedom is not something new added to the universe from outside," she explains. "Rather, it is a sophisticated evolutionary expression of the capacity for self-organization and creativity inherent in the universe itself. . . . This makes us distinct but not separate, a unique strand in the cosmos, yet still a strand of the cosmos."[40] Summing up her version of kinship anthropology, Johnson advocates for a concern for creation grounded in what we have in common:

> If separation is not the ideal but connection is; if dualism is not the ideal but the relational embrace of diversity is; if hierarchy is not the ideal but mutuality is, then the kinship model more closely approximates reality. It sees human beings and the earth with all its creatures intrinsically related as companions in a community of life. Because we are all mutually interconnected, the flourishing or damaging of one ultimately affects all. This kinship attitude does not measure differences on a scale of higher or lower ontological dignity bur appreciates them as integral elements in the robust thriving of the whole.[41]

[38] Ibid., 34.
[39] Ibid., 31.
[40] Ibid., 38.
[41] Ibid., 30.

In kinship anthropology, then, the presumption of anthropocentrism is replaced by biocentrism. Instead of assigning mere instrumental value to other creatures, biocentric kinship recognizes that other species, which have themselves evolved over countless millennia, possess intrinsic value. Moreover, unlike the stewardship approach, kinship anthropology recognizes humanity's place within a larger ecosystem, focusing on the many qualities that we share. What makes us unique or distinctive need not negate the value or unique qualities of other species. Thus, in kinship anthropology, hierarchy and dualism are replaced by a humble appreciation for the stunningly diverse but nonetheless interconnected family of creation, with all the relational responsibilities that this entails.[42]

Kinship and Anabaptist Relational Anthropology

Kinship anthropology not only is more consistent with the scientific worldview than stewardship but also offers a clearer way to make sense of the intuitions and impulses that many contemporary Anabaptists already have toward the environment, by graciously widening the boundaries of community to include all the creatures calling earth their home. As Klaassen suggests, "We are co-creatures with animals and trees, water and air, and cannot exist independently. If this understanding has not been part of our Anabaptist heritage from the beginning, we have the opportunity to make it part of our tradition and part of the tradition of Christian faith now, in our own time."[43] In light of the ecological crisis, he challenges Anabaptists to explore the possibility of adopting a new perspective toward the rest of creation.

However, this does not mean abandoning core beliefs or introducing new ones. Instead, it means looking deeply into the principles that Anabaptists already hold and applying them more holistically to one's entire way of living in the world. The challenge is to consider how traditional ways of practicing the faith can be enriched as they are applied to include the natural world. Doing so, I contend, reveals that even if it has not always been the case historically, the relational anthropology of the Anabaptist tradition is more at home theologically with kinship anthropology than with stewardship

[42] Ibid., 38.

[43] Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," 153.

anthropology.

Kinship is a relational metaphor that shares common assumptions with Anabaptist anthropology, which tends to value human relatedness and mutual dependence over individualism or separation. From an Anabaptist perspective you cannot understand the nature or purpose of humanity merely by focusing on isolated individuals. To be fully human is to be in relationship with others. While this idea is not unique to Anabaptism, it is distinctive. Robert Friedmann summarizes this deeply relational anthropology as follows:

> [In Anabaptism] the thesis is accepted that *man cannot come to God except together with his brother*. In other words, the brother, the neighbor, constitutes an essential element of one's personal redemption…. To him brotherhood is not merely an ethical adjunct to Christian theological thinking but an integral condition for any genuine restoration of God's image in man…. It has always been claimed that the brotherhood-church (*Gemeinde*) served a central function within Anabaptism. The reason for this was apparently that only in the *Gemeinde* can the believer apply Christian love in action. Only here can the believer realize his convictions that he cannot come to God in good conscience except with his brother. (Friedmann's italics)[44]

Many Anabaptists, both past and present, have understood that humans were created by God to be in relationship with others, and, as Friedmann points out, even the image of God is reflected not in individuals alone but people together in loving communities. Salvation too is understood in communal terms. As J. Denny Weaver says, "reconciliation between individuals belongs as much to the essence of salvation as does reconciliation to God, and the two dimensions exist together inseparably."[45] C. Norman Kraus concurs, noting that "in the traditional Mennonite understanding, salvation was experienced as a belonging to, and relationship in, the religious community."[46] Thus, for Anabaptists, salvation can never be spiritualized or

[44] Friedmann, *Theology of Anabaptism*, 81.

[45] J. Denny Weaver, "Becoming Anabaptist-Mennonite: The Contemporary Relevance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4 (1986): 173.

[46] C. Norman Kraus, "Toward a Theology for the Disciple Community," in *Kingdom, Cross and*

abstracted from real relationships to others.

As has long been recognized, human life is characterized by a network of relationships. People may find themselves in loving or destructive relationships. Many will have friends and some will have enemies, but regardless of the quality of the relationship, relating to others is an inescapably human condition. Believing that if people find themselves in favorable circumstances they can live righteous lives, Anabaptists have often attempted to create communities that prioritize right relationships between people through service to one another.[47] Focusing on Mennonite communities, Joseph Smucker observes that

> [t]raditionally, and expressed in ideal terms, Mennonites have believed that the religious life can be practiced only within a community where self-will is submerged. The rules of behavior … are designed to achieve a loving brotherhood rather than personal holiness. Such aims are, of course, antithetical to individualism. Seen in this light, the concept of 'community' demands 'service' of the individual. Thus, one's occupation should express service to the community. Through hard work, a community member demonstrates a greater concern for others than for self…. One's occupation is not to be pursued in order to gain personal wealth, power, or prestige but to benefit the community as a whole.[48]

This aversion to individualism is rooted in the recognition that we are each deeply dependent on others for our being and well-being. Harold Bauman writes that while individuals freely enter into the community of believers, they do so with the understanding that each person will be responsible for the well-being of all others. He suggests that "the church is a covenant community of mutual responsibility. . . . Such a covenant is based upon the priesthood of all believers: each person is a minister for every other person. There is an interdependence upon one another which grows out of

---

Community: Essays on Mennonite Themes in Honor of Guy F. Hershberger, ed. John Richard Burkholder and Calvin Redekop (Scottdale, PA, Herald Press, 1976), 110-11.

[47] Friedmann, *Theology of Anabaptism*, 61-74.

[48] Joseph Smucker, "Religious Community and Individualism: Conceptual adaptations by one group of Mennonites," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25, no. 3 (1986): 274.

an intimate caring, prompted by the love shed abroad by the Holy Spirit."[49] In communities like those described by Smucker and Bauman, interdependence is cultivated in order to strengthen relational ties, and equality is defined in terms of one's responsibilities to the community.

As these sources indicate, a common feature of Anabaptist anthropological reflection is an emphasis on the relational nature of human beings. This focus has motivated historical and contemporary Anabaptist communities to experiment with (if not always achieve) forms of communitarianism, mutual interdependence, and egalitarianism in responsibilities, under the principle that everyone is accountable for the needs of all others.[50] According to this relational anthropology, the key to human fulfillment and the medium of salvation is taking responsibility to live in right relationships with others, even by loving enemies and strangers, who do not or cannot reciprocate.

Kinship as an *Anabaptist* Ecological Anthropology

Anabaptist theological reflection has a lot to say about community, but its scope is often limited to the church, the *community of believers*. What relevance, then, does Anabaptist communal anthropology have in relation to the rest of our human and extra-human kin, especially in light of the ecological crisis? J. Denny Weaver provides a partial answer, suggesting that

> [w]hen envisioning society as a whole, the communal component of the Anabaptist tradition provides an alternative to . . . individualism. . . . The believing community should remind the broader society as a whole of the humanity of all individuals, and should testify that the justice of a society is measured by how it treats the powerless rather than the powerful. The communal-oriented church calls attention to the common good, and to the solidarity of the human race.[51]

This vision of human community is inspiring as far as it goes, but I

[49] Harold E. Bauman, "Forms of Covenant Community," in Burkholder and Redekop, *Kingdom, Cross and Community,* 123-24.

[50] Despite the ideal of equality, the exercise of power in leadership has rarely been egalitarian in practice. This has especially been true for women. See note 28 above.

[51] Weaver, "Becoming Anabaptist-Mennonite," 174.

suggest that the awareness of human interdependence with all life on earth made possible by kinship anthropology allows an expansion of Weaver's principle to creation as a whole. If the believing community is to bear witness to the 'humanity of all individuals,' then it can also bear witness to the intrinsic value of all creation. If the community should testify that 'the justice of a society is measured by how it treats the power*less*,' then this also includes other creatures, many of whom today are at our mercy. As Sallie McFague says, "Christians are those who should love the oppressed, the most vulnerable of God's creation, for these are the ones according to the Gospel who deserve priority.... [N]ature can be seen as the 'new poor,' not the poor that crowds out the human poor, but the 'also' poor; and as such it demands our attention and care."[52] Kinship anthropology recognizes that the common good of humanity cannot be separated from the common good of all who live on our planet, and solidarity can extend even to those not of our species.

While Weaver expands the boundaries of Anabaptist relational anthropology to other humans, Calvin Redekop, in his essay "Toward a Mennonite Theology and Ethic of Creation," considers what relevance it might have to all our kin on earth. With respect to other humans outside the faith community, he says that "Shalom cannot be limited to life within the congregation, the outpost of the kingdom of God; it must permeate the larger community. It means that Christians will work there for the community and creative well-being that is already being achieved in the church."[53] He draws a clear analogy between the reconciling relationship that Anabaptists strive for in the church community and the responsibilities of Anabaptists toward their fellow humans. But he doesn't stop there. Recognizing how deeply interdependent humans are with the natural world, he extends Anabaptist relational responsibilities to all of creation.

Redekop suggests that since God created the world and declared it to be good, the rest of creation must have an intrinsic value of its own: "there is a God-creation relationship in which the human being may not be the central

[52] Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 6.

[53] Calvin Redekop, "Toward a Mennonite Theology and Ethic of Creation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60 (July 1986): 402.

figure."[54] He reasons that if Anabaptists affirm that the creation is good and every part of it is interdependent, then it "forces us to expand the ethic of nonresistance . . . from the community of faith . . . to the larger ecological community."[55] The expansion of this ethic to all of creation significantly heightens Anabaptists' responsibilities toward the natural world:

> The import of this ethic is that it extends the "reverence for life" of humankind to that of the natural world, both organic and inorganic. Nonresistance—the respect for human life that God has created—is thus extended to respect for everything that God has created.... The positive aspect (respect for God's creation) and the negative aspect (being forbidden to destroy life) thus work together to caution humans not to usurp God's position or to think of themselves as equal with God.[56]

Here Redekop claims that the ethic of non-resistance, which he defines as the respect or reverence for life, should be expanded to include the whole of the natural world – organic and inorganic. All species, life-systems and even minerals must be respected. They each have intrinsic value because God created them good.

Redekop suggests an ethic that fits well with kinship anthropology. On the one hand, it recognizes the deep interdependence between all life on earth, including human life, as affirmed by the scientific worldview. On the other, it draws directly from the Anabaptist tradition of relational community. Redekop merely expands the boundaries of community in response to the growing awareness that human actions do impact the lives of others around the world. He says, "solidarity with the rest of creation is bound to include, first and foremost, compassion for the neighbor, not only in the church but everywhere. To be obedient to God means that I must love my brother and sister, for God has created them and to destroy them would be to destroy part of God's creation."[57] While this passage seems to privilege human life over other life (kinship anthropology contends that compassion and love are not zero-sum games, the flourishing of other life need not come at the

---

[54] Ibid., 395.
[55] Ibid., 396.
[56] Ibid., 397.
[57] Ibid., 398-99.

expense of human life and vice versa), it is still evocative. If what is meant by 'neighbor' and 'brother and sister' were all of life on earth and not just our fellow-humans, then Redekop's statement would be an elegant formulation of kinship as an Anabaptist ecological anthropology.

As with any metaphor, kinship can have problematic shades of meaning. It can sometimes evoke notions of tribalism, suspicion of outsiders, and nepotism at the expense of others. Just as Loewen's analysis demonstrated there is more than one way of defining 'stewardship', there are also problematic ways of defining 'kin'. Family is a concept that can be far too easily sentimentalized. As inherently conservative social institutions, family structures can often be deeply patriarchal. Moreover, families can be dysfunctional, abusive, or violent. Yet, while recognizing the limits of this metaphor, kinship can still evoke a deeper truth about who we are as human beings than stewardship anthropology can, since in this case kinship is used not to exclude but to include. Our 'kin' amount to all of life on earth, and the whole of the universe itself. By recognizing that we are all related, we can broaden the sense of loyalty and responsibility often reserved for immediate relatives to our extended family.

What difference might adopting this sort of kinship anthropology have on how Anabaptists and other Christians live in the world? Elizabeth Johnson, in her essay "God's Beloved Creation," suggests that it challenges us to *see* the world and *live* in it in a new way. Rather than looking at the world with an "arrogant, utilitarian stare" that objectifies nature and commodifies other creatures, kinship offers an imaginative framework that can enable us "to see the natural world as God does, with a loving and appreciative eye."[58] By gazing at the world with the love of God, the scales fall from our eyes, and we see that as an integral part of the world (not apart from it), we are loved by God as well.[59] While much of this essay has been an argument in favor if just this possibility, acknowledging relational ties with an extended family of creation is more than an intellectual exercise; it involves a new way of living.

This new way of living can have at least two dimensions: the ascetic and the prophetic. According to Johnson, to live ascetically is to practice

[58] Johnson, "God's Beloved Creation," 10.
[59] Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 63.

discipline in the use of the earth's resources. However, unlike medieval ascetic practices, ecological asceticism seeks not to flee the world but to live in it in more responsible ways. While the concept of asceticism may be foreign to many contemporary Anabaptists, the closely related notion of simple living is not.[60]

Simple living is not just about giving things up, and should not be a rigid or austere practice for its own sake. Instead, living without excess is the condition for the possibility of generosity toward others. Ecological asceticism affirms the common good of all life on earth, recognizing that only if I live on what I need will others have what they need as well. Johnson suggests a simple living in which we "fast from shopping, contribute money and time to ecological works, endure the inconvenience of running an ecologically sensitive household and conduct business with an eye to the green bottom line as well as the red or black."[61]

Additionally, Johnson challenges those convinced by kinship anthropology to respond prophetically, to take action to bring about environmental justice. For Christians this means applying God's commandments consistently to all of creation. She says, for instance, "If we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, then the range of neighbors now includes the whale, the monarch butterfly, the local lake—the entire community of life. . . . 'Save the rain forest' becomes a concrete moral application of the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill.'"[62] For Anabaptists, who have a long history of counter-cultural beliefs and practices, this sort of prophetic response has broad application. For example, how could the Sermon on the Mount be applied to the entire earth community?[63] From a kinship perspective, "one stringent criterion must now measure the morality

---

[60] On the influence of medieval asceticism on early Anabaptist spirituality, see Kenneth Ronald Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study of Intellectual Origins* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1974).

[61] Johnson, "God's Beloved Creation," 11.

[62] Ibid., 12.

[63] For example, in order to fulfill the commandments not to kill and to love one's neighbor and enemy, Gary Comstock and Kristin Johnston Largen, respectively, each suggest a form of ethical or religious vegetarianism. Cf. Gary Comstock, "Must Mennonites be Vegetarians?" *The Mennonite,* June 23, 1992, 273; and Kristin Johnston Largen, "A Christian Rationale for Vegetarianism," *Dialog* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 147-57.

of our actions: whether or not these contribute to a sustainable earth community. A moral universe limited to the human community no longer serves the future of life."[64]

Conclusion

The many symptoms of the ecological crisis such as overconsumption, population growth, polluted air and water, the destruction of ecosystems, and the extinction of species are serious problems that humanity can no longer ignore. However, they will be difficult to solve if people do not recognize that the crisis itself is primarily one of human self-understanding. The metaphors that individuals, cultures, and religious communities use to imagine who they are and why they are here impact the way they relate to the environment. The dominant paradigm today – an imperialistic anthropology that is both deeply anthropocentric and hierarchical in relation to the rest of creation – has become a destructive force and needs to be replaced.

Stewardship anthropology, while well-meaning, is problematic because it continues to rely on a hierarchical dualism that divides humans from other creatures and assigns higher value to one at the expense of the others. When human dignity is based on qualities distinguishing humans from the rest of creation, it too easily reduces the earth's life-systems to assets to be managed, or it subtly equates human interest with God's interest. By retaining the same questionable assumptions held by the imperialistic anthropology it tries to correct, stewardship simply imagines humans as kinder, gentler hierarchs.

In contrast, kinship anthropology draws on insights from modern science that recognize the common origins and interrelatedness of all life on earth. While our species is distinct, human beings are still a part of the larger ecosystem. The earth is truly our home and other creatures are in reality our extended genetic family. From a biocentric perspective, kinship recognizes the intrinsic value of other creatures, acknowledging that humans have a moral responsibility that includes but is not limited to our own species. Moreover, since the kinship metaphor emphasizes our relatedness and interdependence with the rest of the world, it also resonates with Anabaptist anthropology, which has traditionally thought of human beings in relational terms. Identifying loving relationships as the locus of the image of God

[64] Johnson, "God's Beloved Creation," 11.

ARTICLE

The Kinship of Creation: An Anabaptist Ecological Anthropology

Nathanael L. Inglis

Introduction

There is a growing consensus today that the earth is facing an ecological crisis, and that human action is one of the primary causes.[1] However, there is more to this crisis than just the practical concerns of overconsumption, population growth, polluted air and water, the destruction of ecosystems, and the extinction of species. What humanity faces is a more fundamental crisis of self-understanding. In this essay I will critically compare and evaluate assumptions about the human-world relationship inherent in two contemporary theological anthropologies that rely on very different metaphors. Both anthropologies attempt to correct the dominion-based 'imperialistic anthropology' that continues to enable the ecological crisis.

In "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," Walter Klaassen identifies two largely unquestioned assumptions in Western industrial culture that order people's relationship to the world and to one another, which he sees as obstacles to solving the crisis. The first is the "passionate belief in the absolute right to private possessions," and the second is "the conviction of the unimpeded right to pursue wealth."[2] These two beliefs are made possible by and reinforced with "a trick of the mind devised by Western philosophy in which human beings are set over against

[1] Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, et al., "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (December 2007): 614-21. Steffen, Crutzen, and other environmental scientists identify human activity as such a significant factor in the transformation of ecosystems and climate today that they suggest our current geologic age should be called the 'anthropocene'.

[2] Walter Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed. Calvin Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000), 141.

The Conrad Grebel Review 30, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 162-187.

the world in which they live, making them the detached, subjective observers of objective nature and then taking a further step away in denying human kinship with the rest of creation."[3] The paradigm that Klaassen describes has become, in practice if not always in theory, the Western world's dominant anthropology.[4]

This dominion-based view of humanity is what I call an 'imperialistic anthropology' because it envisions human beings as the unaccountable rulers or monarchs over the rest of the natural world. It regards humanity in anthropocentric terms, maintaining a hierarchical dualism between human beings and the rest of creation. Anthropocentrism privileges human life, qualities, and experiences over other forms of life. It is a type of hierarchical dualism, which Elizabeth Johnson defines as "a pattern of thought and action that (1) divides reality into two separate and opposing spheres, and (2) assigns a higher value to one of them."[5] Imperialistic anthropology begins with human interests, defining and valuing other creatures to the degree that they are useful. Non-human creatures are treated either as property or as natural resources, while humans are rewarded for pursuing their own self-interest at the expense of others.

The ecologically destructive patterns of thought and action characterizing an imperialistic anthropology have far-reaching implications, particularly from a theological viewpoint. Klaassen proposes that the destruction of 'nature' is intrinsically bound to a degraded understanding of 'human nature.' As he somewhat provocatively explains it, "God comes to us here in [North] America with his truth to lay bare the terrible travesty we have made of human nature. . . . Human beings have been degraded from being created in the image of God, with all the richness and potential that implies, into consumers."[6] Klaassen affirms that the ecological crisis is in part a problem of human self-understanding. How we relate to the natural world depends greatly upon what we believe our nature and destiny to be—on our theological anthropology.

---

[3] Ibid.

[4] By 'anthropology' I mean the way individuals, cultures, or religions understand who they are as human beings, why they are here, and how they relate to the rest of the natural world.

[5] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 10.

[6] Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," 152.

Likewise, Carl Keener, a biologist and process theologian working in the Mennonite tradition, agrees that our problem with respect to nature is one of self-understanding. He suggests that what may be needed is

> a new root metaphor enabling us to focus our energies toward a more humane village ... a paradigmatic shift leading to a different outlook concerning the cosmos. All of us think and act and make moral decisions from within the context of some worldview, some overarching perspective, and it's my hope we can reflect thoughtfully on what such a perspective might be if Homo sapiens is to survive the 21st century.[7]

Like paradigm shifts in scientific inquiry, which occur when aging theories that can no longer make sense of emerging data are replaced by new ones, Keener suggests that the metaphors that Christians have used in the past to make sense of human life on earth may no longer be best suited to make sense of human experience today. In light of the ecological crisis, it is important for theologians and Christian communities at least to critically evaluate the inherent assumptions about the human relationship to the rest of the world in the anthropological metaphors they adopt.

Similar to Klaassen and Keener, historian Lynn White makes the connection between how we understand ourselves and how we treat our environment:[8]

> What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.... More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.[9]

---

[7] Carl S. Keener, "Aspects of a Postmodern Paradigm for an Ecological Age," in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, 1996), 116.

[8] Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (10 March 1967): 1203-07. Some ecofeminist theologians have also notably made the connection between anthropology and ecology, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

[9] White, "Historical Roots," 1205-06.

Identifying religion as a primary cultural influence on human self-understanding, White doubts that technology alone can save us from ecological disaster as long as a key driving force behind the crisis remains unchanged. For instance, if basic assumptions about the human place and purpose in the world are not transformed, no number of electric cars or composting toilets will help, since we cannot buy our way out of an overconsumption problem. Instead, by identifying in theological anthropology a link between how people see themselves and how they treat the environment, White argues that the crisis will not be averted until people begin to reevaluate how they understand human nature and destiny.

In related ways, Klaassen, Keener, and White each recognize that our ideas have functional value. The anthropological metaphors we adopt make a difference in how we live in the world, treat other creatures, and respond to the environmental crisis.

Theological Anthropologies and Metaphors

The first alternative to imperialistic anthropology I will consider is 'stewardship anthropology,' which imagines human beings as managers of property. As stewards over the earth, we humans have been given the special duty to care for and protect God's creation; we are not to use it or abuse it indiscriminately. The appeal of stewardship anthropology to some Christians is that it appears to be consistent with an understanding of God's will drawn from the Genesis creation accounts. However, by envisioning humans as property managers, stewardship focuses on human difference as a starting point for reflecting on our responsibilities toward other life. Stewardship is a metaphor that makes only superficial changes to the imperialistic human-world paradigm.

The second alternative relies on the metaphor of 'kinship,' which imagines all of life on earth as one extended genetic family. Taking inspiration from modern scientific insights about humanity's deep interconnection with the natural world, 'kinship anthropology' focuses on the many things we share in common with the rest of creation, rather than the few characteristics that make us distinct. Kinship is a metaphor that offers the prospect of expanding the Christian imagination to see the entire world as a community

of relations.[10]

Anabaptist communities have had differing degrees of environmental consciousness and ways of interacting with the land they live on. Of course, as Heather Ann Ackley Bean notes, "historically, environmental issues as we understand them today were not an Anabaptist priority (which is also true for most other Christian traditions)."[11] As people of their time and place, Anabaptists have often reflected broader social norms in their environmental values. Thus, their understanding of how humans should relate to the earth has evolved over time. Today, many Anabaptist communities, along with other Christians, appeal to stewardship anthropology as the right framework for promoting ecological responsibility. I suggest, however, that kinship anthropology is a better alternative for an Anabaptist ecological anthropology today.

For many Anabaptists, life finds its fullest expression in loving community, and thus their anthropology has often valued human relatedness and mutual dependence over individualism or separation. Kinship is a metaphor that, unlike stewardship, shares with Anabaptist anthropology these common assumptions about human relatedness to, and interdependence with, others. I will seek to show how the kinship metaphor not only is more consistent with the current scientific worldview but is also a natural extension of the Anabaptist emphasis on the fundamentally relational character of human nature.[12]

---

[10] For the categories of stewardship and kinship I am indebted to Elizabeth A. Johnson's argument in *Women, Earth, and Creator Sprit*.

[11] Heather Ann Ackley Bean, "Toward an Anabaptist/Mennonite Environmental Ethic," in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 183.

[12] Although this essay relies primarily on contemporary Mennonite scholars as sources, I use the more inclusive terms 'Anabaptist' and 'Anabaptism' when referring to the theological concepts and traditions that I draw from them. I recognize that the terms 'Anabaptist' and 'Mennonite' do not always equate, and that each term refers not to a single tradition but to an overlapping constellation of 'traditions' that have a rich diversity of belief and practice, from their 16th-century beginnings onward. However, I still find the usage of 'Anabaptist' to be appropriate, because the values and beliefs about humanity which I discuss are largely shared across present-day groups who identify as 'Anabaptist' (this includes, for example, Anabaptist-Mennonites but also the Anabaptist-Pietist descendants of the Schwarzenau Brethren, such as 'The Church of the Brethren'), and is thus relevant to the wider Anabaptist theological conversation.

Beyond a Romanticized Vision of Anabaptist Stewardship

The cultivation and farming of land is an occupation practiced by most Anabaptists to some degree until relatively recently.[13] Like every other area of life in many traditional Anabaptist communities, "no distinctions were made between secular and sacred work, [and] the plowing of the fields or assembling for worship" were each given spiritual meaning.[14] Especially now that fewer North Americans have any first-hand experience of farming, there is a tendency to romanticize traditional farmers as being 'closer to the land' and therefore more concerned about environmental preservation.

However, in his essay entitled "The Quiet of the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography," Royden Loewen challenges the idea that closeness to the land or communitarian values naturally go hand-in-hand with environmental concern. He draws upon a wide spectrum of the Mennonite tradition, specifically literature, poetry, and the local histories of farmers. His study shows that the environmental track record of Mennonite farming communities has been ambiguous, often reflecting norms and values of their time and place.[15] Local Mennonite histories, for instance, often contained contradictory accounts of "an affection for the environment and also a determination to 'subdue' it," both of which they understood to be consistent with their faith.[16]

In his comparative study of mid-20th century Mennonite farming communities in Kansas and British Honduras (now Belize), Loewen observes that while the Kansans were more individualistic – holding private property and increasing landholdings – they were deeply concerned with the health of the soil. Mennonites in British Honduras, by contrast, eschewed private property and put restrictions on social mobility, yet had little regard for the

[13] For instance, on changes in North American Mennonite demographics see Leo Driedger, "Alert Opening and Closing: Mennonite Rural-Urban Changes," *Rural Sociology* 60, no. 2 (1995): 323-32.

[14] Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 120.

[15] Royden Loewen, "The Quiet of the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 160-61; see also Ackley Bean, "Toward an Anabaptist/Mennonite Environmental Ethic," 186-90, where she describes several ways that the behavior of North American Anabaptists toward the environment have been inconsistent.

[16] Loewen, "Quiet of the Land," 157.

ecosystem that they clear-cut and bulldozed to create additional farmland.[17] Even in the Kansans' case, however, the interest in soil conservation was far from selfless.

In Kansas land was commodified and only available to a declining breed of successful farmers, some well-to-do from oil and gas discoveries and others from irrigated land. In British Honduras land was seen as a divine gift for the procurement of communitarian humility. Both places sought to profit from the cultivation of land, but because the profits were envisioned for different purposes – varying combinations of individual status and communitarian solidarity – the environment was also eventually considered in diverse ways.[18]

Loewen's point is that while these two communities related to their environments differently, they both prized their land mainly in terms of its profitability. The land was valued and protected not for its own sake but to the degree that it was useful to them. They did not seem to imagine the natural world as having an intrinsic value of its own.

The slash-and-burn agricultural practices of Mennonite farmers in Belize may especially strike people today as indicating a lack of concern for the environment. However, in a context in which humans had relatively little power over the natural world, they interpreted their subdual of nature as an act of faith. Loewen explains:

> Each of these communities pressed the land to yield a bounty and linked agriculture with the creation of order in nature, with the drawing of straight lines on the land. Huge effort was expended on semi-arid plain, intemperate prairie, or cleared jungle in the building of roads, fences and garden rows along cardinal points, thus giving testimony to Yi-Fu Tuan's observation elsewhere that social "harmony was ... believed to be a fruit ... of 'order on the land.'"[19]

In both of these contexts, Mennonite farmers saw their systematic subdual of wilderness into orderly and usable farmland as an authentic form

[17] Ibid., 160.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

of Christian stewardship.

Like Loewen, Walter Klaassen contends there is no intrinsic connection between the agricultural history of Anabaptists and what today we might consider to be an ecological consciousness. He notes that early Anabaptists became farmers not out of concern for the land, or even out of choice; instead, as a persecuted group, they farmed out of economic necessity. In fact, Anabaptism began as a largely urban movement. "It was the need to survive and not love of the land that produced the expertise and care of the land for which Mennonites became famous."[20] The need to survive continues to drive Anabaptist farming practices in large part today. Describing the current state of farming, Michael L. Yoder observes that for modern North American farmers, including Mennonites,

> [t]he pressure is to 'get big or get out.' Farmers can no longer treat farming simply as a way of life…. Farming has become a business, often a cutthroat business as farmers compete against each other to buy or rent more land, raising prices for both to uneconomic levels…. [In order to stay competitive,] farmers, Mennonite as well as non-Mennonite, have gradually become dependent on the technology of the modern world.[21]

Loewen, Klaassen, and Yoder demonstrate that the Anabaptist understanding of how humans should relate to the earth has evolved over time, and has varied according to the context and needs of particular communities. In each case, however, the survival of the community or the profitability of the land (two outcomes that are often related), took precedence over any additional concern or affection for the well-being of the environment for its own sake.

Loewen shows that while Anabaptist communities have displayed a certain degree of consciousness about responsibility toward the land, with some having "affection for the environment" or concern for the health of the soil, this sense of being 'good stewards' has not been consistently defined. At times, it has even resulted in behavior – such as the methodical destruction

[20] Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," 142.

[21] Michael L. Yoder, "Mennonites, Economics, and the Care of Creation," in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 74-75.

of ecosystems to bring them under human control as arable farmland – that appears more consistent with imperialist anthropology. Loewen's study does not seek to portray these particular groups as 'bad environmentalists,' but it does demonstrate the deep-seated ambiguity at the heart of stewardship anthropology itself, which points to one of its major limitations for addressing the ecological crisis today. Stewardship anthropology, like imperialist anthropology, is still inherently anthropocentric. If this anthropocentrism remains unrecognized, Anabaptists today who identify as stewards of the environment will have difficulty altering the power dynamic that continues to tacitly justify ecological irresponsibility.

Promise and Limitations of Stewardship Anthropology

Stewardship is a biblical motif that has broader application than just our relationship to the environment. Christians have perennially drawn upon notions of stewardship to encourage one another to live generously in the world, using their talents, resources, and social privileges in service to others rather than for personal ambition. In his study of biblical stewardship, Milo Kauffman suggests that stewardship consists of

> a special relationship between man and his God. God richly bestows upon man personality, abilities, and possessions and holds him responsible for their use. He is to use them to promote God's interests in the world…. A steward is entrusted with the possessions of another and manages them according to the will of the owner.[22]

While the term 'stewardship' is not commonly used in the Bible, the sentiment – what you have is not your own, it has been entrusted to you for the good of all – runs throughout, from the Garden of Eden to the parables of Jesus.[23]

In light of today's emerging ecological crisis, many concerned Christians, including Anabaptists, who are seeking greater theological justification to care for the earth are turning to stewardship anthropology. Christian portrayals of environmental stewardship differ, but they are

[22] Milo Kauffman, *Stewards of God* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1975), 19.
[23] Ibid., 20-21.

typically a variation on themes drawn from the Genesis creation accounts, in particular from Genesis 1:26-28:

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and 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, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (NRSV)

Working with concepts like the image of God, human dominion, and subdual of the earth, stewardship anthropology is often explained along these lines: Human beings were created uniquely in God's image and put in charge of this world. Although God gave humankind dominion over the world and commanded us to subdue it, we are not to live like gods or kings on Earth, doing with it whatever we want. Instead, God calls humanity to a loving and wise dominion, deputizing us to govern the world not according to our own will but in conformity to God's own heart. God created the world, saw that it was good, and intends for us as stewards to keep it that way, tending the garden and allocating the resources of the Earth for the benefit of all. Misusing the Earth's resources is a sin, since it goes against God's intention for the world.[24]

The influence of stewardship anthropology is evident in the 1994 Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) statement on the environment, "Stewards in God's Creation":

> We believe that human beings have been created good and have been called to glorify God, to live in peace with each other, and

[24] Cf. Ibid., 96-98, 109-10; and Pope John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility" in *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment,* ed. Drew Christiansen and Walter Grazer (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), 216-17 on two characteristic examples of 'stewardship anthropology' from a Mennonite and a Catholic perspective.

> to *watch over the rest of creation*. We gratefully acknowledge that God has created human beings in the divine image and has given the entire human family a *special dignity among all the works of creation*.[25]

Recognizing the extent to which human action is causing harm to the planet, the MCC draws upon stewardship anthropology to emphasize human *protection* of the natural world rather *dominion* over it. As Klaassen notes, Mennonites are beginning to recognize that 'the peaceful reign of God' is not limited to human relations but extends to the whole of creation.[26] By connecting our responsibility to 'watch over' the earth with our 'special dignity,' the MCC statement focuses on what makes us distinct from other creatures as the basis for understanding our relationship to the natural world. It is because of our 'special dignity' that we have been given a special purpose. This line of reasoning, with its focus on human uniqueness, is typical of stewardship anthropology.

Although the language of stewardship has had some success in motivating churches and individuals to take greater responsibility for how they live, it has significant shortcomings.

The goal of most Christians who promote stewardship is to encourage people to protect rather than exploit the earth, but stewardship anthropology is unable to fully realize this vision because it views the world anthropocentrically, maintaining a strict hierarchical dualism that imagines humans to be distinct from, and superior to, the rest of the created order.

As Milo Kauffman defines stewardship, a human steward is someone who manages another person's property. As a metaphor for our relationship to the natural world, our fellow creatures are 'owned' by God and our job is to 'manage' them. If we are the ones responsible for managing creation, then stewardship anthropology, no less than dominion-based imperialistic anthropology, is premised on a hierarchical dualism despite its best intentions. The rest of creation is thought of as property, which has instrumental value, and humans are thought of as persons, who have intrinsic value. It is also hierarchical because it claims that humans have been invested by God

---

[25] Mennonite Central Committee, "Stewards in God's Creation," in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 218. Emphasis added.

[26] Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," 143.

with power over the rest of creation. Although it has softer edges than the imperialist model that it tries to correct, it still focuses on human differences from other creatures rather than similarities as the motivating factor for concern for the world.[27]

Stewardship anthropology sometimes sees humans as servants of God and sometimes as servants of creation, but in either case it hides the fact that our relationships to other creatures are defined in terms of our privileged status. A similar tension arises in discussions of church leadership. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains:

> Insofar as ecclesial relationships are structured and conceptualized in such a way that the church, clergy, religious, and men still remain the defining subjects, a servant ecclesiology deceptively claims service and servanthood precisely for those who have patriarchal-hierarchical status and exercise spiritual power and control.... As long as actual power relationships and status privileges are not changed, a theological panegyric of service must remain a mere moralistic sentiment and a dangerous rhetorical appeal that mystifies structures of domination."[28]

The same logic holds true in our relationship to the world. As long as it is structured and conceptualized so that humans remain the defining subjects, stewardship deceptively claims servanthood for those who already have hierarchical status, power, and control. We can call ourselves stewards or servants, but the fact remains: if we consider humanity to be separate from and superior to the rest of creation, the power dynamic contributing to the ecological crisis will continue to operate, since it is far too easy to equate human self-interest with divine intent.

[27] Ibid., 30; Ackley Bean, in "Toward an Anabaptist/Mennonite Environmental Ethic," 185, argues that the lack of focus on the non-human world in the Anabaptist theology has not been an accident. Instead, it is the inevitable consequence of a tradition of anthropological reflection that focused on the human domination of nature in Genesis 1, rather than the Genesis 2 account that imagines humans as the servants of creation.

[28] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesiology of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 301. On power relations in the Mennonite church, see Dorothy Yoder Nyce and Lynda Nyce, "Mennonite Ecclesiology: A Feminist Perspective," in *Power, Authority and the Anabaptist Tradition*, ed. Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin W. Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 155-73.

In addition to maintaining that power dynamic, stewardship anthropology prevents us from seeing reality as it is. It overlooks the important fact that it is not simply human beings who steward the earth. More accurately, the earth stewards us. Trees are an obvious example. Elizabeth Johnson notes that, biologically, trees do not need humans to steward them – they thrived for millions of years before humans even came on the scene. Rather, humans are biologically dependent on trees: without them we could not breathe. So, she asks, "who then needs whom more? By what standard do human beings say that they are more important than trees?" [29] Fixating on humanity's unique and privileged status, stewardship anthropology cannot adequately appreciate the reality that humans are a part of creation and all of creation is deeply interdependent.

The stewardship metaphor fails to visualize our profound dependence on other life forms and thus cannot fully articulate our relational responsibilities toward them. While the isolated Belize community described by Loewen interpreted the world through the lens of Christian stewardship, it also struggled to survive in the jungle during the mid-20th century. Given the community's cultural context and influences, this was perhaps their only viable option. However, the reality of the collective impact of human actions on the environment today paints a very different picture. Humans are just one species sharing a fragile planet that, through our own willful exploitation or uninformed good intentions, we have consistently mismanaged. This reality not only poses an ethical challenge to consider the global consequences of our way of life but calls for a new theological interpretation of humanity's place and purpose within God's creation.

Kinship as an Ecological Anthropology

A theological anthropology based on the kinship metaphor begins not by reflecting on what makes humans different from other creatures but by emphasizing the many more ways we are related to, and an integral part of, the earthly biosphere. By adopting insights from the physical sciences about the nature of the universe, the earth, and our place within them, theologians Gordon Kaufman and Elizabeth Johnson suggest that interdependence rather than separation is a better starting point for understanding humanity's place

[29] Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 31.

in the world. They both propose versions of kinship anthropology as a root metaphor for interpreting the human-world relationship.

Kaufman argues that a viable theological anthropology cannot be at odds with the best science of the day.[30] As he says in his major work, *In Face of Mystery*: "We will come much closer to articulating the fundamental assumptions about the nature of the human which are widely accepted today if we speak of our interconnectedness and interdependence with all other forms of life . . . and of our cultural creativity in history, producing a thoroughly cultural form of existence."[31] Thus, he proposes a "biohistorical" understanding of human beings as creatures who relate to one another and experience the world within interrelated biological and historical spheres.

That humans are biological should come as no surprise. Yet Kaufman points out that much of the theological and cultural history of the West holds a dissenting opinion, focusing on human distinctiveness from the biological world rather than rootedness in it. This idea is symbolized in the dualistic concept of a soul that is separable and essentially superior to the physical body. Kaufman insists that if Christian theology is to make sense of the human place in the world as it is understood today, the idea of a discontinuity between the psyche and the body or humans and the world is no longer intelligible.[32] As he summarizes: "This intrinsic interconnection of world and human is one of the most fundamental conceptual presuppositions of

[30] While some Mennonite theologians do not view Gordon Kaufman's work as "Mennonite" theology, others do. For instance, see A. James Reimer, "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 33-55. Reimer, while skeptical of Kaufman's theological method, recognizes that Kaufman's work stands in continuity with the prophetic and ethical dimensions of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. See also Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1996), in which a variety of Mennonite theologians engage Kaufman's work as Mennonite theology. Regardless of one's views on Kaufman as a specifically Mennonite or Anabaptist theologian, my primary reason for engaging his work in this section, along with the work of Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson, is because of their thoughtful contributions to the dialogue between theology and science.

[31] Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 109.

[32] Ibid., 107.

our modern experience and knowledge."[33]

As significant and fundamental as biological life is for conceiving our place in the world, according to Kaufman human biology can never be understood apart from cultural life, nor history apart from genetics. As a species, he argues, we were bio-historical from our very beginnings; human beings could not have existed without a shared symbol system.

> In certain respects, the growth of culture—including an increasingly flexible and complex language, new forms of social organization … increasing use of tools, and so on—itself shaped the biological development of the predecessors of *Homo sapiens* over some millions of years…. So the biological organism that finally developed as human was 'both a cultural and a biological product.'[34]

Kaufman's biohistorical anthropology offers a viable alternative to the anthropocentric hierarchical dualism at the heart of both imperialistic and stewardship anthropologies. Instead of existing as if human life on earth is just a temporary stopover, Kaufman argues that human nature is itself the result of a deep evolutionary process of bio-historical development. Human history and biology cannot be separated, since they have each been indelibly shaped by the influence of the other.[35]

Elizabeth Johnson, in *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, also makes the case that kinship anthropology better matches the scientific-evolutionary world-picture than a stewardship approach. Discoveries in astrophysics, evolutionary biology, and quantum physics all point to a fundamental truth: "mutual interrelatedness is inscribed at the heart of all reality."[36] For example, we are genetic relatives to all other life on earth: "the genetic structure of cells in our bodies is remarkably similar to the cells in other creatures, bacteria, grasses, fish, horses, the great gray whales. We have all evolved from common ancestors and are kin in this shared, unbroken genetic history."[37] We are literally one extended family; our history as a species is part of the larger

[33] Ibid., 115.
[34] Ibid., 116.
[35] Ibid., 117.
[36] Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 32.
[37] Ibid., 35.

history of the planet along with the rest of the life on it.

We are not only related to the earth. We are also a dynamic part of the wider universe as a whole, since all the heavy elements comprising our bodies are products of the explosion of distant stars billions of years ago. "A crucial insight emerges from [the scientific] story of cosmic and biological evolution," says Johnson. "The kinship model of humankind's relation to the world is not just a poetic, good-hearted way of seeing things but the basic truth. We are connected in a most profound way to the universe, having emerged from it."[38] All of life on earth comes from the same source and our fates are intertwined. Thus, our relationship with other kinds of life is most accurately described by a familial metaphor like kinship.[39]

Johnson insists that even human intelligence and free will, two concepts which Christians have traditionally used to stress humanity's distinctiveness, need not be taken as setting us apart from or above nature. "Human spirit expressed in self-consciousness and freedom is not something new added to the universe from outside," she explains. "Rather, it is a sophisticated evolutionary expression of the capacity for self-organization and creativity inherent in the universe itself. . . . This makes us distinct but not separate, a unique strand in the cosmos, yet still a strand of the cosmos."[40] Summing up her version of kinship anthropology, Johnson advocates for a concern for creation grounded in what we have in common:

> If separation is not the ideal but connection is; if dualism is not the ideal but the relational embrace of diversity is; if hierarchy is not the ideal but mutuality is, then the kinship model more closely approximates reality. It sees human beings and the earth with all its creatures intrinsically related as companions in a community of life. Because we are all mutually interconnected, the flourishing or damaging of one ultimately affects all. This kinship attitude does not measure differences on a scale of higher or lower ontological dignity bur appreciates them as integral elements in the robust thriving of the whole.[41]

[38] Ibid., 34.
[39] Ibid., 31.
[40] Ibid., 38.
[41] Ibid., 30.

In kinship anthropology, then, the presumption of anthropocentrism is replaced by biocentrism. Instead of assigning mere instrumental value to other creatures, biocentric kinship recognizes that other species, which have themselves evolved over countless millennia, possess intrinsic value. Moreover, unlike the stewardship approach, kinship anthropology recognizes humanity's place within a larger ecosystem, focusing on the many qualities that we share. What makes us unique or distinctive need not negate the value or unique qualities of other species. Thus, in kinship anthropology, hierarchy and dualism are replaced by a humble appreciation for the stunningly diverse but nonetheless interconnected family of creation, with all the relational responsibilities that this entails.[42]

Kinship and Anabaptist Relational Anthropology

Kinship anthropology not only is more consistent with the scientific worldview than stewardship but also offers a clearer way to make sense of the intuitions and impulses that many contemporary Anabaptists already have toward the environment, by graciously widening the boundaries of community to include all the creatures calling earth their home. As Klaassen suggests, "We are co-creatures with animals and trees, water and air, and cannot exist independently. If this understanding has not been part of our Anabaptist heritage from the beginning, we have the opportunity to make it part of our tradition and part of the tradition of Christian faith now, in our own time."[43] In light of the ecological crisis, he challenges Anabaptists to explore the possibility of adopting a new perspective toward the rest of creation.

However, this does not mean abandoning core beliefs or introducing new ones. Instead, it means looking deeply into the principles that Anabaptists already hold and applying them more holistically to one's entire way of living in the world. The challenge is to consider how traditional ways of practicing the faith can be enriched as they are applied to include the natural world. Doing so, I contend, reveals that even if it has not always been the case historically, the relational anthropology of the Anabaptist tradition is more at home theologically with kinship anthropology than with stewardship

[42] Ibid., 38.

[43] Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," 153.

anthropology.

Kinship is a relational metaphor that shares common assumptions with Anabaptist anthropology, which tends to value human relatedness and mutual dependence over individualism or separation. From an Anabaptist perspective you cannot understand the nature or purpose of humanity merely by focusing on isolated individuals. To be fully human is to be in relationship with others. While this idea is not unique to Anabaptism, it is distinctive. Robert Friedmann summarizes this deeply relational anthropology as follows:

> [In Anabaptism] the thesis is accepted that *man cannot come to God except together with his brother*. In other words, the brother, the neighbor, constitutes an essential element of one's personal redemption…. To him brotherhood is not merely an ethical adjunct to Christian theological thinking but an integral condition for any genuine restoration of God's image in man…. It has always been claimed that the brotherhood-church (*Gemeinde*) served a central function within Anabaptism. The reason for this was apparently that only in the *Gemeinde* can the believer apply Christian love in action. Only here can the believer realize his convictions that he cannot come to God in good conscience except with his brother. (Friedmann's italics)[44]

Many Anabaptists, both past and present, have understood that humans were created by God to be in relationship with others, and, as Friedmann points out, even the image of God is reflected not in individuals alone but people together in loving communities. Salvation too is understood in communal terms. As J. Denny Weaver says, "reconciliation between individuals belongs as much to the essence of salvation as does reconciliation to God, and the two dimensions exist together inseparably."[45] C. Norman Kraus concurs, noting that "in the traditional Mennonite understanding, salvation was experienced as a belonging to, and relationship in, the religious community."[46] Thus, for Anabaptists, salvation can never be spiritualized or

[44] Friedmann, *Theology of Anabaptism*, 81.

[45] J. Denny Weaver, "Becoming Anabaptist-Mennonite: The Contemporary Relevance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4 (1986): 173.

[46] C. Norman Kraus, "Toward a Theology for the Disciple Community," in *Kingdom, Cross and*

abstracted from real relationships to others.

As has long been recognized, human life is characterized by a network of relationships. People may find themselves in loving or destructive relationships. Many will have friends and some will have enemies, but regardless of the quality of the relationship, relating to others is an inescapably human condition. Believing that if people find themselves in favorable circumstances they can live righteous lives, Anabaptists have often attempted to create communities that prioritize right relationships between people through service to one another.[47] Focusing on Mennonite communities, Joseph Smucker observes that

> [t]raditionally, and expressed in ideal terms, Mennonites have believed that the religious life can be practiced only within a community where self-will is submerged. The rules of behavior … are designed to achieve a loving brotherhood rather than personal holiness. Such aims are, of course, antithetical to individualism. Seen in this light, the concept of 'community' demands 'service' of the individual. Thus, one's occupation should express service to the community. Through hard work, a community member demonstrates a greater concern for others than for self…. One's occupation is not to be pursued in order to gain personal wealth, power, or prestige but to benefit the community as a whole.[48]

This aversion to individualism is rooted in the recognition that we are each deeply dependent on others for our being and well-being. Harold Bauman writes that while individuals freely enter into the community of believers, they do so with the understanding that each person will be responsible for the well-being of all others. He suggests that "the church is a covenant community of mutual responsibility. . . . Such a covenant is based upon the priesthood of all believers: each person is a minister for every other person. There is an interdependence upon one another which grows out of

---

Community: Essays on Mennonite Themes in Honor of Guy F. Hershberger, ed. John Richard Burkholder and Calvin Redekop (Scottdale, PA, Herald Press, 1976), 110-11.

[47] Friedmann, *Theology of Anabaptism*, 61-74.

[48] Joseph Smucker, "Religious Community and Individualism: Conceptual adaptations by one group of Mennonites," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25, no. 3 (1986): 274.

an intimate caring, prompted by the love shed abroad by the Holy Spirit."[49] In communities like those described by Smucker and Bauman, interdependence is cultivated in order to strengthen relational ties, and equality is defined in terms of one's responsibilities to the community.

As these sources indicate, a common feature of Anabaptist anthropological reflection is an emphasis on the relational nature of human beings. This focus has motivated historical and contemporary Anabaptist communities to experiment with (if not always achieve) forms of communitarianism, mutual interdependence, and egalitarianism in responsibilities, under the principle that everyone is accountable for the needs of all others.[50] According to this relational anthropology, the key to human fulfillment and the medium of salvation is taking responsibility to live in right relationships with others, even by loving enemies and strangers, who do not or cannot reciprocate.

Kinship as an *Anabaptist* Ecological Anthropology

Anabaptist theological reflection has a lot to say about community, but its scope is often limited to the church, the *community of believers*. What relevance, then, does Anabaptist communal anthropology have in relation to the rest of our human and extra-human kin, especially in light of the ecological crisis? J. Denny Weaver provides a partial answer, suggesting that

> [w]hen envisioning society as a whole, the communal component of the Anabaptist tradition provides an alternative to . . . individualism. . . . The believing community should remind the broader society as a whole of the humanity of all individuals, and should testify that the justice of a society is measured by how it treats the powerless rather than the powerful. The communal-oriented church calls attention to the common good, and to the solidarity of the human race.[51]

This vision of human community is inspiring as far as it goes, but I

[49] Harold E. Bauman, "Forms of Covenant Community," in Burkholder and Redekop, *Kingdom, Cross and Community,* 123-24.

[50] Despite the ideal of equality, the exercise of power in leadership has rarely been egalitarian in practice. This has especially been true for women. See note 28 above.

[51] Weaver, "Becoming Anabaptist-Mennonite," 174.

suggest that the awareness of human interdependence with all life on earth made possible by kinship anthropology allows an expansion of Weaver's principle to creation as a whole. If the believing community is to bear witness to the 'humanity of all individuals,' then it can also bear witness to the intrinsic value of all creation. If the community should testify that 'the justice of a society is measured by how it treats the power*less*,' then this also includes other creatures, many of whom today are at our mercy. As Sallie McFague says, "Christians are those who should love the oppressed, the most vulnerable of God's creation, for these are the ones according to the Gospel who deserve priority.… [N]ature can be seen as the 'new poor,' not the poor that crowds out the human poor, but the 'also' poor; and as such it demands our attention and care."[52] Kinship anthropology recognizes that the common good of humanity cannot be separated from the common good of all who live on our planet, and solidarity can extend even to those not of our species.

While Weaver expands the boundaries of Anabaptist relational anthropology to other humans, Calvin Redekop, in his essay "Toward a Mennonite Theology and Ethic of Creation," considers what relevance it might have to all our kin on earth. With respect to other humans outside the faith community, he says that "Shalom cannot be limited to life within the congregation, the outpost of the kingdom of God; it must permeate the larger community. It means that Christians will work there for the community and creative well-being that is already being achieved in the church."[53] He draws a clear analogy between the reconciling relationship that Anabaptists strive for in the church community and the responsibilities of Anabaptists toward their fellow humans. But he doesn't stop there. Recognizing how deeply interdependent humans are with the natural world, he extends Anabaptist relational responsibilities to all of creation.

Redekop suggests that since God created the world and declared it to be good, the rest of creation must have an intrinsic value of its own: "there is a God-creation relationship in which the human being may not be the central

[52] Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 6.

[53] Calvin Redekop, "Toward a Mennonite Theology and Ethic of Creation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60 (July 1986): 402.

figure."[54] He reasons that if Anabaptists affirm that the creation is good and every part of it is interdependent, then it "forces us to expand the ethic of nonresistance . . . from the community of faith . . . to the larger ecological community."[55] The expansion of this ethic to all of creation significantly heightens Anabaptists' responsibilities toward the natural world:

> The import of this ethic is that it extends the "reverence for life" of humankind to that of the natural world, both organic and inorganic. Nonresistance—the respect for human life that God has created—is thus extended to respect for everything that God has created.... The positive aspect (respect for God's creation) and the negative aspect (being forbidden to destroy life) thus work together to caution humans not to usurp God's position or to think of themselves as equal with God.[56]

Here Redekop claims that the ethic of non-resistance, which he defines as the respect or reverence for life, should be expanded to include the whole of the natural world – organic and inorganic. All species, life-systems and even minerals must be respected. They each have intrinsic value because God created them good.

Redekop suggests an ethic that fits well with kinship anthropology. On the one hand, it recognizes the deep interdependence between all life on earth, including human life, as affirmed by the scientific worldview. On the other, it draws directly from the Anabaptist tradition of relational community. Redekop merely expands the boundaries of community in response to the growing awareness that human actions do impact the lives of others around the world. He says, "solidarity with the rest of creation is bound to include, first and foremost, compassion for the neighbor, not only in the church but everywhere. To be obedient to God means that I must love my brother and sister, for God has created them and to destroy them would be to destroy part of God's creation."[57] While this passage seems to privilege human life over other life (kinship anthropology contends that compassion and love are not zero-sum games, the flourishing of other life need not come at the

[54] Ibid., 395.
[55] Ibid., 396.
[56] Ibid., 397.
[57] Ibid., 398-99.

expense of human life and vice versa), it is still evocative. If what is meant by 'neighbor' and 'brother and sister' were all of life on earth and not just our fellow-humans, then Redekop's statement would be an elegant formulation of kinship as an Anabaptist ecological anthropology.

As with any metaphor, kinship can have problematic shades of meaning. It can sometimes evoke notions of tribalism, suspicion of outsiders, and nepotism at the expense of others. Just as Loewen's analysis demonstrated there is more than one way of defining 'stewardship', there are also problematic ways of defining 'kin'. Family is a concept that can be far too easily sentimentalized. As inherently conservative social institutions, family structures can often be deeply patriarchal. Moreover, families can be dysfunctional, abusive, or violent. Yet, while recognizing the limits of this metaphor, kinship can still evoke a deeper truth about who we are as human beings than stewardship anthropology can, since in this case kinship is used not to exclude but to include. Our 'kin' amount to all of life on earth, and the whole of the universe itself. By recognizing that we are all related, we can broaden the sense of loyalty and responsibility often reserved for immediate relatives to our extended family.

What difference might adopting this sort of kinship anthropology have on how Anabaptists and other Christians live in the world? Elizabeth Johnson, in her essay "God's Beloved Creation," suggests that it challenges us to *see* the world and *live* in it in a new way. Rather than looking at the world with an "arrogant, utilitarian stare" that objectifies nature and commodifies other creatures, kinship offers an imaginative framework that can enable us "to see the natural world as God does, with a loving and appreciative eye."[58] By gazing at the world with the love of God, the scales fall from our eyes, and we see that as an integral part of the world (not apart from it), we are loved by God as well.[59] While much of this essay has been an argument in favor if just this possibility, acknowledging relational ties with an extended family of creation is more than an intellectual exercise; it involves a new way of living.

This new way of living can have at least two dimensions: the ascetic and the prophetic. According to Johnson, to live ascetically is to practice

[58] Johnson, "God's Beloved Creation," 10.

[59] Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 63.

discipline in the use of the earth's resources. However, unlike medieval ascetic practices, ecological asceticism seeks not to flee the world but to live in it in more responsible ways. While the concept of asceticism may be foreign to many contemporary Anabaptists, the closely related notion of simple living is not.[60]

Simple living is not just about giving things up, and should not be a rigid or austere practice for its own sake. Instead, living without excess is the condition for the possibility of generosity toward others. Ecological asceticism affirms the common good of all life on earth, recognizing that only if I live on what I need will others have what they need as well. Johnson suggests a simple living in which we "fast from shopping, contribute money and time to ecological works, endure the inconvenience of running an ecologically sensitive household and conduct business with an eye to the green bottom line as well as the red or black."[61]

Additionally, Johnson challenges those convinced by kinship anthropology to respond prophetically, to take action to bring about environmental justice. For Christians this means applying God's commandments consistently to all of creation. She says, for instance, "If we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, then the range of neighbors now includes the whale, the monarch butterfly, the local lake—the entire community of life. . . . 'Save the rain forest' becomes a concrete moral application of the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill.'"[62] For Anabaptists, who have a long history of counter-cultural beliefs and practices, this sort of prophetic response has broad application. For example, how could the Sermon on the Mount be applied to the entire earth community?[63] From a kinship perspective, "one stringent criterion must now measure the morality

---

[60] On the influence of medieval asceticism on early Anabaptist spirituality, see Kenneth Ronald Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study of Intellectual Origins* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1974).

[61] Johnson, "God's Beloved Creation," 11.

[62] Ibid., 12.

[63] For example, in order to fulfill the commandments not to kill and to love one's neighbor and enemy, Gary Comstock and Kristin Johnston Largen, respectively, each suggest a form of ethical or religious vegetarianism. Cf. Gary Comstock, "Must Mennonites be Vegetarians?" *The Mennonite,* June 23, 1992, 273; and Kristin Johnston Largen, "A Christian Rationale for Vegetarianism," *Dialog* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 147-57.

of our actions: whether or not these contribute to a sustainable earth community. A moral universe limited to the human community no longer serves the future of life."[64]

Conclusion

The many symptoms of the ecological crisis such as overconsumption, population growth, polluted air and water, the destruction of ecosystems, and the extinction of species are serious problems that humanity can no longer ignore. However, they will be difficult to solve if people do not recognize that the crisis itself is primarily one of human self-understanding. The metaphors that individuals, cultures, and religious communities use to imagine who they are and why they are here impact the way they relate to the environment. The dominant paradigm today – an imperialistic anthropology that is both deeply anthropocentric and hierarchical in relation to the rest of creation – has become a destructive force and needs to be replaced.

Stewardship anthropology, while well-meaning, is problematic because it continues to rely on a hierarchical dualism that divides humans from other creatures and assigns higher value to one at the expense of the others. When human dignity is based on qualities distinguishing humans from the rest of creation, it too easily reduces the earth's life-systems to assets to be managed, or it subtly equates human interest with God's interest. By retaining the same questionable assumptions held by the imperialistic anthropology it tries to correct, stewardship simply imagines humans as kinder, gentler hierarchs.

In contrast, kinship anthropology draws on insights from modern science that recognize the common origins and interrelatedness of all life on earth. While our species is distinct, human beings are still a part of the larger ecosystem. The earth is truly our home and other creatures are in reality our extended genetic family. From a biocentric perspective, kinship recognizes the intrinsic value of other creatures, acknowledging that humans have a moral responsibility that includes but is not limited to our own species. Moreover, since the kinship metaphor emphasizes our relatedness and interdependence with the rest of the world, it also resonates with Anabaptist anthropology, which has traditionally thought of human beings in relational terms. Identifying loving relationships as the locus of the image of God

[64] Johnson, "God's Beloved Creation," 11.

and human salvation, Anabaptists have attempted to create communities that prioritize mutual interdependence, equality in responsibility, and the common good.

Kinship anthropology has great promise for Anabaptist reflection in light of the ecological crisis. By affirming the dignity of all creation, it calls Anabaptists to an expansive moral vision, to seek ways to live without violence toward all creation, not just human beings. Widening the notion of community to include the entire ecosphere, an anthropology of kinship challenges people to live as loving relatives and good neighbors to all life on the planet.

Nathanael Inglis is a doctoral candidate in systematic theology at Fordham University in New York.