

Article

# Reimagining Christian Hope(lessness) in the Anthropocene

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**Abstract:** Faith in the Anthropocene requires a re-imagined account of Christian hope. Research on the emergence of eco-anxiety disorder shows that climate crisis and ecological destruction have psychological and emotional effects on persons and communities, producing fear, despair, and hopelessness. Accounts of hope in recent environmental literature and in traditional Christian formulations rely on faith in political will, technological innovation, or an omnipotent divine sovereign to intervene and save. Such accounts are inadequate for this moment. A re-imagined notion of Christian hope will embrace hopelessness, understood as the relinquishment of false optimism that the climate crisis can be reversed and a commitment to act without expectation of success, but with a commitment to nurturing the wisdom to live more humanly.

**Keywords:** eco-anxiety; despair; hope; virtue; climate crisis; Anthropocene

## 1. Introduction

Eco-anxiety is increasingly in the news these days and it is manifesting as a crisis of hope. Understood as psychological or emotional stress, distress, or grief triggered by increasing awareness of deteriorating environmental conditions and the planetary scope of the ecological crises we now face, the term “eco-anxiety” first appeared in print in a 1990 *Washington Post* article about the efforts of activists in Maryland to protect the local waterways that feed the Chesapeake Bay.<sup>1</sup> Since then other terms have emerged to describe the experience, such as “climate anxiety”, “eco-angst” (Goleman), “environmental anxiety” (Pihkala), and “solastalgia” (Albrecht).<sup>2</sup> The American Psychological Association has even identified a condition they call “eco-anxiety disorder”, issuing a major report to characterize the “resounding chronic psychological consequences” related to how human beings around the globe process the climate crisis.<sup>3</sup> According to Glenn Albrecht, who coined the term “solastalgia”, he was attempting to name “the pain or distress caused by the loss of, or the inability to derive solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one’s home environment”. It exists when there is the “lived experience of physical desolation of home”.<sup>4</sup> Albrecht first applied the term solastalgia to his observations of the emotional well-being of people living in coal mining regions in eastern Australia,

<sup>1</sup> (Leff 1990).

<sup>2</sup> (Goleman 2009; Pihkala 2018); Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht has published many articles and essays on this topic, but the most comprehensive treatment is in (Albrecht 2019). Albrecht, who coined the term solastalgia in the early 2000s, has developed a taxonomy of “illnesses” related to persons’ awareness of the conditions of their biophysical environment. According to Albrecht, “Somaterratic” illnesses are those which threaten physical well-being when ecosystems are stressed or destroyed (“terratic” meaning, of course, “earth-related”), while *psychoterratic* illness is defined as “earth-related mental illness where people’s mental well-being (psyche) is threatened by the severing of “healthy” links between themselves” and their environments. See (Albrecht et al. 2007). A Nexis search indicates that the term eco-anxiety appeared 785 times in popular news media in 2019, and an additional 341 times in the first two months of 2020.

<sup>3</sup> (Clayton et al. 2017).

<sup>4</sup> (Albrecht et al. 2007, p. 96).

and it has since been applied to studies in the coal counties of eastern Kentucky, among persons facing rising seas in the Marshall Islands, and to communities impacted by Hurricanes Irma and Harvey in the United States, among other places.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, then, emotional distress related to environmental degradation is a global phenomenon: individuals and communities everywhere are experiencing a loss of solace—an inability to take comfort in the world around them, an inability to imagine a flourishing future for themselves or their ecosystems. Researchers on eco-anxiety and related concepts identify the following manifestations: grief, depression, PTSD, perceived loss of agency or ability to respond meaningfully, helplessness, despair, and loss of hope. In this essay I focus on the crisis of hope identified in all of this recent attention to eco-anxiety.

Terminology is important because it helps us identify and characterize what, exactly, is going on: terms like eco-anxiety and solastalgia name the felt emotional and psychological vulnerabilities humans face in the Anthropocene, recognizing despair or loss of hope as a key aspect of our vulnerability. Eco-anxiety can overwhelm individual and collective psyches in ways that immobilize capacities for action (because it is believed that no action one might take can matter) and for finding a sense of wholeness in living (because the loss of hope renders one unable to find meaning in life, in relationships, in the practice of faith, etc.). In this essay I argue that the emergence of eco-anxiety disorders requires re-imagined accounts of hope in light of the climate crisis in which we are now living. Theologians must render accounts of hope that are honest about the realities we face and that point toward ways to live with purpose, not relying on miraculous intervention. While eco-anxiety has gotten plenty of attention in popular media and in academic literature in the social sciences, social work, mental health, and medical fields, theologians, pastoral theologians, and spirituality scholars have yet to address it.<sup>6</sup> Eco-anxiety and its attendant crisis of hope require wide-ranging responses, from the clinical to the political: in this essay I offer only one very narrow response as I reflect on the meaning of Christian hope in a time of climate crisis. Nevertheless, I believe that reflection on hope is a necessary intellectual resource that theologians must provide for people of faith grappling with how to live in these times. After surveying some recent popular works on the climate crisis and hope, I examine and critique two specifically Christian accounts of hope before arguing that any credible Christian account of hope in the Anthropocene must first embrace *hopelessness*. By hopelessness I mean accepting the reality of how deep the climate crisis actually is and that we are now at a point where it will not be reversed in a way that restores our planetary ecology to some former state. In conclusion, I will suggest three dimensions of a renewed account of hope.

## 2. Hope in Recent Climate Crisis Literature

A spate of books outlining the realities of climate crisis has appeared on popular bookshelves and best-seller lists in recent years. They bear ominous titles like *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*; *The Water Will Come: Rising Tides, Sinking Cities, and the Remaking of the Civilized World*; *The End of Ice: Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*; *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*; and a revised version of *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, to name just a few.<sup>7</sup> A number of these works are structured similarly: they start by describing, usually in great forensic detail, the catastrophic future into which the planet is heading (indeed, into which we are already living to some degree), musing on extreme human vulnerability in such a future. However, after outlining the

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<sup>5</sup> (Canu et al. 2017).

<sup>6</sup> While searches of terms like eco-anxiety and solastalgia produce hundreds, even thousands, of results on the databases Nexis and Academic Search Ultimate, a search of the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) database produces exactly one result for either term as of 28 February 2020.

<sup>7</sup> (Wallace-Wells 2019; Goodell 2017; Jamail 2019, pp. 209–25; Scranton 2015; McKibben 2019; Kolbert 2015). I appreciate an anonymous reviewer pointing out that this list consists almost entirely of male authors; the reviewer suggested that the constructions of hope proposed by the authors I engage and critique here may be shaped by particular, and perhaps unhelpful, forms of masculinity. I regard this suggestion as very insightful and I am grateful; it recommends the importance of a gender-related analysis of this literature that I would like to take up in the future.

dire consequences of carbon-based global capitalism's ruinous effects on the planet, these treatments go on to extend some account of hope, insisting that there is still time to change course and that we can avoid the worst outcomes. They express some confidence that humans can transform our politics, our economies, and our infrastructures in order to avoid the most extreme calamities, calamities they have just spent several chapters describing as inevitable.

For example, David Wallace-Wells begins his New York Times bestseller *The Uninhabitable Earth* with the now oft-quoted line: "It's worse, much worse, than you think".<sup>8</sup> His chapter titles include "Heat Death", "Hunger", "Drowning", "Dying Oceans", "Unbreathable Air", "Economic Collapse", etc. In the first half of the book Wallace-Wells cites scientific data and statistical projections, and shares anecdotes describing a future in which extreme heat, diminishing supplies of fresh water, rising seas, and global pandemics will result in widespread economic collapse, enormous numbers of refugees, and large scale human conflict. And yet, he claims in the second half of the book—somewhat remarkably, given the tenor of part I—that he *is* optimistic: "We found a way to engineer devastation, and we can find a way to engineer our way out of it".<sup>9</sup> Considering the pros and cons of technologies like carbon capture and geoengineering, Wallace-Wells expectantly asserts that "we may conjure new solutions" not yet thought of. He holds out hope that societies *will* make political and economic choices and develop technologies that will mitigate the worst effects of climate change.

Australian environmental historian and writer Tim Flannery is a bit less apocalyptic than some other authors of these works and a bit more overtly hopeful in his book (which actually includes the word "hope" in the title): *Atmosphere of Hope: Searching for Solutions to the Climate Crisis*. Flannery, however, proceeds in much the same manner as Wallace-Wells and others. Flannery spends the first five chapters detailing our dire circumstances, addressing "The Waters of a Warming World", and "Ominously Acidic Oceans". Chapter four's title is framed as a question: "How are the Animals Doing?" The epigraph, however, gives away the answer: "We'll lose more species of plants and animals between 2000 and 2065 than we lost in the last 65 million years" (quotation from Paul Watson).<sup>10</sup> Like Wallace-Wells, though, Flannery touts positive signs, possibilities, and technological solutions: coal use is declining, he notes somewhat cheerily; solar and wind energies are gaining ground; geoengineering and carbon capture might save the day. "I have mixed feelings about the future", admits Flannery.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, he insists that we already have at our disposal the knowledge and the tools required to avoid a climate disaster. "Between deep, rapid emissions cuts and third way technologies, we can do it", Flannery confidently asserts near the end of the book.<sup>12</sup>

Not every book in this genre displays as much optimism, but many seem to minimize or mitigate the effects of the projections they report with their conclusions. They share scientific data that demonstrates catastrophic realities, and yet seemingly attempt to reassure readers that the worst will not necessarily happen. Their "hopes" are rooted in technological innovations and political leadership and will. Given current political and economic realities, however, it is difficult to imagine why these authors might hold out *any* hope that things are going to get better. Each year, more and more reports appear telling us that glaciers and the Antarctic ice shelf are melting more rapidly than previously thought, ocean temperatures are increasing more quickly than previously thought, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is now more than twice the size of Texas, and CO<sub>2</sub> levels rose again for the seventh consecutive year in 2018. As some of the authors note, more than half of the carbon pumped into the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels has been emitted in the last three decades: that is, roughly since the first Rio Summit or since Al Gore published *Earth in the Balance*. This means, as Wallace-Wells

<sup>8</sup> Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> (Flannery 2015).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

notes, that we have “now engineered as much ruin knowingly as we ever managed in ignorance”.<sup>13</sup> Global economic infrastructures remain highly fossil fuel dependent and carbon intensive. The world’s political leaders display no inclination to meaningfully address our crisis. In fact, most of them continue to act as if there is no crisis, as illustrated by the “Arctic policy” announced by the United States in 2019 by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. In a news conference held in Finland, Pompeo expressed excitement about the rapid melting of sea ice in the region. “The Arctic is at the forefront of opportunity and abundance”, he said, noting the vast amount of untapped oil and natural gas, along with “an abundance of uranium, rare earth minerals, gold, diamonds, and millions of square miles of untapped resources, fisheries galore” which will become available as the ice melts. Rather than pondering the dire consequences of the melting Arctic for the Earth’s vulnerable poor—or even for people working and living in lower Manhattan or Hoboken—and appealing to international communities to join together in addressing this unfolding crisis, Pompeo touted only the new opportunities for travel, trade, and resource extraction opening up.<sup>14</sup> The Secretary displayed not a hint of irony that extracting carbon emitting fossil fuels previously made inaccessible by the now melting ice will contribute to even further melting, warming, sea level rise, more climate refugees, more conflict over resources grown ever scarcer, etc.

In the face of a radical destabilization of the Earth’s capacities to sustain life as we have known it for most of the history of civilization, the world’s political and corporate leaders see only economic opportunity and the need to colonize even more space in the service of empires. Thus, the hope expressed by authors like Wallace-Wells and Flannery that we will find the political will and the technological innovations to pull back from the brink seem hollow. And, yet, we perpetually seek out reasons to hope: humans are fundamentally hoping creatures.<sup>15</sup> Hope has to do with the future and involves an expectation that a good that is desired can be attained or achieved. And if we do not believe that a future awaits—a future that promises solutions to problems, improved living conditions, flourishing lives for humans and other creatures—then what motivation do we have to live into that future, much less do the hard work that addressing the perils of the Anthropocene requires?

### 3. Christian Accounts of Hope

In Christian thought, hope has long been regarded as a virtue. In fact, it is one of the three *theological* virtues. “And now faith, hope, and love abide”, wrote the apostle Paul at the end of his well-known discourse on love found in chapter 13 of his first letter to the Corinthian church. Ever since, Christians have regarded these “virtues” as fundamental, even constitutive, of a person’s relationship with God: that is, of the spiritual life. Thus, in response to the crisis of hope brought on by eco-anxiety, Christian theologians have a long history of reflection on hope from which to draw. Not all Christian accounts of hope, however, are necessarily helpful for living through the vulnerabilities with which climate crisis confronts humanity. In this section, I examine and critique two Christian accounts of hope, one classical and a more recent one by an ecotheologian, before considering some elements of a re-imagined account of Christian hope for the Anthropocene.

Thomas Aquinas’s account of hope has been widely influential since he articulated it in the 13th century; we derive from it the notion of “theological virtues” (as opposed to “natural virtues”). In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas explained that hope, as a *natural* passion, is “the desire for a future, difficult, yet possible good”.<sup>16</sup> As a *theological* virtue, Thomas locates hope in the will, as hope directs the will toward the good. Here, hope becomes a primary point of convergence for theology, spirituality, and ethics in Thomas’s work, because the ultimate good, the arduous good, toward which hope leads us, is God, in Godself, toward union with God. Hope is for the enjoyment of God’s presence. Further,

<sup>13</sup> Wallace-Wells, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> (Hansler 2019).

<sup>15</sup> e.g., (White 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II 40.1; (Doyle 2011; Cessario 2002).

this hope, as theological, is an *infused* virtue, meaning that it is not attainable through human efforts, but that it is given by God. As such, hope acts as a “stable disposition” that enables one to “endure difficulties on the way to realizing the Good”,<sup>17</sup> a good realized fully only in the next life. Should one pursue a good that is easily attainable without struggle, they are displaying merely desire and not hope. Indeed, hope is understood to be a *primary motivation for moral action*. Despair, in this rendering, is a vice in that it is the will turning from the Good. “People who despair acknowledge that the object hoped for is, in truth, a good to be pursued”, yet believe that it cannot be attained because it is too difficult. Because hope relies completely on the grace, mercy, and power of God, despair indicates a complete “absence of any transcendent hope in God’s mercy and power”.<sup>18</sup> Further, just as hope is the source of all other virtues in orienting one’s actions toward God, despair is “the source of other sins” in that it draws one away from moral action, denying “the infinity of God’s goodness and mercy”.<sup>19</sup>

Although Aquinas’s account of hope, only briefly treated here, is not directed toward an ecological ethic, its logic provides an interesting point for reflection in light of a climate chaos-related crisis of hope. If the hope for a better future, as expressed by some environmentalists and progressive politicians, is grounded in faith in technologies and the human willingness to adapt and change in order to avoid disaster, the source of hope for many Christians lies *beyond* human capacities. In Aquinas’s account of hope, it is founded on a transcendent metaphysical source. That is, it relies on a transcendent God to act on the human will to keep it moving toward a divinely established end—the beatific vision or salvation. Of course, the will may resist, but it will be resisting the inevitable fulfillment of nature and history ordained by God.<sup>20</sup> While Aquinas’s account focused on the person and on a non-material fulfillment, it takes place, as environmental philosopher Andrew Fiala notes, “within an account of creation that views history as progressive and linear. Theological hope involves reflection upon what was lost in the beginning of history and expectation about what can be attained in its end”.<sup>21</sup> This account could suggest that our currently unfolding ecotastrophe provides opportunities for spiritual growth and transformation through the practice of hope, anticipating a future creation restored to its primordial wholeness or fulfilled into some at-present unknown flourishing.<sup>22</sup>

Just as Aquinas’s account of hope for the human person relies on a transcendent, metaphysical source, many contemporary Christian eco-theological accounts of hope for “creation” rely, too, on the expectation of a transcendent future that comes about as the gift of a transcendent God whose power ultimately overcomes all forms of oppression, injustice, cruelty, and decay. The second example of Christian hope I explore is articulated by the Lutheran ecotheologian Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, who asserts, as the starting point for her account of hope in the Anthropocene, “Nothing is surer, no truth stronger than this breath-taking claim of Christian faith: that God—the Light of Life, the creating, liberating, healing, sustaining Source—loves this world and each of us with a love that will not diminish, a love more powerful than any other force in heaven or earth”.<sup>23</sup> In musing on where one might find the motivation and “moral-spiritual power” to resist despair and hopelessness in the face of colossal and intractable systems and structures that perpetuate economic and ecological injustice, she points to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which determines that “God’s life-saving, justice-seeking love is stronger than all else. In some way that we do not grasp, the last word is life raised up out of death. God ‘will not allow our complicity in this evil to defeat God’s being for us and for the good of all creation’”.<sup>24</sup> Part of the appeal of her account is that it locates hope for an ecological future and motivation for action to resist structural evil, climate injustice, and ecological catastrophe squarely within the Christian

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<sup>17</sup> (Boyd 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Doyle, *Thomas Aquinas on Hope*, p. 124.

<sup>19</sup> Aquinas, *ST II-II.20.1-2*; Doyle, *Ibid.*, pp. 124–25.

<sup>20</sup> See reflections on this by (Fiala 2016).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> (Moe-Lobeda 2017).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 537, quoting (Morse 1994).

prophetic and eschatological framework of the coming reign of God, the divine sovereign who is making and will make things right. Further, she points to resources and practices in the Christian tradition that seem to hold promise for motivating actions that might contribute to planetary healing. Her ethical vision consistently urges Christian people to respond with vigorous moral action as “God’s embodied presence in the world” (quoting Bonhoeffer). “The destiny of creation is abundant life for all”, she writes. Many people are paralyzed in what she calls a “moral inertia in the face of economic and ecological violence” which she attributes to “a lack of hope that it can change”. However, “the cross and the resurrection promise otherwise. They testify that in the face of death and destruction, God’s life-bringing power prevails. Soul-searing, life-shattering destruction and death are not the last word”. In the end, Moe-Lobeda declares that we must trust God to work this out: “While the forces of evil are fierce and virulent, the force of good—known in Christian tradition as divine love—will ultimately triumph . . . God, not humans, can and will save the world”.<sup>25</sup>

Theologians like Moe-Lobeda operate within the moral and theological frameworks of particular Christian traditions, attempting to render accounts of hope that resonate with historic Christian teaching. This is an admirable strength of her work: it is recognizable to the tradition’s adherents and contains rhetorical energy. However, I do not believe it is adequate to address our current crisis of hope because it relies too heavily on a God conceived as an all-powerful sovereign who will ultimately intervene to set things right.

Some critics of traditional religious accounts of hope, like environmental philosopher Michael Nelson, suggest that hope itself acts as a dangerous and counterproductive distraction, especially in its transcendental forms, working against motivating people to engage in rigorous action to combat climate change and its impacts.<sup>26</sup> Nelson says that such hope is a “placebo” that simply establishes the conditions for disillusionment, if hope is understood as promoting the expectation of a “restored creation”. Accounts like Aquinas’s, which relativize “secular” or “temporal hopes” in relation to the ultimate “eternal hope” in God, could be viewed as diminishing motivation for participation in life giving-moral action vis-à-vis the planet.<sup>27</sup> Accounts of hope like Moe-Lobeda’s seem to minimize what science tells us about our planetary future (and present) in favor of a projected future in which we must trust God, an omnipotent divine sovereign, to take care of us in order to avoid a catastrophic future. Indeed, Whitney Bauman has critiqued accounts of what he calls “the Omni-God, creator *ex nihilo*” who “has been used as a transcendent space for hope (in the form of eschatological new creations) and blame (in the form of theodical questions)”. One of Bauman’s points is that this theology of transcendence “becomes a space of denial of responsibility for human actions”.<sup>28</sup> He goes on to argue that this denial is actually a denial of the reality of how the planet has evolved and how it works, as it chooses to embrace a transcendent and idealistic notion of harmony (one that will be restored by “Omni God”) rather than an understanding of how things actually are. This serves to blur our vision about what humans are responsible for and what we are not: in the end, both social and moral “evils” (such as poverty) and “natural evils” (such as predator–prey relations and death) will be eliminated by “Omni God”. I would add that this theology of transcendence denies the scientific accounts of what is actually happening to the planet now and what possibilities for renewal we are foreclosing.

Finally, both the secular writers treated in Section 2, who encourage their readers to choose hope, and the theologians who, like Aquinas, identify despair as a sin, ignore what research on eco-anxiety indicates about human nature. The former (i.e., those who believe we will think, invent, and engineer our way out of the climate crisis) attribute a loss of ecological hope to a failure of will and imagination, while the latter (the theologians) view it as a failure of faith and morality. Both of these attributions

<sup>25</sup> (Moe-Lobeda 2013).

<sup>26</sup> (Nelson 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Doyle argues that while Aquinas’s account of hope *could* be viewed this way, it *should not* be if read properly. Doyle, *Thomas Aquinas on Hope*, pp. 120–33.

<sup>28</sup> (Bauman 2009).

fail to grapple with the very real psychic and emotional tolls that the Anthropocene takes on the lived experience of persons and communities. If what Wallace-Wells, Flannery, McKibben, and others outline in the first parts of their books is true, then most talk of hope amounts to whistling in the hurricane. Despair, anxiety, depression, and loss of hope actually seem to be reasonable responses. Further, identifying these responses as sinful seems ignorant and cruel. Thus, what is called for now is a radical rethinking of what hope means in Christian terms. What might a more adequate account of Christian hope for the Anthropocene look like?

#### 4. Embracing Hope(lessness)

In a recent *New Yorker* essay entitled “What if We Stopped Pretending?”, Jonathan Franzen writes, “If you care about the planet, and about the people and animals who live on it, there are two ways to think about this. You can go on hoping that catastrophe is preventable, and feel ever more frustrated or enraged by the world’s inaction. Or you can accept that disaster is coming, and begin to rethink what it means to have hope”.<sup>29</sup> Following Franzen’s second way, I suggest that the first step toward reimagining Christian hope in the Anthropocene is to stop pretending and to embrace hopelessness. I am borrowing the notion of “embracing hopelessness” from Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre.<sup>30</sup> In his recent book on hopelessness, writing to the pain and suffering of billions of the world’s poor who experience the crushing burden of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation and oppression, De La Torre asserts that “hope is possible when privilege allows for a future”. He explains that hope, “as a middle class privilege, soothes the conscience of those complicit with oppressive structures, lulling them to do nothing except look forward to a salvific future where every wrong will be righted and every tear wiped away, while numbing themselves to the pain of those oppressed, lest that pain motivate them to take radical action”. De La Torre goes on to declare that “The first step toward liberation requires the crucifixion of hope . . . the realization that there is nothing to lose becomes a catalyst for action”.<sup>31</sup> I acknowledge that, as one who enjoys a great deal of “middle class privilege”, the worst impacts of climate change will fall upon those of whom De La Torre writes while others of us will fare better. However, the time is approaching when fewer and fewer will fare well—even many of the privileged—as we have less and less to lose, as the losses mount. Although De La Torre’s work is not about the climate crisis per se, I take his suggestion to embrace hopelessness as suggestive—even generative—for a reimagined account of Christian hope in the Anthropocene.

To embrace hopelessness as a first step in reimagining hope means to accept that we are in the midst of an utterly disorienting, overwhelming, and intractable crisis and that the conditions that threaten life and well-being on Earth are going to get worse. To release a false sense of hope that things are going to get fixed—by political will, technology, or an “Omni God”—provides clarity and a more realistic set of expectations. Any credible account of hope will begin with truth-telling, which includes accepting what climate scientists are telling us about the future unclouded by false hopes *and* coming to terms with human responsibility for our current condition.<sup>32</sup> Roy Scranton’s *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* is an exception among the titles addressed earlier in that he does not try to peddle optimism that things are going to get better, that there will be a last minute rally to avoid disaster. Scranton writes that “The greatest challenge we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is already dead”.<sup>33</sup> Scranton draws on his time as a soldier in Iraq to argue that the human future depends on accepting the fact that our civilization is already in its death throes, just as he had to

<sup>29</sup> (Franzen 2019).

<sup>30</sup> (De La Torre 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 5–6.

<sup>32</sup> Truth-telling about climate crisis will also involve persons in the world’s most industrialized and developed nations—i.e., the Western colonial powers—to acknowledge their greater complicity in bringing about the crisis and to take steps to aid persons and communities that have lesser responsibility for the crisis but will suffer disproportionate impacts. Theologically, we would call this confession, repentance, and restitution.

<sup>33</sup> Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, p. 23.

come to terms with the inevitability of his own death, not just in order to survive, but also so as to function in the midst of war.<sup>34</sup>

The Jesuit priest Walter Burghardt famously described contemplation as a “long loving look at the real”. For Burghardt, human wholeness emerges from a willingness to allow one’s whole self to respond to what is most real in the world. This includes the appreciation of beauty and virtue, but it also involves gazing, clear-eyed and lovingly, on the broken and the tragic. The “real” includes war, poverty, disease, and climate chaos. “Contemplation does not always summon up delight”, warned Burghardt. It also involves confession and grief.<sup>35</sup> If we are to live into the future in the best ways possible, we will have to embrace a faith, hope, and love that are capable of acknowledging the realities of our diminishment and capable of helping us to face the world as it is, the world we have made. As the spiritual writer Margaret Swedish wrote several years ago, faith must be able to “encompass our ecological crisis, provide it with content and meaning”, insisting that “we need a spiritual space large enough to contain all of our fears and hopes, our questions and our bewilderment”.<sup>36</sup> Any account of hope that dismisses, discounts, or cannot face our realities or include our anxieties will, indeed, be a placebo.

A second aspect of a credible account of hope in the Anthropocene is an expanded notion of the experience of God or the Sacred. Swedish writes that we need “Faith that can enlighten and inform all this disturbing news by providing a framework of meaning for it, a place for an experience of the Divine *within* it”.<sup>37</sup> The Christian quest for the Sacred through much of history has largely sought God *outside* of or above the natural world. The logic of that quest has caused humans to attempt to extract ourselves from the rest of the world. The dualisms of matter/flesh and spirit, sacred and profane, heaven and earth, Creator and creation that run throughout the history of Western Christianity have served to desacralize the world of “nature” and located the quest for God in an otherworldly sphere and in the realm of ideas or reason. As many scholars have shown, the quest for God outside of or apart from the earthly has contributed to the establishment of hierarchies in which, in the earthly sphere, humans have established themselves at the top, hovering above the rest of a world seen as external to humanity.<sup>38</sup> Such a view of the world understood “nature” to be a resource to subjugate and exploit to the fullest. Such a view has greatly contributed to the crisis we now face.

There are many Christian—and other religious and non-religious—accounts of spirituality that find the sacred embedded within the world; a new account of hope needs this. Partly, this means acknowledging that we are a part of a larger whole and celebrating our connection to a vast, remarkable, mysterious, and still vital world. As Dahr Jamail writes, it means being present—fully alive to—what remains of beauty and wholeness, even as we grieve what we are losing.<sup>39</sup> It also means learning to experience the sacred in “nature” or “nature” *as* sacred, becoming comfortable with that, and learning to speak about that experience vividly. Many examples of this are available to us. Sallie McFague has offered a model of theological language along these lines, naming the Earth itself as “the body of God”. That is, she understands God as embodied in the universe itself, and all bodies on the planet as incarnations of God.<sup>40</sup> Theologian Mark Wallace has written eloquently of his “palpable experience of

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 13–27.

<sup>35</sup> Dahr Jamail’s *The End of Ice*, like Scranton’s work, is an exception to the literature on climate crisis cited in this essay. Reporting on his journeys around the globe observing the effects of climate change on glaciers, coral reefs, and indigenous cultures in the Arctic, Jamail also refuses to promote optimism that we might restore what has been lost. Rather, in an elegiac work, Jamail encourages us to grieve what we are losing, to give ourselves to the work of repair without expecting a particular outcome, and, like Scranton, to ask ourselves who we now want to become and how we want to live in this time. (Jamail 2019). There is much literature on grief as a response to ecological loss, both academic and theological, thus I will not treat it here.

<sup>36</sup> (Swedish 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> e.g., (Merchant 1980; Plumwood 1993, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> Jamail, *The End of Ice*, pp. 214–15.

<sup>40</sup> (McFague 1993).

God in the Earth”, swimming in a Mississippi coastal river as a child and hearing an ancient, mournful song of Pascagoula legend in the water. “The river was a site of numinous powers, greater than myself, that both transcended and interpenetrated the everyday world of boyhood activity I normally inhabited”, he recalls. “God, I sensed, was in the river, but God was also beyond the river”.<sup>41</sup> This childhood memory serves as the basis for Wallace’s book on the relationship between God and the world. Finally, Lisa Dahill gives us a wonderful example of speaking about finding God in the world in her address to the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality a few years ago. Describing her own spiritual transformation, Dahill tells how her discernment led her outside of traditional modes of Christian discourse, practice, and experience, literally to the outside—to the woods, the creeks, the wind—as the space of sacred encounter. She writes, “Jesus is dissolved: all that’s left is the wind . . . the *literal* wind, the outdoor wind breathed from trees and cold fronts that fills my lungs”.<sup>42</sup> Christian hope in a time of climate crisis must relinquish ideas of a God radically separated from this world who is expected to intervene from outside to repair the damage we have done. It must relocate notions of the experience of God from transcendent ether-worlds to this Earthy-world so that our conception of the encounter with the sacred is radically immanent.

Finally, a re-imagined hope emerging from an embrace of hopelessness will see virtuous action on behalf of the Earth and its inhabitants as a good in itself rather than as a means to an end. Many environmental ethicists cling to consequentialist accounts because they insist that motivation to action requires outcomes that people can anticipate. Those who research eco-anxiety report that a perceived loss of agency and lack of belief that one’s actions have any meaning in the midst of a crisis of such overwhelming proportions is one of the underlying causes of feelings of despair. However, others argue that relinquishing hopes that our virtuous actions will save the planet from ruin means that we are freeing ourselves to engage in life-giving practices.

The environmental activist and writer Derrick Jensen muses, “When you give up on hope, you turn away from fear”. Jensen goes on to argue that hope in the traditional sense allows the people, institutions, and ideas that are wrecking the planet to maintain control. “When you quit relying on hope, and instead begin to protect the people, things, and places you love, you become very dangerous indeed to those in power”. When we realize the agency we do have, reasons Jensen, “we no longer have to ‘hope’ at all. We simply do the work”.<sup>43</sup> Here Jensen seems to echo De La Torre’s suggestion that releasing hope spurs action.

Scranton argues that our approach to the Anthropocene has to do with who we want to be—our humanity. He writes: “The conceptual and existential problems that the Anthropocene poses are precisely those that have always been at the heart of humanistic inquiry: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live? What is truth? What is good? In the world of the Anthropocene, the question of individual mortality—What does my life mean in the face of death?—is universalized”.<sup>44</sup> Scranton argues that our circumstances call for a “new humanism”, a moral and philosophical reckoning in which humans accept responsibility for our contributions to geo-planetary catastrophe and look to our cultural heritages—the philosophical, literary, and artistic inheritance of the world’s many cultures—for wisdom about how to live (and die) in this altered world.

Theologically, Paul Tillich’s reflections on hope offered in the face of the threat of nuclear war are instructive on this point. Genuine hope, for Tillich, must be distinguished from utopian expectations, and that distinction lies in the grounds of hope that are evident in the present. Utopian expectations—i.e., expectations of a dramatic reversal in planetary climate chaos—have no basis in the present. However, according to Tillich, “the basis for *genuine* hope is that there is something present of that which is hoped

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<sup>41</sup> (Wallace 2005).

<sup>42</sup> (Dahill 2016).

<sup>43</sup> (Jensen 2006).

<sup>44</sup> Scranton, *Learning to Die*, p. 20.

for, as in the seed of something of the coming plant is present”.<sup>45</sup> These “seeds of hope” consist of any acts of love, justice, or mercy we might manage; they *are* the manifestations of hope in themselves. Tillich warned that we should not understand the goal of history as moving in linear fashion toward some state of future perfection or restoration, but that we must work toward what is *possible* in every given circumstance: our struggle is against “the forces of evil, old ones and new ones, which arise in each period in a different way”. However, “every victory, every particular progress from injustice to more justice, from suffering to more happiness, from hostility to more peace, from separation to more unity anywhere in [hu]mankind, is a manifestation of the eternal in time and space”. Tillich identifies this as the coming of the reign of God. Planting “seeds of hope” by acting for the sake of acting realizes God’s reign in the moment, for each seed contains within it a trace of that for which one hopes.<sup>46</sup> Thus, without any illusions that actions on behalf of justice, community, and sustainability will bear results, we engage in them in order to become more human and to create space for the experience of God’s reign in the present. Hope becomes an enacted phenomenon rather than an idealistic projection.

Theological and philosophical reflections on the nature of hope will not, by themselves, overcome the crushing angst, fear, and despair of those who experience eco-anxiety. However, releasing unrealistic and overly optimistic notions of hope that rely on technological innovation or a divine sovereign to intervene can create space for clarity and free us from paralyzing anxiety and fear. The first step to imagining a credible, generative account of Christian hope in the Anthropocene is to embrace hopelessness, not as a vice but as a virtue. When we no longer cling to delusional notions of restoration or rescue from outside, we do the work that points the way beyond despair, seeking wisdom to live more humanly.

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<sup>45</sup> (Tillich 1990). Emphasis mine.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 188–89.

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