Eco-Reformation, Deep Incarnation and Lutheran Perspectives on the Universe Story

Barbara R. Rossing

Universe Story, Evolutionary Cosmology and Ecology

The new "universe story" of evolutionary science and living cosmology is a story Lutherans embrace. I am deeply grateful for the ways the work of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology has played a part in shaping Lutheran voices. At the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago we regularly show the film “Journey of the Universe,” through Zygon Center for Religion and Science. We teach evolution. Our students learn the story of living cosmology through a pair of science and theology courses: the "Epic of Creation,” with lectures by astrophysicists, geologists, evolutionary biologists, and ecologists; and “The Future of Creation,” an ecological course featuring climatologists and environmental scientists and activists.1 The goal is for seminary students and future pastors to take an understanding of evolutionary cosmology into their churches, through having engaged scientists and the science, as part of their faith.

Lutherans have long been involved in interdisciplinary reflection on ecology and theology. The pioneering eco-theological work and influence of Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler in some ways parallels that of Roman Catholic Thomas Berry. Sittler’s 1961 speech to the World Council of Churches Assembly in New Delhi constituted a kind of turning point for Protestant and ecumenical theology, challenging churches to make ecological thinking central to their life.2 Sittler called for a Christology of nature, emphasizing the cosmic Christ of Colossians 1, the fact that God came to reconcile not only humans but ta panta, “all things” (Col. 1:15-20). Sittler had already begun addressing environmental concern in his 1954 essay “A Theology for Earth,” a theme he expanded in the New Delhi lecture as well as two subsequent volumes of essays.3 Sittler’s love of poetry, combined with attention to the quirky details of nature, makes his writing deeply consonant with the joy and reverence of the universe story.

Many other Lutherans have continued the eco-theological work begun by Sittler, including historians, systematic theologians, biblical scholars, ethicists, liturgical scholars, missiologists, and others. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) issued a social statement in 1993, “Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice,” that set the framework for the church’s advocacy. Subsequent statements and pastoral letters have reiterated the church’s concern for climate justice, a position also underscored in testimony by ELCA bishops before the U.S. House and Senate.4 “Lutherans Restoring

1 Lutherans are proud of the fact that the judge who ruled against public schools’ teaching of Intelligent Design as “science” in the 2005 Dover Pennsylvania court case was a Lutheran, Judge John E. Jones III.
Creation,” founded by New Testament professor David Rhoads, provides resources for creation care and advocacy in Lutheran churches.

Not all Lutherans agree about the urgency of climate action, to be sure. One of the most extreme climate change deniers in the U.S. Congress is a Missouri Synod Lutheran, Rep Shimkus from Illinois—whose position is at odds even with his own very conservative Lutheran church. In the Bakken Oil Fields of western North Dakota, or the Marcellus Shale area of rural Pennsylvania, some Lutherans view the economic benefits of oil and gas fracking as outweighing the risk of climate change. Bishop Mark Narum of the Western North Dakota Synod urges Lutherans to listen more to such views.5 Lutherans—including conservative Lutherans—care deeply about World Hunger and global health, donating generously to programs such as the ELCA Hunger Program, Bread for the World, and the ELCA Malaria Appeal. Framing climate change in terms of hunger or human health effects, rather than as an environmental issue, may have more strategic resonances with conservative Lutherans.6

Globally, international Lutheran voices contribute much to ecological theology. The archbishop of the largest global Lutheran Church, the Church of Sweden, Antje Jackelen, has made climate justice advocacy the signature element of her public leadership.7 An international Lutheran World Federation study program has pondered theological questions related to climate change.8 The LWF is has been active climate justice advocacy work, in partnership with the World Council of Churches. The LWF plans to observe the 2017 anniversary of the Reformation with strong attention to ecological justice, under the three-fold theme of “Salvation—Not for Sale,” “Humans—Not for Sale” and “Creation—Not for Sale.”

A New Eco-Reformation?

Lutherans love the Reformation. As we approach the 500th anniversary of the event in October 1517 when Martin Luther published his 95 theses on the Wittenberg Castle Church door, one question is how we will commemorate the anniversary. Thanks to the achievements of decades of ecumenical dialogs, including the “Joint Declaration Change: Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives, March 25, 2009,” in Currents in Theology and Mission 37 (2010) 138-40. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton,

5 Bishop Mark Narum, “Prairie, Petroleum, Pondering: What Does this Mean?” in Karla Bohmbach and Shauna Hannan, eds., Eco-Lutheranism: Lutheran Perspectives on Ecology (Lutheran University Press 2013), 144-56. One of the worst floods of the Souris River in Minot occurred in 2011, destroying many homes. The Western North Dakota Synod of the ELCA has been the recipient of the largest disaster relief funding of any ELCA synod. Yet the causal connections between flooding, more extreme precipitation, climate change, and the burning of fossil fuels, have not been drawn persuasively.

6 Anthony Leiserowitz of Yale Climate Communication suggests communicating the human health effects will persuade more people than an environment frame. (need specific reference)

7 See A Bishops’ Letter About the Climate (Uppsala: Church of Sweden, 2014); available in English at http://fore.research.yale.edu/files/A_Bishops_letter_about_the_climate_2014.pdf.

8 See the essays in God, Creation and Climate Change: Spiritual and Ethical Perspectives, ed. Karen Bloomquist (Lutheran World Federation Studies, 2009), following a visit to coastal villages of India experiencing severe flooding. My own essay is “God’s Lament for the Earth: Climate Change, Apocalypse and the Urgent Kairos Moment,” pp. 129-143.
on Justification,” Lutherans and Roman Catholics no longer engage in polemics, unlike earlier anniversaries of the Reformation. An amazing joint statement, “From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017,” has been issued by both the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation. At the seminary where I teach we plan to organize a joint event with the Roman Catholic seminary in our consortium, the Catholic Theological Union. We hope this will also include reflection on Pope Francis’ encyclical on climate change.

What aspects of church and society still need reforming today, leading up to the quincentenary? This is a question many of us are asking, underscoring the Reforming principal of a church that is “always reforming” (ecclesia semper reformanda). A number of theologians have signed an open letter to our presiding bishop and 65 bishops urging that the anniversary be an occasion for an eco-Reformation in Lutheran churches. Commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation comes at an urgent kairos moment for the creation. We believe this is a time for a new reformation that turns the church towards earth justice and earth-healing:

“To bring ecological justice into the ongoing Reformation of the church testifies to the living nature of the Lutheran tradition and witnesses to the scope of God’s redemption of the whole world. We therefore write in solidarity with Lutherans around the world and a growing number of ELCA pastors, laity, theologians, teachers, authors, and activists whose Christian faith compels us to care deeply about creation and all inhabitants of Earth.”

We hope the ELCA and its bishops will make the Eco-Reformation “kairos” theme central in its worship, theology, Bible study and other commemorative activities, leading up to the Reformation anniversary.

Lutheran Theology and Ecology

1. Joyful Panentheism and Deep Incarnation: God in All Things

Martin Luther loved creation. He believed in the presence of God in all creation. His insistence that the finite can really hold the infinite, finitum capax infiniti, is a principle he argued most vehemently in his writings on the Lord’s Supper against the Calvinists. “Deep incarnation” is a phrase coined by Danish Lutheran Niels Gregersen to express the idea of the radical incarnation of God in all matter. Incarnational and sacramental theology insists that God is present, as Luther says, “in every little seed, whole and entire…Christ is present in all creatures, and I might find [Christ] in stone, in

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fire, in water, or even in a rope, for [Christ] is there.” 12 Larry Rasmussen and others call this Luther’s “joyous panentheism.” Today, in the face of creation’s suffering, we can embrace Luther’s joyous insistence that God is present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power.13

To be sure, Luther’s radical incarnational vision is not always voiced in Lutheran pews. Though Sittler and others already pointed Lutherans towards the cosmic Christ and earth-embracing eschatology of Colossians more than 50 years ago, an anti-earth escapist strand Lutheran Norm Habel labels as “heavenism” is deeply engrained in many quarters.14 We often fall back into thinking that the goal of salvation is to take souls to heaven after death, leaving earth behind. Older Lutheran hymnals even contained the hymn “This Earth is Not My Home.” But this is not good Lutheran theology. Our teaching about heaven and eschatology, as well as our hymnody, needs reforming, in order to fully live into “joyful panentheism” that embraces earth.15

2. Indigenous Voices.

Indigenous communities’ spiritual perspectives can help us recover a Lutheran emphasis on the goodness of creation. Challenging the up-down polarity of much theology, George Tinker underscores the “deeply embedded Indian cultural notion of relatedness”—a relatedness that extends to all of life. In critiquing much of Western science and technology, Tinker’s perspective is resonant with the emphases of the universe story.16 Similarly, Lutheran theologian Tore Johnson, a member of the Sami community living in the Arctic region of Nordic countries, underscores the communal nature of creation, in which all living beings are seen as inter-related in a circle of life. “Sami tradition reflects the idea that creation has a voice that should be listened to.”17

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14 The term “heavenist” was coined by Norman Habel: ‘Heavenism’ is the belief that heaven, as God’s home, is also the true home of Christians…Earth, by contrast, is only a temporary ‘stopping place’ for Christians en route to heaven.” See “Ecojustice Hermeneutics: Reflections and Challenges” in The Earth Story in the New Testament, ed. Norman Habel and Vicky Balabanski (The Earth Bible volume 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 3-4.
15 On reforming eschatology to embrace the healing of the world, see Barbara Rossing, “River of Life in God’s New Jerusalem: An Eschatological Vision for Earth’s Future,” in Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds., Christianity and Ecology (Harvard Center for World Religions, 2000), 205-224.
Johnson calls for an eco-theological starting point that begins with creation, doing “theology from the circle of life.”

3. Theology of the cross.

Lutheran theology of the cross—the insistence that God is present also and even most of all in brokenness and pain—can help us face the structural sin of ecological devastation and formulate an analysis of both sin and redemption capable of addressing this crisis. Brazilians Wanda Deifelt and Vitor Westhelle have done important work connecting the cross to eco-justice. Biblical scholar Monica Melanchthon brings Dalit perspectives from India. African American Lutheran Richard Perry, and Larry Rasmussen, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda and James Martin-Schramm, have all done important work.

**Living Cosmology’s Challenges to the Economic Claims of Extractive Capitalism**

Extending the Reformation ecologically can also mean challenging the very logic of neoliberal economic globalization. An international group of Lutherans and Reformed scholars have developed a series of papers under the theme of “Radicalizing Reformation.” Their 94 Theses underscore a biblical and Lutheran priority for those who have been left out and marginalized by current economic structures.

Such a radical economic and social critique is consonant with the universe story. The “old story” over against which we need to lift up a new universe story today, was not only bad science and bad theology in terms of “heavenism.” It was also an old story of slavery and oppression—as told from the perspective of hegemonic empires. Biblical scholars underscore that the Hebrew Bible and New Testament were written over against the cosmologies of empires—whether the Babylonian Empire or the Seleucid Empire, or the Roman empire. Empires promoted their own cosmologies and eschatologies, telling their empire story about who we are as humans and how the world works. Over against those imperial stories biblical authors declared a bold, prophetic “no.” They told a new story of how the world works, a new cosmology.

Five hundred years ago, when the capitalist economic system was still nascent. Luther’s bold economic critique called for reform not only of the church but also of the debt structure of society that impoverished many. Luther’s writings “On Usury” and other writings are more radical than we have realized, as Argentinean Guillermo Hansen points out. He was clear that the worst idolatry was worship of Mammon. So too today, at a time when extractive capitalism is functioning as a sort of “gospel” or “religion,” Lutheran theology must offer a critique.

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18 Ibid, 106
19 See Wanda Deifelt, “From Cross to Tree of Life: Creation as God’s Mask,” in Karla Bohmbach and Shauna Hannan (eds), *Eco-Lutheranism: Lutheran Perspectives on Ecology* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2013), 169–76
We live at a time when the “good” and “goods” are commodified, but nature and the atmosphere are still treated as a sewer or as a resource with no value, as the 1999 ELCA Social Statement *Economic Life: Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, declares: “Too often the earth has been treated as a waste receptacle and a limitless storehouse of raw materials to be used up for the sake of economic growth, rather than as a finite, fragile ecological system upon which human and all other life depends.”

An economic critique has not always been at the heart of Lutheran social teaching, but it is grounded in Luther’s own work, as well as in the Bible. Ecology and economy are closely connected, both deriving from the Greek word *oikos* (house). We live together in the “world house,” as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called this planet.

**Embodied Hope: Living Cosmology in Liturgy, Sacraments and Local Communities**

The Eco-Reformation message of living cosmology takes form in faith practices and communities. Hope for the future is Christianity’s greatest gift, and one that is urgently needed today. A local pastor tells me climate change is a pastoral issue: young couples who come to her say they don’t want to have children. When LWF surveyed people about how they are experiencing the effects of climate change, in the poorest countries the pastoral question was “Why is God punishing us?” Global warming raises profound biblical and theological questions, speaking to the heart of cosmology as well as pastoral care. Despair is a great temptation.

Churches, camps, retreat centers, church yards and gardens, all need to be local cells of hope, community and solidarity. Worship and the arts shape Christian imagination. The way we tell our story matters. Where the body of Christ meets to share the body of Christ, we learn to see the world differently. We learn to give our testimony. We learn to tell the story of the universe as a story of living cosmology, of a tree of life with leaves “for the healing of the world, as scripture says (Rev 22:2).

One way we tell the universe story is liturgically. Our songs, our liturgies are profoundly ecological, as Ben Stewart reminds us about the Easter Vigil, and Lisa Dahill reminds us by taking worship outdoors. The lectionary also shapes Lutheran worship and faith. Two bold Lutheran biblical scholars, David Rhoads and Norman Habel, and a theologian/pastor, Paul Santmire, propose changing the lectionary from September 1 to October 4, St. Francis Day, to a set of scripture texts for the “Season of Creation.” They have chosen a three-year cycle of different scripture texts for “Season of Creation.” Sundays include River Sunday, Tree Sunday; Storm Sunday; Ocean Sunday, and more.

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Symbolic action matters, as those who practice civil disobedience remind us. Luther probably never said the apocryphal statement, “If I knew the world were going to end I would plant a tree.” But Lutherans do plant trees! The Northern diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, overseen by Bishop Frederick Shoo, requires tree-planting as part of wedding ceremonies, confirmations, and other liturgies. Described as a kind of Lutheran Johnny Appleseed, Bishop Shoo oversees 500,000 members and 164 parishes, encouraging tree-planting in order to address global warming. Tree planting is an important ministry in urban churches such as Bethel New Life in inner-city Chicago. Lutherans are working to embody their ecological commitments on the ground, through wind turbines at Lutheran colleges, solar panels on church roofs, and energy conservation loan funds and initiatives.

Students preparing for ordination are expected to take seriously creation care. For some years, ELCA Lutheran seminary students have been required to subscribe to the Statement of “Vision and Expectations for Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).” But until 2009, and the decision to ordain gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships, scrutiny had focused on sexuality. Now we are seeking to turn the attention of candidacy committees and judicatory bodies also to the section of the document on creation care, which stipulates that:

“This church expects that its ordained ministers will be exemplary stewards of the earth’s resources, and that they will lead this church in the stewardship of God’s creation.”

The “Visions and Expectations” statement makes clear that candidates are expected to “speak on behalf of this earth, its environment and natural resources and its inhabitants.”

To take seriously the Reformation today means to be on a reforming journey—a journey that reforms the way we tell and live our story, bringing the universe story and the urgency of ecological science into conversation with Lutheran confessional writings and practices. Creation is the dwelling place of God, Luther taught. The universe is Christ’s home. These are radical truths, proclaiming God’s radical “yes”—a yes of love, for the universe and for all of us.