



HOW WOULD
WE KNOW WHAT
GOD IS UP TO?

Edited by
Ernst M. Conradie & Cynthia Moe-Lobeda

AN EARTHED FAITH:
Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”
Volume 2

HOW WOULD WE KNOW WHAT GOD IS UP TO?



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Editors

Ernst M. Conradie
Cynthia Moe-Lobeda



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Research Justification

This is the second volume in a series entitled “An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the ‘Anthropocene’.” The series builds upon an international collaborative project (2007–2014) on “Christian Faith and the Earth” that involved more than 100 leading scholars in the field of Christian ecotheology. Because Christianity is widely regarded as complicit in ecological destruction, a crucial part of any response to the impact of the “Anthropocene” has to include a critique and constructive reinterpretation of the Christian faith. The series addresses this challenge through ecumenical collaboration between the leading scholars in the field, together with some emerging voices. The ambitious aim is to capture the state of the current debate on twelve core themes and then take the debate forward through a set of constructive contributions that optimize diversity in terms of geographical contexts, confessional traditions, theological schools, and issues of gender, race, language, and age. The contributors for each volume have been handpicked accordingly. Each volume includes an introductory essay that seeks to capture the current state of the debate and then outlines a core, unresolved question that has to be addressed in order to take the debate forward. The rest of the volume is structured in the form of ten constructive responses to this question, engaging with each other through cross-references. Such engagement is made possible through a series of meetings between contributors to critique each other’s work and through a concluding conversation between the authors on the difference that this volume has made to the state of the scholarly debate.

For the second volume, this question is formulated as follows: Given what we know about the “Anthropocene,” how does one even begin to answer the question: What is this God up to? And how would we know how to respond to that? These are questions of theological method, including the sources and interlocutors of Christian theology, its aims and starting points, social theories shaping it, and presuppositions grounding it. There is no consensus on the appropriate method for Christian ecotheology, as the editors demonstrate in the introductory essay. The contributors come literally from around the globe, namely Ernst Conradie (South Africa), Heather Eaton (Canada), Guillermo Kerber (Uruguay/Geneva), Loreen Maseno (Kenya), Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis (Panama), Cynthia Moe-Lobeda (USA), Jea Sophia Oh (Korea/USA), Maina Talia (Tuvalu), and George Zachariah (India/New Zealand). Each of them has a remarkable record of publications and builds on that by offering a constructive attempt to address the question. It would be arrogant to claim that this volume could resolve the question that is addressed here, but any future scholarly contributions in ecotheology on issues of method would arguably need to be on the basis of and with reference to this volume. In this way, the ambitious aim is to shape the future of the debate by identifying “current paths” and suggesting “emerging horizons” in the field. Although each contributor necessarily builds upon previous work in the field and is invited accordingly, each contribution is original. Self-plagiarism is avoided through careful referencing to such previous work. The volume is written by leading scholars and aimed at other scholars, primarily in the fields of Christian ecotheology and systematic theology.

Ernst M. Conradie, Department of Religion and Theology, Faculty of Arts, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa.

Artist statement

Lucy D'Souza-Krone was born in 1949 in a village in Goa on the Western coast of India. Her family later moved to Dehra Dun at the foothills of the Himalayas. Childhood in a village on the shores of Goa and then her life within sight of majestic Himalayan mountains left impressions which appear frequently in Lucy's paintings: earth, water, the sky and trees.

From 1976 onwards Lucy was a member of the spiritual community of the "Kristsevikas", who were active for the education of women in rural India. In 1983 she joined INSCAPE (Indian School of Art for Peace), an Ashram near Bangalore founded by the Christian painter Jyoti Sahi. This Ashram, whose members live and work in community, is a house of encounter between Indian culture and Christianity. In 1996 she married and has since then lived in Germany with her husband. She is invited to exhibitions and workshops around the world.

Lucy says: "For me, painting is my spiritual path to God, my prayer, my sadhana, as we say in India. For me, it is a path of self-knowledge and self-awareness, a way to stay in touch with my inner self and to come close to God. I usually take my motifs and themes from the Bible and relate them to spiritual, social, cultural and environmental concerns of our time. I also try to build a bridge between biblical themes and the scriptures of the Indian religions Hinduism and Buddhism. My special interest and commitment is the promotion of women and their creativity, but also peace and environmental issues, as well as inter-religious dialogue. India is a country whose great holy women and men have respected and loved nature and lived in harmony with it for centuries. I would like to follow in their footsteps and become more creative in every way. Perhaps I can inspire people of other cultures and peoples to do so."

The Tree and Cross Mandala

"From the beginning of my painting career I have been fascinated by trees and the elements (earth, water, fire, air and space). These creep up in most of my paintings in different forms. Here, in this mandala, a seed is sprouting in the center. The red cross has three different shades of red, representing the three days of death of Christ. His resurrection is depicted by the yellow behind the cross.

"The seed that dies bears abundant fruit. The green leaves around the cross are a sign of hope and new life. The red-orange flowers stand for the joy of life and fruitfulness together with the circle of wheat. In some Eastern churches the sprouting cross is an image often used to express the power of resurrection and the life forthcoming from it. This could inspire us in these days of climate change to care for our earth."

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Abbreviations and Acronyms and Figures Appearing in the Text and Notes

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

COP	Conference of the Parties
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
HRAF	Human Relations Area Files
IKS	Indigenous Knowledge Systems
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
ISCP	International Society of Chinese Philosophy
JPIC	Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation
LA	Latin American
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual and more
NGOs	non-governmental organizations
PLTS	Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
ROOTS	Retracing Our Own Traditions
SACP	Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SOUL	Save Our Unique Landscape
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
WCC	World Council of Churches
WMO	World Meteorological Organization

Figure List

Figure 1: Sets of factors influencing biblical and theological interpretation.

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Notes on Contributors

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An Earthed Faith: Envisaged Volumes in the Series

The following twelve volumes are envisaged in the series entitled “An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the ‘Anthropocene’”:

■ *Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin . . . (An Earthed Faith Volume 1)*

This volume will address the following question: How does the story of who the Triune God is and what this God does relate to the story of life on Earth? Is the Christian story part of the earth’s story or is the earth’s story part of God’s story, from creation to consummation? This raises many issues on the relatedness of religion and theology, the place of theology in multidisciplinary collaboration, the notion of revelation, the possibility of knowledge of God, hermeneutics, the difference between natural theology and a theology of nature, etc. The word “breath” in the title suggests the Spirit of God as a source of inspiration for the story, already present in any further deliberations. It hints at an Air of anticipation, indicated by the three dots in the title.

■ *How Would We Know What God is Up to? (An Earthed Faith Volume 2)*

This volume will address the following question: Given what we know about the “Anthropocene,” how does one even begin to answer the question: What is this God up to? How would we know how to respond to that? These are

questions of theological method, including the sources and interlocutors of Christian theology, its aims and starting points, social theories shaping it, and presuppositions grounding it. Addressing this question is the classic task of doing contextual theology, namely to describe and analyze the particular context that is addressed and to consider how this may best be addressed theologically. This question highlights the need for prophetic theology to discern the “signs of the time” to recognize a “moment of truth” (Kairos) and to discern counter-movements of the Spirit. Such methodological questions are necessary in order to tell the story of who God is and what God does amid the “Anthropocene.” In terms of narrative / rhetorical theory a focus on method requires attention to the plot upon which the narrative hinges; the sense of crisis that will draw together the characters; the exigencies that invite passion, reflection, and persuasion. Theological method is inherently a theological question about sin and salvation, creation and redemption, God and God’s world—and it shapes where the story may lead and how it may be told.

■ ***The Place of Story and the Story of Place?*** **(An Earthed Faith Volume 3)**

This volume will address the following question: “What difference does it make to the story of cosmic, planetary, human, and cultural evolution to re-describe this as the creative work of God’s love?” Inversely, what difference does it make to the story of God’s love to describe it in evolutionary terms? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on creation and cosmic, biological, hominid, and human evolution (the story of place). Such reflection on the beginning is of course not situated “in the beginning” but entails a narrative reconstruction of the story where current interests, positions of power, and fears are necessarily at stake (the place where the story is being told). This is a contested space, indeed a “site of struggle,” often dominated by issues of race rather than by grace. How, then, is this story to be told given a sense of place? It will not be possible to avoid questions around suffering, sin, evil, and the tragic (the theme of the next volume), but the focus will be on why on earth a loving God would deem this story to be “very good”—despite the prevalence of suffering, injustice, and oppression?

■ ***Making Room for the Story to Continue?*** **(An Earthed Faith Volume 4)**

This volume will address the following question: How could the suffering of God’s creatures in the “Anthropocene” be reconciled with trust in God’s loving care? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on

the classic themes related to the doctrine of providence, including *creatio continua*, *conservatio*, *gubernatio*, and *concursus*. For some, God's providence (common grace) is a necessary requirement to allow (to make room for) the history of salvation to proceed. For others, the suffering embedded in God's "good" creation requires responses to the theodicy problem: Why would a loving God allow creatures to suffer so much? What is the relationship between so-called natural evil and social evil? Is the underlying problem human sin, or is it the inadequacies, the tragic dimension, indeed the violence embedded in God's world? Again, this last question is hinted at in the question mark after the title.

■ ***The Saving Grace of the Story?*** **(An Earthed Faith Volume 5)**

This volume will address the following question: How is the Christian message of salvation to be interpreted given the current ecological destruction and apocalyptic fears associated with the "Anthropocene"? Is this message plausible given the failure of Christianity to address so many other urgent problems over 20 centuries? This will require theological reflection on Christological symbols such as atonement and Pneumatological symbols such as liberation, healing, reconciliation, regeneration, moral guidance, justification, and sanctification—insofar as these may be pertinent in the Age of the "Anthropocene." The title is ambiguous and ironic to indicate that the story is highly contested but is at best to be understood as good news for the whole Earth.

■ ***The Keepers of the Story?*** **(An Earthed Faith Volume 6)**

This volume will address the following question: What is the place and significance of the church in God's "household," now situated in the destabilizing context of the "Anthropocene"? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on the formation, upbuilding, and very nature of the church, on its many ministries and missions. Presumably, the question is no longer whether there is salvation outside of the church, but indeed whether there is salvation to be found within the church. Can it still be said that the church is God's main (even only) instrument (sign, sacrament, icon) to bring salvation given the challenges posed by the "Anthropocene"? Or is the task of the church the monastic one of "keeping" the story, that is, to maintain the inner secret to the mystery of history, amid dark clouds looming and despite few outsiders taking any notice? Does this not sound as if it is the church that needs to come to God's rescue or is the inverse true?

■ ***Where the Story Ends and its Ends . . .*** **(An Earthed Faith Volume 7)**

This volume will address the following question: How should the content and significance of Christian hope be understood in the context of the “Anthropocene”? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on the eschatological symbols of the final judgment as a sign of hope, on the resurrection of the dead, on the coming reign of God, and on eternal life. It will also have to assess whether such hope is to be understood as the restoration (neo-Calvinism), elevation (Roman Catholicism), replacement (Anabaptism), recycling (liberalism / secularism), or divinification / theosis (Eastern Orthodoxy) of this world. Does the meaning of the story lie in its end, or in the journey / pilgrimage toward that end? Any answer to such questions will remain provisional, hinted at in the three dots in the title.

■ ***Being Blessed as the Inner Logic of the Story?*** **(An Earthed Faith Volume 8)**

This volume will address the following question: Can the notion of being God’s chosen people / instrument be retained in a religiously plural world under the threat of the “Anthropocene”? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on the themes of divine election and vocation. Can “being blessed” by God be understood as the inner logic of the story? Is such blessing not often experienced as a curse? What about divine reprobation, punishment, and justice for the victims and perpetrators of history? How is a theology of religions to be understood in a context characterized by common threats, the need for tolerance and compassion across religious divides? How can Christians move beyond the options of exclusivism and relativism in the context of the “Anthropocene”? What does it mean to be blessed for the whole of creation to receive God’s blessing?

■ ***The Spirit of the Story?*** **(An Earthed Faith Volume 9)**

This volume will address questions around the identity and character of God’s Spirit. It will require theological reflection on how the very notion of spirit should be understood in relation to person, matter, ideas, force, energy, and related concepts. What does it mean that this Spirit is “holy” and makes things “holy”? Is this Spirit able to overcome what is “demonic” in the “Anthropocene”? Is it money or love that makes the world go round? Or is this Spirit the spirit that makes matter move, even if this movement is not all that obvious and requires discernment?

■ ***The Letter of the Story?*** **(An Earthed Faith Volume 10)**

This volume will address questions around the identity and character of Jesus of Nazareth, proclaimed to be the Christ, anointed by God's Spirit, the One who would inaugurate God's coming reign. It will require theological reflection on the significance of all six Christological symbols, namely (deep) Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, Ascension, Session, and Parousia, as these may relate to the coming of the "Anthropocene." If the cross is a concrete symbol of the history of imperialism and oppression, can the (bodily?) resurrection still function as an equally concrete symbol of hope in the "Anthropocene"? How is the interplay between the letter and the spirit of the story to be understood given long-standing ecumenical divides on the *filioque* controversy—that still divides the East and the West, the North and the South, over whether the Spirit works (only / primarily) on the basis of the Letter (as most so-called mainline churches assume)? Or should the relative independence of God's Spirit be emphasized (as many others emphasize)?

■ ***In Communion with the Story Teller(s)?*** **(An Earthed Faith Volume 11)**

This volume will address questions around the doctrine of the Trinity as the inner secret / apophatic mystery / doxological culmination of the Christian faith. It will offer theological reflection on how the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity are related by exploring God's identity and character. The question is which of God's characteristics need to be foregrounded in the Age of the "Anthropocene." In particular, how is God's mercy related to God's justice given the interactions between God as Father, Son, and Spirit? Can these (patriarchal) symbols be maintained in the "Anthropocene"? Should one favor the social analogy (emphasizing communion) or the psychological analogy (perhaps allowing for a more generic notion of God) for understanding the Trinity? What difference does faith in such a God make (if any) in the Age of the "Anthropocene"? Moreover, who is telling the story? Are we (Christians?) the ones responsible to tell the story or are we characters in a story ultimately told by Godself? Given these reflections, what does it mean to believe in "God" (a God, any God) in the world in which we now live? Note that this (philosophical) question is not addressed upfront but penultimately. For Christians the question remains whether this Triune God can be regarded as the ultimate mystery of the world?

■ ***What, then, is the Moral of the Story?*** **(An Earthed Faith Volume 12)**

This volume will address questions around the relationship between Christian doctrine, Christian ethics, Christian spirituality, and Christian praxis—between the ultimate and the penultimate, between the indicative of God’s grace and the imperative of ecological gratitude. Such relatedness has been there implicitly in all the other volumes but needs to be made explicit here. In dealing with climate change (for example), there is a need to find common moral ground with those standing in other religious traditions and with organizations in civil society. This has implications for all the relevant ethical categories—such as moral vision, virtues, duties, rights, responsibilities, values, middle axioms, action steps, etc. For Christians the question will be whether and if so how such common moral ground is deeply rooted in the story of who God is and what God has done, is doing, and will be doing.

Academic (finite) co-travellers who will dare to accept are invited in the ecotheological ‘Anthropocene period’ to journey together (without a roadmap), exploring the probing and unnerving question, ‘What is God up to?’ This question is exploringly posed and rigorously pursued in the book. The reader will find themselves enraptured by the breadth, depth, and height of a methodological approach to the uncharted landscape of the mystery of an (infinite) God, as well as sense-making narratives of our world – contextually and receptively and constructively, as well as sensitively.

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Since we live on a ‘planet in peril’, this proposed ecotheology summa is both timely and significant. This book and the series as a whole engage the perennial themes of systematic Christian theology from the perspective of the multiple strands of ecological reflection. I look forward to reading all the volumes of the “An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”” book series.

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