

Intercultural Ecotheology: Integral Visions of Healing

Elyse Rider

Abstract: This article examines the themes of healing and health from the perspective of intercultural ecotheology; a contemporary practical theology that seeks to address the fundamental problems facing humanity in the global era; namely our intercultural and ecological relations. I will be reviewing the writing of some contemporary intercultural ecotheologians whose work bridges the gaps between interfaith healing and ecological healing. Their main concerns lie in redressing the prevalence of severed, non-cooperative and isolationist ideologies and cultural tendencies in a context of globalisation where our unprecedented interdependency with other human cultures and the life world require unity, cooperation and mutual flourishing. Intercultural ecotheologians identify multiple sites for healing the divides that threaten our social, spiritual and ecological future. In surveying some key texts, this article identifies themes and works towards establishing a theoretical framework for this emerging field.

An exploration of ecotheology and interfaith dialogue engages the themes of health and healing on a number of levels. In recognising the physical embeddedness of our existence, ecotheology aims for health as embodied beings in an ecosystem of other human and more than human beings and entities. It reveals the quite literal links between the health of individuals as dependent on the health of communities and dependent on the health of the environment in which communities dwell. Ecotheology defines health broadly, it not only relates this embedded and interdependent health back to our physical being but also our social, cultural and spiritual being. In these aspects of health, ecotheology works to heal philosophical and cultural cuts and breakages. In practicing ecotheology, faith communities seek to heal the rift that has opened between their

religious practice and the ecological world that sustains their community.¹ They seek to heal the wounds that an often violent exploitation of the ecological environment or equally damaging denial of that physical world has painfully torn throughout the history of their religion.² This entails an acceptance and active engagement with their religious interpretation of the world which has allowed, or even encouraged this history and cultural condition. Here another site of healing can be identified, a healing of the rift between the members of faith communities and their religious doctrines, rituals and organisational structure. In practicing ecotheology, faith communities regain access to the transformative powers they hold as members, in becoming healers, they reclaim a role in the organic growth of their faith and the ability to contribute the lessons of their times to its future.

Similarly, the practice of interfaith dialogue is a healing practice. Like ecotheology, it too heals the gash that severs communities from their transformative and active powers of cultural growth, thus reconnecting vital vessels for the life blood of living faiths. On a more apparent and deliberate level interfaith dialogue works to heal the rifts between religious communities. It dares to imagine a seemingly impossible task of reconciliation, of connectivity between different and even violently opposing faiths and in doing so reveals that these faiths are not so opposed, that they have grown with

¹ Some examples of ecotheological communities or networks include: The Earth Song Community and Journal (Melbourne), The Jewish Ecological Coalition (Melbourne), Genesis Farm (New Jersey USA), Green Faith (International network based in USA), Common Belief and the Interfaith Call to Action network facilitated by the Climate Institute (Australia), The Interfaith Coalition for the Environment (USA), The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (international), The Muslim Alliance for Conservation (international).

² Peter Harrison. (Jan., 1999). 'Subduing the earth: Genesis 1, early modern science, and the exploitation of nature.' The Journal of Religion, v.79, n.1. 86-109.

each other, have influenced each other and shared much.³ Here, again, interfaith dialogue heals, not only across cultures but across time and history. It seeks to rejoin a severed and rarified present to the organic development of an embedded faith journey, a journey of seeking truth and wisdom. The present manifestation or state of that cultural journey is revealed as dynamic, rather than static, as developmental rather than timeless.

Globalization presents us with a new set of circumstances to which we must adapt our belief systems to in order to survive culturally and ecologically. The *oikos* (the Ancient Greek 'home' and the root word for our *eco*) has revealed its diversity in this era of globalisation; there are no longer impenetrable walls of terrain and distance between different peoples. We find others; other communities with different belief systems, closer and closer to our perceived homes. Cultural diversity is, now more than ever, a crucial aspect of our ecological context.⁴ The rise of 'identity politics' as a co-phenomenon of globalisation is symptomatic of our struggle to deal with facing up to the differences between us.⁵ Fundamentalism, has arisen as a fearful reaction to this context, it seeks to preserve and maintain belief systems as separate from the 'other'⁶ and in doing so enacts violence against both self and other, it wounds and shackles the members of faith communities as well as their 'outsiders.' In turning belief systems in on themselves, by

³ Koyama, Kosuke. (April 1999). 'A theological reflection on religious pluralism.' Ecumenical Review. v51, i2. 160-171.

⁴, Erika Cudworth (2005). *Developing Ecofeminist Theory: The Complexity of Difference*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ Henry Giroux. (1993). *Living Dangerously: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Difference*. New York, P. Lang.

⁶ Malise Ruthven. (2007). Fundamentalism: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford and London, Oxford University Press.

denying them room to grow and interact, fundamentalism can be understood as the negation of healthy living religion, it is, as Derrida explains, a violent auto-immune disorder where, the closed organism attacks itself in a confused attempt to maintain itself.⁷ In its hyper xenophobia, its phobia of all difference, fundamentalism generates a fear of a different future, and thus works to deny this future. To heal religion; to protect faith communities in multicultural and multi-faith societies against this highly contagious disease, new ways of imagining religious faith needs to be fostered which suit our contemporary socio-cultural and ecological circumstances and allow us a shared future where we can grow in and through our differences as well as our similarities. In imagining these future possibilities we can draw much from the past, revitalise the present and in doing so transform the future. The ecumenical calling, the call to spread Christianity globally, is from the Greek *oikoumene* meaning 'the inhabited earth,' it has expanded in its meaning and application in the contemporary context and lessened, if not eradicated the imperial overtones of this past. Ecumenism has developed into a call for unity and ecotheology reminds us to recognise these roots to the earthly aspects of that unity as we forge a shared future as earthly inhabitants.⁸

These various sites of healing in ecotheology and interfaith practice and theory provide us with a holistic vision of health. While interfaith dialogue and ecotheology are largely theorised and practiced as separate disciplines, an eco-critical reading of interfaith dialogue and a multicultural reading of ecotheology is beneficial to both fields in

⁷ Jacques Derrida. (1998) 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone.' Gil Anidjar (ed.) Acts of Religion. London and New York, Routledge. p 82.

⁸ Max Oelschaeger. (1994). Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis. New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

establishing a healthy community practice, a practice in which the principle of bio-diversity is applied more broadly to the context of mutual flourishing in bio-cultural diversity.⁹ I will focus on several key theorists who bring these themes together in an emerging body of work I will refer to as intercultural ecotheology. The work of theorists, practitioners and communities adopting this approach and contributing to its development provide an important counterpoint to fundamentalism as the defining path of religion in the era globalisation.¹⁰

Intercultural ecotheology literature, incorporates a variety of voices. Ecofeminists,¹¹ theologians,¹² scholars of comparative religion,¹³ sociologist,¹⁴ ecocritics,¹⁵ anthropologists¹⁶ and scientists¹⁷ have, from their interdisciplinary origins, made crucial connections between these aspects of the life-world. Out of the multiplicity of studies, theories and approaches emerging from this diversity I have identified five underpinning themes prominent in this literature which may provide us with a clearer

⁹ Paul Knitter. (1995). *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* Maryknoll and New York, Orbis Books.

¹⁰ Gerald Barney. (1999) *Threshold 2000: Critical Issues and Spiritual Values for a Global Age*. Arlington, Millennium Institute.

¹¹ Val Plumwood. (2002). *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London and New York, Routledge.

¹² Wayne Teasdale. (1999). *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*. Novato, New World Library.

¹³ Mary Evelyn Tucker. (2007) 'Ethics and Ecology: A Primary Challenge of the Dialogue of Civilizations.' *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophy for the Earth* Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (eds.) New York: Fordham University Press. 495-503

¹⁴ David Tacey. (2003). *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality*. Sydney, Harper Collins Publishers.

¹⁵ Kate Rigby. (2004). *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press.

¹⁶ Roy Rappaport. (1979). *Ecology, Meaning and Religion*. Berkeley, North Atlantic Books.

¹⁷ Humerto Maturana and Francisco Varela. (1987) *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*. Boston, Shambhala.

theoretical framework and enable a thematic exploration and critique according to our various faiths and disciplines. These themes include: first, a call for multidisciplinary as well as interfaith dialogue; second, an envisioning of integral utopias; third, an emphasis on the balance between unity and diversity; fourth, the use of postmodern constructivism in ethics development;¹⁸ and finally the use of ‘process thought’ to found an interpretation of the divine and religion as adaptive.¹⁹ In this essay I will limit my discussion to the first three of these five themes drawing on several exemplary texts by Jay McDaniel, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Baird Callicott. I will launch this discussion by establishing the way these theorists define and approach religion and the eco and interfaith aspects of these definitions. These theorists have been chosen as their work focuses specifically on the links between ecotheology and intercultural development and they present broad arguments that reflect the views of many other theorists in this field.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, an ecofeminist whose work focuses on comparative religion and Christian ecotheology and heritage, analyses both oppressive and progressive potentials in monotheistic Abrahamic traditions.²⁰ She is interested in establishing a call for a dialogical construction of shared social-environmental ethics gathered through the exchange of multiple forms of wisdom. She does not presume to

¹⁸ David Wood. (2007). ‘Specters of Derrida: On the Way to Econstruction.’ Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (eds.) New York, Fordham University Press. 264-287

¹⁹ Process theology is based on the process theory of Whitehead. See: Alfred North Whitehead. (1991). The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. Paul Arthur Schlipp (ed.) La Salle, Open Court. It is used extensively in ecotheology see: Katherine Keller. (2003). Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming. London and New York, Routledge.

²⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether. (1992). Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing. San Francisco, Harper San Francisco.

pre-empt the outcome of such a dialogue. Ruether's ecofeminist critique illustrates the links between the different aspects or faces of violence against the other. She assesses the 'cultural and social roots that have promoted destructive relations between men and women, between ruling and subjugated human groups, and the destruction of the rest of the biotic community.'²¹ The ecofeminist analysis seeks interrelated solutions to interrelated problems, 'it demands that we must speak of eco-justice and not simply of domination of the earth as though that happened unrelated to social domination.'²² Ruether's analysis of the classical western traditions, reveals the role of religion in justifying and even sacralising relationships of domination so that our western culture has inherited 'not only a legacy of systems of domination, but also cultures that teach us to see such relations as the "natural order" and as the will of God.'²³ This is a powerfully limiting force in social change. The possibility of religion being part of a solution to oppressive and violent systems rather than a perpetrator is also explored by Ruether. She investigates the way the fundamental questions of the human condition that religion grapples with, namely evil, ethics, and the meaning of existence, has meant that it has generated extreme systems to manage these insurmountable issues. Practices and ethics of extreme care as well as extreme violence mark the history of religion as 'this effort to name evil and struggle against it reinforced relations of domination and created victim-blaming spiritualities and ethics.'²⁴ There are also glimpses, however, of 'transformative, biophilic relationships' in this heritage.²⁵ Religion is not a tame or neutral force in society

²¹ Ruether. Gaia and God. p6.

²² Ruether. Gaia and God. p2-3.

²³ Ruether. Gaia and God. p3.

²⁴ Ruether. Gaia and God. p3.

²⁵ Ruether. Gaia and God. p3.

but it has both good and bad potentials. While the religious focus on sin has led to violent acts, the way religious communities have struggled with defining and identifying sin and injustice has also worked towards the cultivation of 'just and loving relationships between people in their relation to the earth and to the divine.'²⁶

In interfaith dialogue, Mary Evelyn Tucker explains, we are drawn into 'contemplation of our own as a planetary species with allegiance beyond regional or national bounds.'²⁷ In developing and understanding our shared universal story we 'celebrate our kinship not only with other humans but with all life forms.'²⁸ This communicative niche, this 'reflective consciousness' and 'wondering intelligence,' is identified by Tucker as 'the indispensable capacity of all humans that religion can evoke in the presence of the mystery of life.'²⁹ The role religion has played and may continue to play in the development of humanity is, for Tucker, this opening it provides for wonderment. Central to the global transformation of religions into what she identifies as their ecological phase is 'the reawakening in the human of a sense of awe and wonder regarding the beauty, complexity, and mystery of life itself.'³⁰ Humanity's wonder has been stifled under the techno-centrism of modernity and instrumentalism has relentlessly driven mystery away from our encounters with the other than human, now largely seen as resource rather than being. This critique of consumerist instrumentalism runs through

²⁶ Ruether. Gaia and God. p3.

²⁷ Mary Evelyn Tucker. (2003) Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter their Ecological Phase. Chicago and La Salle, Open Court.

p11.

²⁸ Tucker. Worldly Wonder. p11.

²⁹ Tucker. Worldly Wonder . p11.

³⁰ Tucker. Worldly Wonder . p52.

ecothology, revealing the influence of Marxism on the movement. Moving into post-Marxist, post-secularism, ecotheology reinstates religion as the means by which the sacred and the numinous are reintroduced into the new global ecological and multicultural context in which we find ourselves ill equip to cope. Tucker recognises that religion has played this adaptive role of explanation, aide and inspiration throughout human history and in calling for the planetary ecological phase of religious traditions; she is drawing on this role. ‘Will the world’s religions assist in the further development of the human spirit as they have throughout their long, unfolding journey?’³¹ She asks.

Jay McDaniel identifies five historical challenges that the practical theologies of the world’s religions should orient themselves around in order to generate harmony in social and environmental diversity. These include: 1: To live compassionately, ‘helping to build multi-religious communities that are just, sustainable, participatory, and non-violent.’³² 2: To live self-critically. To recognise the aspects of our religions that have lead to violence and arrogance and to amend these. In other words, to grow reflexively away from fundamentalism. 3: To live simply. To provide an alternative to the dominant religion of consumerism, this is a common ground of most religions that understand material accumulation and waste in direct opposition to spiritual and social enlightenment. 4: to live ecologically, aware of ourselves as ecologically embedded beings and to balance our needs and wants to allow the flourishing of others and ourselves. 5: To welcome diversity; ‘To promote peace between religions by befriending

³¹ Tucker. Worldly Wonder. p53.

³² Jay McDaniel. (2007). ‘Ecotheology and World Religions.’ Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies of the Earth L. K. Kearns, Catherine New York, Fordham University Press. 21-44. p39.

people of other religions, trustful that the truths of the world religions are manifold, all making the whole richer.’³³ The five callings of contemporary religion presented here encapsulate a common ground or set of core values from which to collectively launch a dialogue of theological pluralism and ethical constructivism. These common values span the ecological, cultural and spiritual components of the human condition.

Baird Callicott approaches the task of a shared consciousness through ethics as ethics exist in all cultures as the ‘models to emulate, goals to strive for, [and] norms by which to evaluate actual behaviour.’³⁴ Ethics are therefore not only universal in Callicott’s analysis, but also universally embedded in comprehensive worldviews and conceptual complexes that define the limits and inspiration of human behaviour. The construction of environmental ethics must, therefore, be a deliberate process which creatively grows from ‘the raw materials of indigenous, traditional, and contemporary cognitive cultures.’³⁵ This dialogical cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary creation represents, for Callicott, ‘an important step in the future movement of human material cultures towards a more symbiotic relationship – however incomplete and imperfect – with the natural environment.’³⁶ Acknowledging the role of partial or situated knowledge’s contributing to a larger net of evolving common knowledge and ethics leads Callicott to the claim that a ‘postmodern ecological worldview’ is the cognitive motif most suited to understanding and developing common ground between the multiple

³³ McDaniel. ‘Ecotheology.’ p40

³⁴ Baird Callicott. (1994). *Earths Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback*. Berkeley and London, University of California Press. p5.

³⁵ Callicott. *Earths Insights*. p5.

³⁶ Callicott. *Earths Insights*. p5.

religious or cultural belief systems and also inclusive of scientific knowledge and development.³⁷ This motif allows for social and cultural constructivism to be activated in a reflexive fashion while a space for ongoing development is maintained through the recognition of perpetual partiality.³⁸

Having explored these critiques and visions of what religion is and could be I will now move to a more detailed overview of three of the underpinning themes common in much intercultural ecotheology. The first theme of the intercultural ecotheology framework is the call for multidisciplinary as well as interfaith dialogue. Scientific, political and spiritual thought and action are understood as necessarily interactive. While some theorists see different roles for these different modes of understanding and others seek to fully integrate them into one understanding, all attempt to bridge the gaps in communication between these fields. Tucker broadly applies the pluralist framework along these lines stating that: ‘no one religious tradition or discipline will be sufficient in the search for a more comprehensive and culturally inclusive global environmental ethics.’³⁹ Nor can religious and academic scholars and practitioners from different fields of knowledge work in isolation from each other. Callicott explains that this sophisticated dialogue and knowledge exchange will enable the traditional environmental ethics embedded in belief systems to be ‘revised and, just and important, validated by their affinity with the most exciting new ideas in contemporary science.’⁴⁰ In turn the ‘rich

³⁷ Callicott. Earths Insights. p7.

³⁸ Wood. ‘Econstruction.’

³⁹ Tucker. Worldly Wonder . p27.

⁴⁰ Callicott. Earths Insights. p11.

vocabulary of metaphor, simile, an analogy developed in traditional sacred and philosophical literature of the worlds diverse cultures' can be drawn on to express the 'most arcane concepts of nature, human nature, and the relationship between people and nature implied in ecology and the new physics.'⁴¹ Ruether recognises the need for equity in this conversation because of the differentiated power bases of these cultural knowledge systems in the modern world. Some have been 'unjustly dominant... and others that have been deeply silenced and rightly claim space to flower again.'⁴² She investigates the longstanding relationship between religious philosophy and scientific knowledge systems illustrating how they have shaped each other in both positive and negative ways. In the modern paradigm, religion and science are understood as strictly divided spheres of ideology. This ignorance of their relationship has created a dangerous split, Reuther argues, between 'fact' and 'value.'⁴³ She sees the growing potential in progressive thinkers and spiritual communities to rejoin this severed dialogue believing that 'there is something of a new global consciousness arising from the union of these concerns.'⁴⁴

Following from Reuther's point here we see the emergence of the second underpinning theme in intercultural ecotheology: the envisioning of integral utopias. Integral consciousness is understood as a mode of social and personal being and becoming where social, environmental and spiritual harmony evolves through the communion of cultures, through inclusion and transcendence of differences, that

⁴¹ Callicott. Earths Insights. p12.

⁴² Ruether. Gaia and God. p11.

⁴³ Ruether. Gaia and God. p6.

⁴⁴ Ruether. Gaia and God. p11.

globalisation facilitates.⁴⁵ This integrated and adaptive utopia is held up as an alternative to the dystopia of violence, destruction and fragmentation in all these aspects of the life-world should dialogue not proceed. Tucker believes that we ‘humans are called for the first time in history, to a new intergenerational consciousness and conscious – and this extends to the entire earth community.’⁴⁶ Tucker understands this evolution of consciousness as historically contextualised where the contemporary circumstances of globalisation call for an already emergent paradigmatic shift of the twenty-first century. This shift is characterised by the human ability to think about welfare holistically, welfare of the entire human race and welfare of other than humans begins. ‘The twenty-first century will be remembered,’ she predicts, ‘by this extension of our moral concerns not only to humans, but to other species and ecosystems as well.’⁴⁷ This integral vision not only integrates different knowledge systems but also different modes of knowing, as indicated by the emphasis Tucker and other ecocritics in particular place on the development of empathetic and communicative faculties along side and of equal importance to the development of rational thought faculties which have been favoured in enlightenment thinking. Ruether links her integral vision to a change of consciousness at the personal and the communal level. ‘A healed relation to each other and to the earth’ she claims, ‘calls for a new consciousness, a new symbolic culture and spirituality.’⁴⁸ Religion, as the realm of spiritual symbolic heritage and community has an important role in the transformation of ‘our inner psyches and the way we symbolize the interrelations

⁴⁵ Ken Wilber. (1995). Sex, Ecology and Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution. Boston and London, Shambhala.

⁴⁶ Tucker. *Ethics and Ecology*. p496.

⁴⁷ Tucker. *Ethics and Ecology*. p495.

⁴⁸ Ruether. Gaia and God. p4.

between men and women, humans and earth, humans and the divine, the divine and the earth.’⁴⁹ Both religion as we know it and our socio-environmental perceptions as they stand will transform in this process meaning that, for Ruether, integral ‘[e]cological healing is a theological and psychic-spiritual process.’⁵⁰ It is also, simultaneously and inextricably, a process of social activism so that ‘the work of eco-justice and the work of spirituality ... [form] the inner and outer aspects of one process of conversion and transformation.’⁵¹

In order to avoid the potential of homogenization that the integral approach may tend towards, intercultural ecotheologians emphasise the need to balance unity and diversity. Defining this balance has become an important underpinning theme in this body of theory and the third that I will be addressing today. The harmonious integral utopia maintains a necessary diversity. Following the principles of biodiversity in the holistic biosphere, they are not seeking homogenisation but rather a common ground for flourishing through difference. Difference is culturally as well as ecologically situated so that each context offers locally as well as globally relevant knowledge. These theories are thus attempting to transcend the communitarian – cosmopolitan divide. They largely promote a version of ‘thin-multiculturalism’ whereby diversity is encouraged but must not encroach on the space for open dialogue and the flourishing of others.⁵² Common values are therefore promoted. These theorists seek varying levels of unity and diversity.

⁴⁹ Ruether. Gaia and God. p4.

⁵⁰ Ruether. Gaia and God. p4.

⁵¹ Ruether. Gaia and God. p4.

⁵² Will Kymlicka. (2001) *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

While Tucker recognises the diversity of humanity, she does not seek to maintain fundamentally different or opposing values. She sees both the ecological and social circumstances of globalisation as requiring ‘the awakening of a sense of shared species identity that transcends yet respects our cultural and religious differences.’⁵³ This era of globalisation presents the pressing demand and unique opportunity for different cultural and religious groups to come together and share their differentiated knowledges with the purpose of forging common goals and beliefs. ‘This is the imperative of our evolution as a species’ she claims, which requires ‘a new ethical and cultural coding resonant with, but distinguished from evolution itself.’⁵⁴ Callicott divides the one and the many and along the lines of our embedded condition. The one shared worldview, which we can collectively develop, has one associated environmental ethic ‘corresponding to the contemporary reality that we inhabit one planet, that we are one species, and that our deepening environmental crisis is worldwide and common.’⁵⁵ The multiplicity of culturally situated belief systems are simultaneously revived and many associated environmental ethics are encouraged to flourish ‘corresponding to the historical reality that we are many peoples inhabiting many diverse bioregions apprehended through many and diverse cultural lenses.’⁵⁶ This one ethic and these many ethics are not at odds for Callicott: ‘Each of the many worldviews and associated environmental ethics can be a facet of an emerging global environmental consciousness, expressed in the vernacular of a particular and local cultural tradition.’⁵⁷ Similarly to Tucker, Callicott theorises

⁵³ Tucker. *Ethics and Ecology*. p496.

⁵⁴ Tucker. *Ethics and Ecology*. p498.

⁵⁵ Callicott. *Earths Insights*. p12.

⁵⁶ Callicott. *Earths Insights*. p12.

⁵⁷ Callicott. *Earths Insights*. p12.

diversity and unity along ecological/evolutionary lines. The extremes of unity and the extremes of diversity are both problematic and unbalanced; they need each other for an integral system to function. 'Cultural fragmentation – inwardness, isolation, mutual hostility, intolerance – is no less destructive of the human biotic communities than is cultural homogenization,' Callicott explains, '[a]n analogue to ecosystemic integration is needed to complement cultural diversity.'⁵⁸

Intercultural ecotheology is a young field that draws on long histories. While it takes up the long held mantle of spiritual and cultural development passed through the heritage of the world's religious traditions, it is young and still inexperienced in terms of practical application. There are many faith communities who practice interfaith dialogue with their neighbours and ecotheology in their communities. There are also many organised networks between these communities. But the movement is still fledgling. It now needs the leaders, members and scholars of these faith communities to critically engage with these theoretical assumptions and contribute to intercultural ecotheology's development. The field itself needs to be diversified in the interests of genuine dialogue. As a largely white middle-class movement of the west, Intercultural ecotheology needs to seek contributions and critiques from a variety of cultural perspectives, national contexts, class groups and faiths. Challenging questions need to be asked and explored. To what extent do will faith communities allow themselves to adapt to new circumstances without feeling that they are threatening their unique integrity and heritage? Can faith communities reinterpret their theologies in a way that can incorporate these themes and

⁵⁸ Callicott. Earths Insights. p13.

contemporary callings? How can faith communities imagine the divine and their specific relationship to the divine in this multi-faith context? How do we maintain collectively a fair and fruitful arena for discussion and exchange and prevent any particular ideology or belief system from colonising that space? These questions and many more present the practical dilemmas that can only be navigated through practice. Intercultural ecotheology thus needs to become more of a widespread practical theology, one that is practiced in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples in a variety of cultural contexts. This practical knowledge and experience can open up further potentials and directions of thought and practice that cannot be preconceived. When dealing with new approaches to old traditions we need to be open to play, open to the expression of ideas and practices that lay beyond the page, and are inclusive of the knowledges transferred in ritual and experiences. We need to be open to experimentation in safe environments and we need to be brave enough to introduce our long held traditions to new possibilities. At this historic juncture, collecting these experiences of transformation and using this knowledge in developing and strengthening ourselves and each other is a courageous task. In a world where faith communities are already challenged and undermined in so many ways new transformations and interactions seem threatening and the pull of separatist fundamentalism may appear a safer haven. But perhaps it is in these uncertain circumstances, that faith communities can remember and exercise the only truly common aspect of their identity, that of faith.

Author: Elyse Rider holds an Honours degree in political science and developmental studies through Melbourne University and is currently doing her doctorate in comparative

literature and cultural studies at Monash University. She is a member of the Association of Practical Theology in Oceania.

Email: ejrid2@student.monash.edu
