

## *Reimagining Creation in an Era of Extinction: An Hexameron for the Anthropocene*

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The overall aim of this project is to examine how Christian texts and traditions pertaining to the mythic ‘six days of creation’ in Genesis 1 can contribute to the eco-poetic articulation of a scientifically-informed and theologically-influenced ecological worldview in support of concerted biodiversity conservation. The project will therefore bring a religious and literary perspective to bear on the extinction crisis, exploring how the biblical narrative of creation, which continues to resonate in modern secular notions of human mastery over nature, might be reimagined in the era of the Anthropocene and in the face of escalating anthropogenic biodiversity loss. I hope to contribute to this agenda through the recovery and re-articulation of a neglected resource in the Christian canon. Whilst there is a considerable body of theological and biblical scholarship that reinterprets Christian texts and concepts pertaining to ‘Creation’ through an ecological lens (see e.g. the extensive bibliographies available on the [Yale Forum for Religion and Ecology website](#)), as well as powerful statements by church leaders (most notably, Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical *Laudato si*), the Hexameral tradition (meditations on the biblical six days of creation) has been almost entirely overlooked.

Whilst focussed at the intersection of eco-theology, ecocriticism, and eco-poetics, this project is located within the wider field of the environmental humanities. It entails a cross-disciplinary approach, utilising three primary methods: historical and interpretative; social-ecological; and literary-creative. Following a review of prior research on the Hexameron from late antiquity to the middle ages, I will explore how these earlier texts are echoed in later poetry, in order to make a case for an enlarged history of the hexameral tradition as extending into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will reinterpret a selection of exemplary texts from different periods through an eco-theological and ecocritical lens e.g. Hexamers of Basil of Caesarea (c.370), Ambrose (387), Peter Abelard (1130s), Thierry of Chartres (1130s), and Bonaventure (1273); and poetry from the early modern period to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century e.g. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1674), Geoffrey Hill’s ‘Genesis’ (1953), James McAuley’s *The Six Days of Creation* (1962) and Ernesto Cardenal’s *Cosmic Canticle* (2002).

Drawing on this scholarly research, together with consideration of current scientific assessments of biodiversity loss, I will compose a new series of meditations on the biblical text in the form of an Hexameron for the era of extinction, interweaving intertextual references to earlier homilies, commentaries, and poetic works. I intend to approach the biblical account as a mythopoetic narrative, focussing on the ‘what’ of creation, rather on the ‘why’ or ‘how:’ I assume that the former is unknowable, while the latter, i.e. the physical processes of cosmogenesis and the evolution of life on Earth, is best left to the natural sciences. My work will therefore depart both from scientifically-questionable creationist approaches, and from those that re-narrate current scientific knowledge as if it were a timeless truth. Just as earlier Hexamers were informed by the natural philosophy of their day, however, so too will mine be scientifically-informed as well as theologically-influenced.

Beginning with the alternation of day and night, each meditation will celebrate aspects of our earthly environs associated with one of the six days of creation, as well as highlighting the damage inflicted upon other creatures by unsustainable socio-economic systems and destructive technologies e.g. with respect to the alternation of day and night, this might

include the problem of light pollution; with respect to the separation of the waters, changes to the hydrosphere (rising sea levels, changing rainfall patterns) associated with anthropogenic global warming; and with respect to the emergence of diverse living creatures in the sea, air, and on land, the multiple threats now faced by free-living plants and animals throughout the world as a consequence of environmental degradation and climate change. With respect to the creation of human beings, I will emphasise in particular how the concept of human dominion, which continues to resonate in modern secular notions of human mastery over nature, is challenged in other parts of the Bible, and how it needs to be rethought in the era of the 'Anthropocene' and in the face of the current extinction crisis. Here, I will also highlight the unequal distribution of culpability for, and vulnerability to, environmental degradation and climate change amongst humans, in keeping with social-ecological research on environmental injustice. The work as a whole will be oriented towards cultivating a sense both of human fellowship with other creatures, and of human responsibility for safeguarding the continued flourishing of life on Earth, within the horizon of a multispecies ethic, according to which the principle of neighbour-love enjoins the pursuit of justice and the practice of compassion for nonhuman as well as human others. This will be supported by social-ecological research to identify positive examples of Christian biodiversity conservation initiatives from around the world.