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Christic witnessing: a practical response to ecological trauma

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ABSTRACT

Suffering in the ecological realm exhibits structural parallels with diagnoses of human trauma. Viewing ecological suffering as traumatic allows for recent work in trauma theology to be applied in an ecological context. This article focusses specifically on the breakdown of communication that characterises traumatic events. In the ecological case, this is often a human failure to attend to suffering in the rest of the ecosphere. What is required is a witness to this ecological trauma. Following Shelly Rambo, such witnessing is not about proclamation or imitation, but rather entails simply remaining with the suffering. For Christians, Christ can be one such witness. In his life and his death, he bears witness to the traumas of the earth—especially in his refusal to abandon our wounded world at the crucifixion. And this Christic witnessing provides a blueprint for our own, practical response: not imitating the self-sacrifice, but following the witness. One, tangible example of this is given by the *Stations of the Forests* resource. Here, the fourteen stations of the cross are recast as a witness to the traumas of contemporary deforestation. Resources like this illustrate how a model of Christic witnessing can constitute a practical response to ecological trauma.

KEYWORDS

Ecotheology; trauma theology; witnessing; Christ; stations of the cross; deforestation

Introduction

This article is part of an attempt to bring together two different modes of practically-oriented theological thinking, namely: trauma theology and ecotheology.¹ Recent work in the theology of trauma has considered how the traumatic character of some forms of human suffering affects both our pastoral responses and the substance of our theological ideas (Pound 2007; Rambo 2010; Lange 2010; Rambo 2017; O'Donnell 2018; Jones 2019). In brief, trauma theologians tend to eschew systematic schemes and eschatological speculations in favour of a form of theological accompaniment that foregrounds the experience of victims and prioritises the present moment. But this literature has yet to be applied to suffering that occurs in the nonhuman realm. What I want to do, therefore, is to demonstrate how the category of trauma might be useful for ecotheologians by viewing ecological suffering through 'the lens of trauma', applying some of the approaches adopted in trauma theology to ecological processes and problems (O'Donnell 2018, 12–13).

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I focus here on one specific symptom experienced by victims of trauma, that is: a struggle to communicate their traumatic experience. According to trauma theorists, one of the most helpful ways to respond to this breakdown in communication is to seek to bear witness to the trauma that has occurred, to attempt to bring it to light in the hopes of dignifying past suffering and preventing future violence (Felman and Laub 1992; Laub 1995). My central argument in this article is simply that, from the perspective of Christian theology, Christ can serve as one such witness to the trauma that occurs in the ecological realm. However, before I elaborate on my proposal any further, I want to ground the discussion in a practical example of this Christic witnessing.

The following, visceral quotation is from *Stations of the Forests*, a reflective resource produced by the St Columbans Mission Society. It was initially developed by Father Vincent Busch whilst working with the Subanen people in the southern Philippines in the mid-1980s, and it has been used in multiple guises since (St Columbans Mission Society 2011, 4).

Again and again, blades rip up the fragile skin of the forests [...] logging trucks travel along the wounded back [...] rainforest trees are being sacrificed [...] the splintering wood fills the forest with its screams. [...] Now the trees lie dead in the arms of their mother, Earth. [...] The stripping of the land means death for life itself. (Columbans 2011, 6–8)

The *Stations of the Forests* booklet and accompanying video rework the traditional fourteen stations of the cross—which chart the story of Christ’s Passion—to draw attention to the various forms of creaturely suffering that are caused by deforestation in places like the Philippines. For example, the stripping of Christ mirrors the ‘stripping of the land’; Christ’s flagellation evokes the way in which chainsaws are used to ‘rip up the fragile skin of the forests’; the famous pietà, in which Mary cradles the dead body of her son, is akin to the trees, which now ‘lie dead in the arms of their mother, Earth’; and Christ’s sacrifice echoes the sacrifice of rainforest ecosystems for the sake of farmland, infrastructure, and commerce. Most poignantly and most tellingly of all, the whole crucifixion event points to the simple fact that deforestation can mean ‘death for life itself’. The overall strategy is straightforward, but compelling; Christic motifs are used to bear witness to an ecological issue that has devastating, traumatic, and potentially life-ending consequences.

Stations of the Forests is a beneficial case study, I suggest, because it illustrates three important components of the proposal I am seeking to develop in this article. First, deforestation is a prime example of an ecological process that might usefully be viewed as traumatic. Second, this reimagination of the stations of the cross is a clear demonstration of how Christ could be said to bear witness to the occurrence of ecological trauma. And third, the purpose of this resource is to place the onus on us to follow Christ’s witness: we are called to raise awareness of the traumas of deforestation in the hope of preventing such ecological destruction in the future.²

Defining and diagnosing ecological trauma

Several trauma theologians have recently drawn attention to the fact that their work could profitably be employed in an ecological context. For instance, Serene Jones writes: ‘the different forms of violence I was describing have also been perpetrated

against the earth itself. We are witnessing the violation of the integrity of creation. It's as if we're living in a traumatized physical environment.' (Jones 2019, xiv) What Jones recognises is that there are structural similarities between the symptoms of human trauma and various ecological phenomena. My suggestion is that these symptoms of trauma apply metaphorically in the ecological realm. For example, just as human victims of trauma invariably undergo a physical wounding, the same is often true of ecologically-destructive processes. In the case of deforestation, the 'wounding' of the trees and the 'scar' that is left on the landscape are eminently tangible. Note too that this is a deliberately anthropomorphic approach: the aim is not to argue for the consciousness (or otherwise) of the trees and the landscape, but to treat them *as if* they can experience trauma for the sake of ascertaining how this might alter our response. When the *Stations of the Forests* resource speaks of the 'skin of the forests' and the 'screams' of the trees, it is exactly this sort of relational anthropomorphism that is occurring (Columbans 2011, 6).

Yet trauma entails more than simply physical wounding and the suffering that results: traumatic symptoms persist and recur, and physiological processes lead to ongoing psychological and even sociological consequences. Again, though, something similar is true of ecological trauma. During the twentieth century, forest cover in the Philippines decreased from 70% of the land area to just 20% (Lasco, Visco, and Pulhin 2001, 653). *Stations of the Forests* highlights some of the traumatic reverberations of this physical change. Local people lose food sources, root crops, and medicinal plants. Their cultures, languages, spiritualities, and traditions—which are invariably closely linked to their environment—are put in danger too. Other organisms lose their habitats, leading to large-scale reductions in biodiversity. The felled trees are often converted to charcoal and burned, releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The loss of the forest reduces rainfall and interrupts nutrient cycles, leading to increasingly infertile soil, possible drought, and potential famine. Unprotected soil is washed away, resulting in landslides and the potential destruction of fishing areas. Mining companies often move in to claim the subsurface minerals, generating further pollution and destruction of the landscape. With reduced tree cover, the planet's overall capacity to absorb carbon dioxide is reduced, exacerbating anthropogenic climate change. What is more, this raft of traumatic changes, which all stem from the initial deforestation event, are largely irreversible. Indeed, it is the persistence and permanence of these subsequent repercussions that qualifies the original tree-felling as traumatic. In the abrupt words of *Stations of the Forests*: 'The death of forests is forever.' (Columbans 2011, 8)

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article, it is the traumatic breakdown of communication that is of most relevance. In cases of human trauma, this struggle to articulate what has occurred stems directly from the traumatic event itself: the original experience is not properly integrated into ordinary memory, resulting in its incommunicability. In medical terms, our cerebral cortex, which deals with conscious thought, is detached from our limbic and autonomic nervous systems, enabling a rapid response but potentially preventing us from processing the event (Van der Kolk 2015, 51–73; Ison 2019, 51–52). Ecologically, however, the rupture of communication operates slightly differently. Animals may squeal in pain and trees might be able to release chemical signals via their interlinked root networks, but if we expect communication to take the form of cognition and language, then the rest of the ecosphere has never had the ability to articulate its suffering. Yet, as we humans (or at least, the majority of us) have sought to insulate

ourselves from the natural world, we have become progressively oblivious to these non-cognitive and non-linguistic forms of communication, meaning that we have increasingly lost touch with ecological suffering. As perpetrators of the sixth great mass extinction, we appear to be immune to the pleas of disappearing species (IPBES 2019, 11–12).³ As the guilty culprits of anthropogenic climate change, we are failing to properly understand the cries of our inexorably warming world. To use the language of trauma theorist Dori Laub, it is as if there has been a ‘collapse of witnessing’ (Laub 1995, 65). *Stations of the Forests*, for example, draws attention to the psalmist’s anthropomorphic exhortation for ‘the trees of the forest [to] cry out for joy’, but as the trees’ joyous cry has turned to screaming, we seem to have taken no notice (Columbans 2011, 12; Ps. 96.12). In the last decade, 10 million hectares of forest have been cut down globally every year—a rate that is only very gradually beginning to slow (Ritchie and Roser 2021).

Given Laub’s diagnosis of what lies at the heart of the traumatic breakdown of communication, many trauma theologians propose that an act of bearing witness constitutes the most appropriate response to instances of trauma (Laub 1995; Rambo 2010; Jones 2019). The temptation is often to try and explain the origin of the trauma, or even to attempt to hasten post-traumatic healing, when in fact it is simply by bearing witness that ruptured lines of communication might tentatively begin to be restored. It is by encouraging and enabling victims to narrate their own experiences that traumatic suffering can be honoured and brought to light. As *Stations of the Forests* puts it: ‘Let us listen to the stories of the rainforest peoples, to those affected by mining and climate change around the world. [...] Their story helps us to tell our story’ (Columbans 2011, 10). It is to this act of witnessing that I now turn.

Models of witnessing

In her book *Spirit and Trauma*, Shelly Rambo problematises two common understandings of witnessing. The proclamation model of witness imagines an onlooker, bystander, or spectator, who gives verbal testimony as if in a court of law (Rambo 2010, 38). The purpose is to impart information and, in the case of Christian witnessing, to share beliefs about Jesus with the aim of bringing about conversion in the recipient. But the problem with this practice of proclamation is that it assumes a degree of mastery, a sense of understanding and control, that is often completely lacking in cases of trauma. The traumatic breakdown of communication can destabilise not just our own certainties, but also the very reliability of language to convey what we might think we understand.

Meanwhile, in the imitation model, the witness attempts to imitate Christ’s life—his love, his service, and his sacrifice—by copying the embodied practices of Jesus (Rambo 2010, 39). This bodily imitation invariably includes risking one’s life for one’s faith: if Christ suffered and died for the truth, then we must be willing to do the same. Yet this model of witness also has its problems. Imitation can suppress difference and encourages sameness. More worryingly still, an imitative model of witness can be co-opted to recommend self-sacrifice and glorify martyrdom.

Translated into the ecological realm, conceptions of witnessing as proclamation or imitation are likewise rather limited. We have, for decades, been conveying factual information about deforestation, climate change, and species extinction—but to little or no

avail. This sort of witness is restricted in what it can achieve. Furthermore, this approach often assumes that we have fully grasped, or even mastered, the information about ecological destruction that is being reported, when in reality there is something inaccessible and unassimilable about the scale and severity of our current ecological crisis. Similarly, attempting to imitate examples of ecological suffering in our own lives makes little sense in this context. Self-destruction contributes to, rather than prevents, planetary destruction.

Instead, for Rambo, witnessing is about remaining with the reality of suffering, something that cannot be fully comprehended, even when everyone else is impatient to move on. Witnessing, she says, ‘describes a way of being oriented to what remains, to the suffering that does not go away’ (Rambo 2010, 26). It involves staying in the present and being brutally honest about what you find there. A witness is ‘what endures, survives, or is left over after everything else falls away’ (Rambo 2010, 104). But this is not an easy thing to do: avoiding or ignoring the trauma is a much more common response. For example, *Stations of the Forests* describes what tends to happen in the aftermath of deforestation, as the site of violence is abandoned:

There are no trees to protect the soil and there is no soil where new trees can grow. There is no food, no rice or corn. There are no animals, no birds, no flowers, no fish. There are no loggers, no slash and burn farmers, no mining companies. There are no fresh and clear streams and rivers. There are no forest people. (Columbans 2011, 8)

But Rambo’s model of witnessing insists that there is a need to remain with the trauma of deforestation. Just because loggers, farmers, and miners have moved on, the traumatic reverberations of the original tree-felling are likely to persist—in the lives of local people, in the remaining biodiversity, and in the permanent alterations to the surrounding landscape. A witness that honours the continuation of this ecological trauma must be ‘oriented to what remains’.

Christ as ecological witness

In her own work, Rambo turns to Pneumatology for a suitable witness to the traumas she describes, but here I want to explore the possibility that Christ might be understood as a witness to the ongoing suffering of ecological trauma. In proposing Christ as the witness, I am deliberately inverting the usual understanding of Christian witness. Most literature on witnessing is interested in how humanity can bear witness to the Christ-event (Bauckham 2017). This is a perfectly reasonable enquiry, but my line of argument is to submit that the opposite might also be true: that in Christ we find a theological witness to the world and its sufferings.

However, before expanding on this idea of Christ as a witness to ecological trauma, I want to acknowledge some potential difficulties with this turn to Christology. First, I do not mean to imply that Christ is some sort of ‘answer’ to the ‘problem’ of ecological trauma—far from it. Although Christian hope is often thought to be about ultimate redemption in Christ, the methodology of trauma theology encourages us to focus first on present realities. Instead of rushing too quickly to a narrative of triumphant healing, the initial value of Christ’s presence is simply as a witness who accompanies. This is especially important given the apparent irreversibility of traumatic ecological processes

like deforestation. As *Stations of the Forests* puts it, candidly: 'The forests that are dead are finished and cannot be brought back to life again. Christian hope must be based on what can be done with the forests that remain' (Columbans 2011, 9). In other words, true Christian hope is a realistic hope—including a realism about what might remain irretrievable or unhealed. Christic witnessing should be a cautious and hesitant reply, not a bold or boastful solution.

Second, we must remain mindful of feminist and womanist concerns about an excessive focus on the violence of the cross, even as we seek to tease out the relevance of the crucifixion for ecological trauma. There is a balance to be struck here between Christ's solidarity with the victims of trauma and any theological move that could be interpreted as recommending or glorifying suffering. What is particularly important is that the crucifixion is understood as a Christic witness to suffering that has already occurred or is absolutely unavoidable, rather than any encouragement to seek suffering or self-sacrifice for its own sake. Suffering may be inevitable, but it should never be necessary.

Third, as the *Stations of the Forests* case study arguably exemplifies, there is a risk that overlaying a cosmically-relevant Christ could constitute a colonial act of imposition. Many of the Subanen people are now Muslims, Catholics, or evangelical Protestants, but they did not necessarily need the arrival of Christian missionaries, nor the Christic witness of *Stations of the Forests*, to realise the potential traumas of largescale deforestation—especially since the influx of Western ideas about the natural world may have been part of what has precipitated increasing rates of deforestation.⁴ It is therefore important that the appeal to a Christic witness is bottom-up rather than top-down, generated and employed by those who freely self-identify as Christian. Indeed, the *Stations of the Forests* booklet notes that the Subanen people 'have drawn on their faith, creating their own Stations of the Cross to tell their story [... which has] helped them connect their own sufferings with Christ's' (Columbans 2011, 6).

More generally, there is a danger that focusing on the ecological and cosmic dimensions of Christ might remove us from particular instances of traumatic suffering (Johnson 2015, 140). This holistic, ecological vision could result in insufficient attention being paid to the trauma of individual creatures. One of the counterbalances to this concern, proposed by Elizabeth Johnson, is to refocus attention on the particularities of the historical Jesus (Johnson 2015, 140). As such, I want to turn to a scriptural motif from the life of Jesus to start developing this model of Christic witnessing.

'Look at the birds [...] consider the lilies', says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6.26, 28). Many ecotheologians appeal to such lines as a general indication of the importance of the material world (McFague 1997, 27; Gregersen 2010, 182; Wallace 2019, 3). But there is also something more specific and more active about Jesus's plea. Here, at the heart of his preaching, he entreats us to pause and consider the ecological realm. Note that we are not asked to make use of the lilies, or even to protect them, but simply to 'consider' them—to honour them with our undivided attention (McFague 1997, 27). This is a direct invitation into a deep contemplation of ecological phenomena and their significance. Furthermore, the thrust of this passage from Matthew's Gospel reassures us of divine care no matter what trials or tribulations the birds and the lilies may suffer. There is a pledge to remain through thick and thin. What is especially striking is that Jesus's invocation to 'consider the lilies' orients us towards the importance of the present moment. Indeed, the passage ends with the lines: 'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow

will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.' (Mt. 6.34) Jesus's words refuse to move on from 'today's trouble'. Here, then, we have an act of witnessing that includes two of the essential components of any witness to ecological trauma: an active foregrounding of the nonhuman and a commitment to the present trouble. And it is Jesus Christ who is fulfilling the role of witness.

Yet, perhaps the most obvious way in which Christ could be said to bear witness to ecological trauma is via the crucifixion. In her essay collection *Trauma and Grace*, Serene Jones develops what she calls a Christology of mirroring. The power of the cross, she says, lies in its ability to reflect our stories of suffering back to us (Jones 2019, 82). In relation to a victim of trauma, she writes:

Cruciformed, he embodies the fractured, tortured shape of her traumatic existence [...] there is an identification of being that makes communication possible. [...] In bearing her story, he brings voice to the horror she herself cannot speak. He is, in other words, her embodied testimony. [...] He witnesses her; he receives her unraveled testimony-of-a-life as an offering of truth, and in that exchange, he articulates her unspoken history, her invisibility made visible in his eyes. [...] He assumes her reality, speaks the unspeakable in his own loss of speech, and then returns all of this to her as he witnesses to what she believed would be forever unknown. (Jones 2019, 123)

Jones's understanding of the crucified Christ as a witness to trauma is especially apposite because it begins to address the traumatic breakdown of communication. Christ 'brings voice to the horror', revealing what might otherwise have been 'forever unknown', primarily by providing an 'embodied testimony'. It is Christ's own, embodied 'loss of speech' that bears witness to that which is unspeakable. A channel of communication begins to be re-established for this trauma survivor in a fragmentary and fleshly form.

However, the ecological dimensions of this Christology are not the focus of Jones's concern. This is where so-called deep incarnation theologies, which understand Christ as embedded within evolutionary and ecological processes, can be helpful. According to Elizabeth Johnson: 'The logic of deep incarnation gives a strong warrant for extending divine solidarity from the cross into the groan of suffering and the silence of death of all creation' (Johnson 2014, 205; 2018, 188). Johnson explicitly expands Christ's solidarity—or witness—to the whole of the nonhuman realm. On this understanding, the cruciform testimony about which Jones writes so poignantly embodies not just the 'tortured shape' of human traumatic existence, but that of ecological trauma too. In 'bearing' the planet's story, Christ 'brings voice to the horror' that the planet cannot speak, articulating the ecosphere's 'unspoken history'. Again, the Christic witness re-establishes a form of communication, this time between the rest of the suffering ecosphere and ourselves. And this cruciform witnessing is exactly what is achieved by *Stations of the Forests*. From Christ's stripping and flagellation to his death and sacrifice, each moment in the Passion narrative is connected to an aspect of the trauma of deforestation. The traumatic rupture of communication is not easily healed, but Christ's embodied testimony nonetheless conveys, albeit incompletely, some of the pain of ecological trauma to humanity.

A further indication of the ecological scope of Christ's cruciform witness can be found in the narrated events of the crucifixion itself. In Matthew's Gospel, 'darkness came over the whole land,' and, at the moment of Jesus' death, 'the earth shook, and the rocks were split' (Mt. 27.45, 51). These apocalyptic motifs point to the possibility that the whole of the suffering creation is being echoed in this intense moment of trauma. It seems like the

gospel writer recapitulates these ecological phenomena here as a reminder to the reader that this is the reality of the wounded world to which Christ is bearing witness. 'God joins earth in the agony', we might say (Cadwallader 2004, 53). These are the sufferings that are brought to light by Christ.

Lastly, given the traditional transformation that is thought to be part of the work of Christ, it is particularly important to emphasise that this practice of bearing witness is neither totally static nor completely hopeless. As Dori Laub writes, 'the listener [...] is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*': they are looking for 'a record that has yet to be made' (Laub 1992, 57). The victim and the listener are not in the business of conveying a truth that is already known and mastered, like in the proclamation model of witnessing, but rather work together to unearth the trauma as they both seek to bear witness to it. There is something new in the very act of witnessing itself. The result is not an immediate and straightforward salvation for the victim, but neither is it stagnation in perpetual suffering. The Christic witness that I am proposing is therefore constructive and purposeful whilst also remaining mindful of the dangers of any rushed redemption.

Our call to bear witness to ecological trauma

This final section addresses the role that human beings might have in this vision of Christic witnessing. My suggestion is that we are called, not to imitate Christ's suffering and sacrifice, but to follow Christ in seeking to bear witness to ecological trauma. Even so, how can we possibly represent the traumas of our planet adequately? As Stacy Alaimo writes, 'speaking for nature can be yet another form of silencing, as nature is blanketed in the human voice' (Alaimo 2000, 182). Part of this concern might be addressed by continually reminding ourselves that we should not be trying to follow a proclamatory model of witnessing. We know only too well that declaring further facts about the trauma of climate change is limited in its efficacy to connect with people or motivate new behaviours. Further speech is of limited usefulness. Instead, we should be focusing on embodied forms of witness, where we seek to align ourselves with ecological traumas, and to remain with them. Our role as witnesses is not to speak for nature, but to 'pay attention to what the earth might have to say' (Deane-Drummond 2008, 149). This begins by listening, so that we, as Dori Laub says, can help to bring about 'a record that has yet to be made' (Laub 1992, 57). And then we remain with it. We do not gloss over the suffering, nor do we give up on the wounds of the world. A further safeguard against silencing nature with our own speech comes from remembering that this model of ecological witnessing is Christic in shape. It is Christ who draws our attention to traumatic ecological sufferings. We do not need to strike out on our own anthropocentric missions to save the world: we just need to follow Christ. Christ is the fundamental ecological witness, and we are tasked with continuing that witness.

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore Christian liturgies, rituals, and spiritualities in any detail, but it is worth noting, albeit in passing, how some existing Christian practices might already be fulfilling the call to emulate Christ's witness. One point to note is the way in which the Christian liturgical calendar enables an annual repetition: liturgies that foreground both ecology and suffering, such as the Season of Creation and the traditional Triduum, are repeated every year. These cyclical returns are also tuned to the frequency of the seasons, blending with natural rhythms of growth and decay. Such liturgical repetitions can highlight the recurrence of trauma, but they are

also importantly non-identical in character (Pickstock 2013, 177). Each return is the forging of a new witness to the same events; each liturgy is a *de novo* witness to ecological trauma. To come back to our case study: if the *Stations of the Forests* material were to be integrated into a repeated Passiontide liturgy, it might provide a fruitful way to follow Christ's witness to ecological trauma—especially if the liturgy were also to incorporate bodily movements and postures alongside the spoken text.

Furthermore, eucharistic liturgies might be another way in which we attempt to follow the model of Christ's ecological witness. Here, bread and wine—elements of the natural world—are recalled as broken and outpoured, symbols of our suffering creation. Each eucharist is a double re-membling of these elements, that is, a re-assembly and a non-identical repetition. In Karen O'Donnell's words, each eucharist is a 'repetition of a traumatic somatic memory' (O'Donnell 2018, 25). And she continues: 'The embodied experience of the Eucharist helps to create a eucharistic perspective on the natural world in which sacramental materials reflect, in their ritual use, the broken practices of the world' (O'Donnell 2018, 152). In other words, we might say, the eucharist follows Christ in bearing witness to the traumatic wounds of the world. What is more, this is a practice that is resolutely enfleshed: words alone do not capture the offering, sharing, and consuming that is involved.

Nevertheless, just as with Christ's witness, there is a question about what these liturgical practices of ecological witnessing achieve. Though we might wish that our liturgies and our rituals were sufficient to bring about ecological healing, ecological conversion, or ecological action, such results do not necessarily follow straightforwardly from the act of witnessing itself. We must reject the temptation to stipulate the precise form that witnesses to ecological trauma might take, or to prescribe the types of ethical actions that could (and arguably should) follow from these acts of witness. Moving too quickly to solutions is not in keeping with the approach of trauma theologians. And hopes for conversion echo some of the more problematic aspects of models of witness that emphasise proclamation, imitation, or martyrdom. Rather, we, too, are simply called to remain. This is not complete stasis: witnessing brings something new, which might just be the seed for transformation. But it is more important to attempt to bear witness to reality as we find it than to guarantee forms of redemption that it is not within our gift to bestow.

Conclusion

In this article I have proposed that, in the aftermath of ecological trauma, Christ bears witness to the wounds of the world. The key feature of this Christic witness is neither a proclamation nor an imitation, but an insistence on remaining with the suffering. At the same time, the very act of witnessing itself brings about something new: a communion that was not otherwise possible. In this way, the Christic witness inhabits a tension between a need to honour the present, and a need to offer hope for the future. Our own role is not so much about imitating Christ's self-sacrificial gesture, so much as receiving Christ's witness and seeking to follow it ourselves. Our role—as theologians, activists, and human beings—is to follow Christ in seeking to bear witness to ecological trauma.

The *Stations of the Forests* resource fulfils many of the features of this model of Christic witnessing. It uses the story of Christ's Passion to foreground, and remain with, the victims of the trauma of deforestation. Whilst it recognises that the loss of these forests is often

irreversible, it does provide a seed of hope that helps to re-establish a form of communication between those parts of the ecosphere that are suffering and ourselves. There are legitimate concerns about imposing a Christic witness like *Stations of the Forests* on those who do not share in the Christian tradition, but within the church it is undoubtedly a useful resource. At the end of the fourteenth station, the booklet quotes from Luke's Gospel. As Christ walked to Calvary, he turned to those around him who were weeping and said: 'Do not weep for me; weep rather for yourselves and for your children [...] For if this is what is done when the trees are green, what will happen when they are dead?' (Columbans 2011, 9; Lk. 23.28, 31). We *must* continue to bear witness to ecological trauma in the hope that we never reach the situation where all the trees are dead.

Notes

1. This wider task is the focus of my doctoral thesis at the University of Oxford, provisionally entitled 'Witnessing a Wounded World: A Theology of Ecological Trauma'.
2. As far as I am aware, there is no empirical data available on the effectiveness of *Stations of the Forests* for changing people's attitudes and behaviours. But the resource has been used internationally for over a decade, and the accompanying YouTube video has been viewed more than 10,000 times. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6xnReBmht8>.
3. In its latest report, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) states that 1 million species are currently at risk of extinction, including 25% of all animal and plant species on earth. The current rate of extinction is already tens to hundreds of times higher than has been seen in the last 10 million years (IPBES 2019, 11–12).
4. Catholic missionaries have been present in the Philippines since 1565, at the start of Spanish colonial rule. Meanwhile, most of the deforestation has occurred in the twentieth century (Lasco, Visco, and Pulhin 2001, 653). But it remains an open question as to whether deforestation would be as extensive today if the Philippines had never been colonised.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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