Creative Adaptations in an Interdependent World: Recent Studies in Religion and Ecology

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The relationship between human beings and the ecosystems that both threaten and sustain us has always been complex, but the thresholds that have been crossed by human technological intervention in
the age of the Anthropocene (our current age in which human activity has become the leading influence on the environment) have turned that relationship into a “wicked” problem. Wicked problems are problems that cannot be treated with linear, analytic approaches. They are often difficult to clearly define, have many interdependencies, and are multi-causal. Attempts to address them often lead to unforeseen consequences. They are often unstable and have no clear solutions. They are socially complex and rarely the responsibility of a single organization. They involve changing behavior. For all of these reasons they are frequently characterized by chronic policy failure.1

The challenges of managing the complex adaptive systems that make up the planet Earth are not only scientific, or only technological, philosophical, political, ethical, or theological. They are all of these. The truth of the Anthropocene is that the consequences of human actions have grown ever larger through the combination of population growth and advances in technology so that human action now must be understood to be a causal contributor to the functioning and malfunctioning of the systems that keep Earth habitable. This truth challenges modernity’s assumptions about the relative stability of the natural world and the division between the realms of nature and culture. The crumbling worldview of modernity stands in need of something more than cosmetic repairs, and ecotheology is turning to the resources of the world’s religions in search of an alternate worldview that can enable us to navigate the wicked problems we now face.

Do we need a new politics? A new economy? A revised theology or a new religion? New practices or new ethics? This review of six recent contributions to the conversation indicates that the answer is “yes” to all of the above. These texts all offer their own improvisations on the themes of modernity, technology, climate change, religion, and ethics, developing different approaches to interrelated aspects of the problems we face. Although none possesses “the solution” to our current environmental challenges, the nature of wicked problems means that a single comprehensive solution does not exist. Instead, each offers a piece of the solution in their visions of the ethics, politics, economy, and theology that we need today.

A Theological Ensemble

In *Systematic Theology and Climate Change: Ecumenical Perspectives*, editors Michael S. Northcott and Peter M. Scott bring together theologians from Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions to critically retrieve Christian doctrine in light of climate change. The main point of consensus among these theologians is that anthropogenic climate change is a real threat to the flourishing, and possibly the survival, of both human beings and other forms of life. This volume covers all the classical doctrines in the classical order of systematic theologies, with the important addition of a treatment of creatures as its own theological doctrine. This text will appeal to the environmentalist who is interested in Christian theology and to the theologian who worries about the environment, but the brevity of each chapter-long treatment forestalls the full development of any one approach. Each chapter stands on its own and could serve as an important addition to introductory courses in systematic theology. The themes of power and politics, idolatry, and the Christian responsibility of care cross doctrinal categories and offer a glimpse into the contributions of each chapter.

In his essay on the Holy Spirit, Northcott begins with the theme of power and politics, discussing the work of the Spirit as the balancing of power between both members of creation and heaven and earth.\(^2\) Human exertions of too much power in creation upset this balance, and the emission of greenhouse gases is an exercise of human power that has upset the balance of the atmosphere. This leads Northcott to characterize anthropogenic gases as “a post-Christian subversion of the descent and ascent of the Spirit.”\(^3\) The Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit, therefore, provides grounds for resisting the concentration of money and power that supports the current fossil fuel regime and for reclaiming “democratic and participative communities” that could restore appropriate balances of power.\(^4\) Building on this theme, Scott argues that human freedom and actualization are dependent on nature and that this dependence requires human beings to undertake the new political roles of “citizen, representative

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\(^3\) Northcott, “Holy Spirit,” 61.

and agitator” of and for nature. Human beings should use their disproportionate share of power on behalf of those creatures that have no political voice. This resonates with Tamara Grdzelidze’s understanding of the church as a public, political embodiment of the kingdom that exercises its power on behalf of all creation.

Other chapters characterize the factors contributing to climate change as a form of idolatry. Noting that “absolute value and absence of limits are traditional attributes of deity,” Timothy Gorringe argues that the modern economy based on limitless growth is idolatrous. He offers a reconstructed ethic that recognizes limitations imposed by our responsibilities in a relational world as a way to oppose this idolatry. Neil Messer explains that our inaction on climate change is based in an idolatrous belief “that our ultimate fate lies in our hands alone.” He argues that a reclaimed practice of repentance is needed to restore our faith in God as the guarantor of our ultimate fate. Finally, Celia Deane-Drummond argues that the Sabbath means that “the unmediated presence of God” is available to all members of creation. This affirmation of the integrity and value of all creatures understands anthropogenic climate change as human interference with God’s intended relationship to creation—an idolatry that must be resisted.

This volume also reclaims the Christian duty of neighbor love as another resource for resisting climate change. Developing the argument of deep incarnation that Christ is positioned within the matrix of materiality, Niels Henrik Gregersen argues that Christ is “with” and “for” all creatures. Coupled with the interdependence of all creation, this establishes a kinship relation between Christians and all other living beings—a relationship that brings with it attendant responsibilities for mitigating climate change. Arguing for the integrity of all creatures, Rachel Muers resists two leveling impulses.

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12 Gregersen, “Christology,” 46.
that strip other-than-human members of creation of their power and voice: subsuming the category of creature into that of anthropology and treating all creatures as an undifferentiated whole under the name “creation.” Treating the heavens, plants, and animals separately, she emphasizes the integrity of other-than-human creatures while also exploring their interdependence and mutuality in the biblical image of peaceable relationships. Muers argues that human beings’ ability to upset the conditions necessary for ongoing life necessitates a new relationship in which “all creatures affected by human actions become ‘neighbors.’”

By focusing on the single environmental problem of climate change, this volume introduces the reader to different ways that theology, as theology, can be developed in light of concrete problems. Next we turn to a project which brings theology to bear on ethics in the realm of nonhuman environmental ethics.

### Unifying Theology and Ethics

In *Preservation and Protest: Theological Foundations for an Eco-Eschatological Ethics*, Ryan Patrick McLaughlin develops a new typology of environmental ethics that clarifies the conflict between conservation and transfiguration while also developing the theological basis for, and ethical implications of, his understanding of cosmocentric transfiguration in conversation with Jürgen Moltmann and Andrew Linzey.

Ecotheological insistence on the goodness of creation as we encounter it has raised questions about the continued viability of doctrines of eschatology that envision radical discontinuity between this world and the next. This book explores the implications of that insistence as it introduces the reader to current taxonomies of environmental theological ethics and McLaughlin’s proposed typology organized around poles of conservation/transfiguration and anthropocentricism/cosmocentricism. In order to defend the continuity of this world with the world to come, conservation approaches are willing to radically alter traditional understandings of eschatology. McLaughlin describes cosmocentric conservation as the belief that the goodness of creation means that there is no need for redemption. Natural

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death is not an evil from which anything needs to be rescued. It is part of the process by which life is sustained: “As this order not only includes but currently requires violence, death, predation, suffering, and evolutionary waste, these dimensions of the cosmos constitute part of its beauty and goodness. The human fault is the rejection of this beauty and goodness in pursuit of some future hope that leaves this natural order behind.”

Unwilling to either give up some future hope or leave the natural world behind, McLaughlin proposes cosmocentric transfiguration as an alternative. Although he develops several tenets of cosmocentric transfiguration from his close examination of Moltmann and Linzey, what is most salient to this discussion is the claim that creation has been distorted and therefore stands in need of redemption. McLaughlin explains that this distortion stems from the nature of God’s love expressed in creation. The goal of God’s love is communion, but communion requires alterity—otherwise it would simply be union. Therefore creation is initially a separation of the created from the divine for the purposes of consecration that leads to communion. The distortion arises when the separation becomes isolation instead of consecration through the “wandering” of the creation from God’s intended path. Because McLaughlin understands the mechanisms of evolution in creaturely death, suffering, and predation as part of this distortion, he argues that the source of the distortion is not a human action or decision. Instead he locates the source of cosmic distortion in the Big Bang, claiming that “it is here already in the very forming of the laws of thermodynamics that consecratory distance fails to develop toward communion and instead becomes a wandering in isolation.” This failure to develop is neither a flaw in the original design nor the result of perverse willing. It is rather the consequence of a freedom of indeterminacy that was necessary for creation to be set apart from God. Based on this understanding of the Fall as wandering, McLaughlin reads the cross and resurrection as the reconsecration of the entire created order that restores it to the proper path.

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For McLaughlin, this theology of cosmocentric transfiguration leads to an ethics that incorporates elements of conservation while also protesting the current order of things. Eschatological transfiguration is needed to stop the suffering of evolution and the effects of predation. Human beings cannot try to achieve the peaceable kingdom on their own. In hoping for this ultimate consummation, however, human beings can act as witnesses to it by refusing to cause suffering themselves. As concrete examples of this witness, McLaughlin recommends a fruitarian diet and the curtailment of animal experimentation so far as it is possible. When killing cannot be avoided it should be undertaken as a necessary evil rather than treated as a good in itself. In addition to these individual efforts to resist the distorting effects of the wandering cosmos, human beings can also engage in communal efforts to preserve the systems that sustain life in cooperation with conservation approaches.

This text provides a thoughtful examination of the issues at stake in fully developing a doctrine of eschatology along ecotheological grounds. Unlike vague conclusions about extending justice to other creatures that pepper ecotheological literature, McLaughlin unpacks the ethical implications of a theology of cosmocentric transfiguration and offers concrete examples of ethical reforms. Preservation and Protest is a useful demonstration of how ethics can be shaped by starting with theological commitments. Next we will turn to two volumes that take an alternate approach and begin with the current state of the environment in order to develop an ethic for the problems we face today.

The Ethics We Need

Larry Rasmussen and Willis Jenkins both develop their ethical approaches from the starting point of the incompetence of current moral constructions to address serious ecological challenges. Both agree that our current ethical systems have led to environmental devastation that threatens the flourishing of human life. In Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key, Rasmussen ties these failures to the consumerism, commodification, alienation, oppression, and folly that characterize dominant cultural and economic models today. While Rasmussen argues that we have resources within religious traditions from which we can construct an appropriate ethic, Jenkins is less optimistic about our current capacities. In The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity,
Jenkins observes that “the accelerating expansion of human power generates problems that exceed the competency of our laws, our institutions, and even our concepts.”

Instead of producing a new ethical worldview to counter modernity’s broken one, Jenkins argues that we need to develop our moral imagination by examining the reform projects of “incompetent” communities that are currently addressing concrete problems with imperfect concepts. We will first explore Rasmussen’s reconstruction of religious resources before turning to Jenkins’s argument for a more pragmatic approach to ethics.

Rasmussen begins by examining the world as it is and explores what kind of faith and ethics we need to live well in this world. Chapters on “The Creature We Are” and “The World We Have” draw the physical sciences into conversation with the social sciences and humanities in order to describe human beings as biosocial, story-telling, symbol-using, religion-having, moral creatures who imagine a world other than the diminished and diminishing one we are currently inhabiting. Borrowing the concept of “doing first works over” from James Baldwin, Rasmussen argues that one must “reexamine everything from its onset and . . . speak the truth as best one can.”

Rasmussen assumes that the current understanding of a separation between nature and culture stands at the heart of our ecological problems and argues that we must do our first works over in order to challenge this separation at its foundation.

Rasmussen then turns to the resources that religious traditions provide for making these changes. First he opposes consumerism—the “phantom cosmology” that prioritizes consumption as the foundation of human life together—with the religious tradition of asceticism. Not simply a practice of deprivation and denial, asceticism’s focus on living simply and treading lightly on the Earth counters consumerism’s distorted pursuit of small things as though they were great things. Next, he offers sacramentalism, the understanding that materiality has intrinsic value and serves as the means through which the divine is experienced, as a corrective for commodification,

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which treats all materiality as that which can be bought and sold. Arguing that the alienation of Cartesian dualism has grown to claim that “the meaning and end of all nature has its effective value in the rational will and active agency of autonomous and sovereign humanity,” Rasmussen opposes our current condition of alienation by recovering a panentheistic mysticism that affirms the inter-being of humanity with the rest of the cosmos. Focusing on the imbalance of power that leads to oppression, he argues that prophetic-liberative traditions demand revised priorities that protect the vulnerable and those most affected by exercises of power rather than serving those who possess the most power. Finally, Rasmussen turns to the folly of ignoring ecological limitations and reclaims the assumption of wisdom traditions that we can learn to live together by paying close attention to the places in which we live.

Earth-honoring Faith is an encouraging curative to the moral paralysis of ecological despair. Although it deals with many of the major figures of modernity’s turn to the individual and separation of culture from nature, it is engagingly written and accessible to both experts and laypersons. While the primary emphasis of the volume is on Christianity and Buddhism, it draws from multiple traditions in order to provide a strong foundation for interfaith work.

In contrast to Rasmussen’s approach of “doing first works over,” Jenkins’s methodology in The Future of Ethics arises from his frustration with cosmological approaches. According to Jenkins, such approaches never get to practical action because they begin by developing an alternative worldview which must then be accepted by enough people before there can be any actual reform. The perfect moral storm of global unfairness, intergenerational deferral, theoretical ineptitude, and radical inequality—all present in wicked ecological problems like climate change—inhibits meaningful action when proposed solutions must first achieve a national or global consensus on worldviews. Therefore Jenkins focuses on concrete reform projects instead of on reforming worldviews, not because such projects model the moral competency he finds lacking in society, but because they provide the counter-cultural space in which moral competency

25 Rasmussen, Earth-honoring Faith, 258.
26 Rasmussen, Earth-honoring Faith, 297.
27 Jenkins, Future of Ethics, 79.
28 Jenkins, Future of Ethics, 33–46.
Jenkins’s analysis focuses on projects like the management of the mute swan population that migrated to the Chesapeake Bay, the establishment of sustainable fisheries around Tangier Island, the Catholic bishops’ letter “The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good,” environmental justice movements aimed at cleaning up toxic waste in the Love Canal and Warren County, and the Canasta Communitaria Utopia founded in Ecuador. Examining these and similar projects, he argues that the most important moral resources of a religious tradition “are the tactics generated by communities using their traditions to confront new problems” because they “cultivate opportunities for moral agency to bear responsibility for unprecedented problems.”

The Future of Ethics bases its hope for the future on the actions of small(ish) communities responding to local problems. Jenkins calls for ethical analysis of these actions as the primary resources available to craft meaningful responses to problems that have outstripped modern environmental management, technology, and political regulation. This pragmatic book will appeal most directly to ethicist-activists, but also to anyone who is frustrated by our seeming inability to undertake effective constructive action on the environmental problems plaguing us today.

The chief weakness of this otherwise fine addition to the conversation stems from Jenkins’s frustration with the more theoretical movements of the cosmological strategy and his advocacy for a pragmatic one. His analysis would be well served by a stronger recognition of the ongoing interdependence of the cosmological and pragmatic approaches. Borrowing liberation theology’s model of the interrelation of practice and doctrine, we can see that Jenkins’s volume represents the analytical study of liberating practices, while Rasmussen’s volume represents the kind of doctrinal reconstruction that can emerge from such analysis. Rasmussen offers concepts drawn from religious practices and reconstructed in light of our ecological situation that can in turn fund concrete reform projects like those Jenkins

29 Jenkins, Future of Ethics, 81.
studies. Alternative worldviews evolve within this ongoing exchange between the pragmatic and the cosmological.

**Following the Thread of the Story**

In *The Earth in God’s Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective*, Ernst Conradie introduces another step in the construction of an alternative worldview: the necessity of crafting a compelling and plausible story to accompany it. Drawing from the field of narrative theology, he seeks a productive way to tell the story of God’s action in the world that avoids the twin dangers of reductionism (subsuming the story under secondary causal explanations) and disconnection (severing the story from other frameworks for understanding reality). This is important for Conradie because how we tell that story shapes how we experience the world.

Conradie first establishes what the story is about. He follows the ecotheological demand that Christian salvation be understood as salvation of the Earth, rather than from it, but he highlights the complexities of such a story with questions of what needs saving, what it needs saving from, and how salvation is to be understood as a response to the problem.30 According to Conradie’s cosmological approach, the story of God’s saving action is a story about creation as a whole, but what it needs saving from and how it is saved are developed later, in the story itself.

Having established that the story is about God’s salvation of the whole created order, Conradie next addresses the limitations of the narrator of the story. Although it is God’s story, it is told by human beings from limited perspectives: “We therefore have to gather various fragments in order to tell the story and we end up telling the story in fragments. And we live from such fragments. At best we can see sparks of infinity through these fragments.”31 Recognizing the limitations of any single perspective, Conradie opts for a narrative chorus that brings together the biological and chemical perspectives of the natural sciences with the psychological and sociological perspectives of the social sciences. These different perspectives reflect different levels of complexity, and none is reducible to or entirely subsumable under another. Religion provides another perspective with yet another level

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31 Conradie, *Earth in God’s Economy*, 128.
of complexity, but it cannot take the place of any other perspective—each must be part of the telling of the story.

Having set the stage, in chapters 5 and 6 we arrive at the story itself. For Conradie, the story is shaped by the root metaphor of God’s oikos, or household. This metaphor makes room for a tension between the world as it is and an eschatological vision of the world as it should be by characterizing the story as the process of God’s home-making, the transformation of a house into a home. This story acknowledges human action in cooperation with God by understanding the church’s mission “as preparing the house for God’s homecoming.”32 Adopting a conservation approach to eschatology, Conradie argues that “salvation does not add anything to God’s work of creation.”33 Instead of providing something that was missing, salvation is the removal of obstacles to appropriate maturation in line with God’s intention for creation.

Conradie identifies certain benefits to telling the story in this way. By casting the maturation of creatures as the telos of creation, it recognizes that both religion and salvation are means of furthering that end rather than ends unto themselves. This recognition opens the door for interfaith work in a plural world, allowing Christians to collaborate with other groups “for the sake of the common good of God’s household.”34 At the same time, this story preserves “the compelling nature of the Christian vision” which understands the story of God’s action in the world as a re-description of the world as God’s good creation.35 According to Conradie, this re-description is itself the ethical task, providing “a retrospective layout of the path from moral vision to emancipatory praxis in order to enable us to follow this path.”36

Although rooted in the context of ecotheology, The Earth in God’s Economy does not engage in the same level of analysis of ecological problems and their causes that our other authors do. Conradie assumes much of that conversation as he focuses on developing a compelling narrative in which to situate an alternative worldview. Chapter 3 provides a helpful introduction to the field of narrative theology, and chapter 4 offers an overview of the dialogue between science and religion. This book should appeal to those looking for an accessible

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32 Conradie, Earth in God’s Economy, 231.
33 Conradie, Earth in God’s Economy, 288.
34 Conradie, Earth in God’s Economy, 319.
35 Conradie, Earth in God’s Economy, 321.
36 Conradie, Earth in God’s Economy, 321.
introduction to these topics, as well as those in the field of religion and ecology interested in a narrative approach to this topic.

A Cosmopolitical Overcoming of the Nature–Culture Divide

In A Political Theology of Climate Change, Michael S. Northcott provides an illuminating analysis of the forces that led to anthropogenic climate change and that also prevent meaningful action in its mitigation. Tracing the philosophical, technological, and physical factors that have brought us past the 400 ppm atmospheric carbon threshold, Northcott argues that the only way to mitigate harmful climate change in the near future is to stop extracting fossil fuels. He further argues that only nation-states have the political and moral authority to put an end to such extraction.37 The mirror image of Jenkins’s approach, Northcott allows that small-scale projects, or “home practices” can serve as important resources for generating alternate ethical forms of society, but he cites Jevons’s paradox to demonstrate that small-scale conservation ironically increases the overall burning of fossil fuels.38 For Northcott, anthropogenic climate change is a political problem that cannot be mitigated by small-scale reform projects. Instead he offers a “new political theology of climate change” that seeks to overcome the nature–culture divide of modernity and to recover “the role of ecosystem boundaries and ecological limits in the constitution of the nations.”39

Northcott’s definition of the problem of anthropogenic climate change reveals its wicked nature: it consists of “imperceptibly slow . . . change leading to catastrophic outcomes” and this creates perceptual and political problems that are rooted in philosophical separations of humanity and human culture from the natural world.40 Because modern human beings have come to understand the natural world as a relatively stable resource separated from human culture and activity, the idea that human activity is causing imperceptible changes that

38 Northcott, Political Theology of Climate Change, 202, 123. William Jevons demonstrated that increased efficiency in the use of fossil fuels lowered prices, which in turn increased the rewards of using them in further production. This leads to Jevons’s paradox, in which increased efficiency increases rather than decreases the use of a resource.
39 Northcott, Political Theology of Climate Change, 48–49.
40 Northcott, Political Theology of Climate Change, 8.
will lead “to catastrophic outcomes is therefore counterintuitive.”  
At the same time, the incremental accumulation of greenhouse gasses has placed us in the physical predicament where mitigation “requires dramatic, large-scale political interventions in fossil fuel extraction and marketing, and hence in the energy systems and behaviours that these fuels sustain,” yet such intervention “lacks popular support, and hence influential advocacy.”

Northcott explains that the unpopularity of any such intervention is rooted in the nature–culture divide of modern society. He describes the evolution of this divide through detailed analysis of the work of Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Locke, and Kant, and he seeks the resolution of the divide in conversation with thinkers like Whitehead, Schmitt, MacIntyre, and Latour, as well as with religious traditions such as the Hebraic covenant. This discussion provides a perspicacious introduction to the history of modern thought and its relation to the nature–culture divide that is both the origin and the exacerbation of anthropogenic climate change. In addition to arguing that we must overcome the nature–culture divide, this volume demonstrates the unified approach to human and natural history that overcoming this divide demands. Northcott skillfully interweaves the science of climate change with histories of philosophical and ethical thought, technological developments, and their repercussions. His account of human culture is firmly embedded in the physical world.

Northcott offers a recovered understanding of the “nomos of the earth” as part of a unified political theology that returns the realm of human culture and politics to the context of the physical world. Northcott argues that the concept of the political has been eroded by three major factors: the nature–culture split that excludes the land from political consideration, the growth of a borderless economy, and liberal/neoliberal theories that restrict the political task to creating “the conditions in which individuals pursue individually chosen and rival conceptions of the good” mediated by the market. In response, Northcott turns to the Hebraic idea of a covenant between three parties: “God, humanity, and the land.” The recognition that the

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41 Northcott, Political Theology of Climate Change, 8.
42 Northcott, Political Theology of Climate Change, 12.
43 Northcott, Political Theology of Climate Change, 206.
44 Northcott, Political Theology of Climate Change, 218, 209.
political is embedded within both physical and metaphysical reality provides leverage for overcoming the nature–culture divide.

**Conclusion**

This short survey of recent contributions to the field of religion and ecology cannot do justice to the astute analysis and creative reconstructions of each author. It does, however, provide some perspective on the range of conversations going on within this field. The critiques of anthropocentrism that dominated early work in the field of religion and ecology have been marginalized by the growing recognition that human interests are not furthered by actions that devastate the environment. It is assumed that most readers understand that environmental protection does further anthropocentric interests and that human beings cannot flourish by destroying the Earth. Despite this general consensus, these contributions reflect ongoing diversity of opinion about which religious resources might be most helpful, and how they should be deployed. As Northcott provides a worldview that might support the political will to make the radical changes needed to mitigate the damage of climate change, Jenkins argues that such cosmological approaches are ineffective and urges a greater emphasis on concrete reform projects. Rasmussen describes the religious resources available for individuals and communities to create space for transforming desire through religious praxis, while McLaughlin and the authors of *Systematic Theology and Climate Change* offer theological arguments for changing our ways. Conradie seeks a new way to tell the religious story that will inspire greater concern for environmental protection.

It is the hope of this author that these diverse approaches not be set in opposition to one another, but rather be taken as partial responses to the wicked environmental problems that have outstripped our current economic, political, cultural, and religious systems. The way we tell our story shapes our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live. Theological arguments within traditions are informed by the concrete practices of members of those traditions, and vice versa. The political will of a nation is funded by the evolving belief systems of its citizens. None of these volumes provides the solution to the environmental problems that we face today, but each offers one piece of the complex puzzle that we must assemble in order to respond effectively.
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