


As long as the earth endures

Looking for providence in the ecological crisis

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By most accounts, the term *eco-anxiety* entered the public conversation in 2017 by way of a report from the American Psychological Association. That report described eco-anxiety as “a chronic fear of environmental doom.”¹ In this essay I want to offer some reflections on what Christian teaching might have to say about such a fear. In the ecological crisis, many Christians experience a theological collision between a belief in God’s ongoing provision for the earth, with us earthlings in the mix, and the catastrophic repercussions of a way of life wildly out of alignment with



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the biophysical limitations of that same earth. The significance of this collision comes from the fact that a fear of serious environmental disruption—whether or not it rises to the level of doom—is in line with the unfolding facts.

The theological conversation surrounding the ecological crisis is wide-ranging. For instance, many pastoral voices have encouraged us to recognize God as “Creator” in our prayers as a way of connecting faith and worship

with environmental realities. Christian ethicists have asked us to evaluate our carbon footprint in light of God’s love for creation. Theologian Sallie McFague encourages Christians to see consumerism as an affront to a biblical portrait of God, especially the kenotic descriptions of God like the one in Philippians 2. God’s self-emptying love, she argues, should lead us to practice the radical love of self-restraint.² Christian teachers have found

1 Susan Clayton, et al., “Mental Health and our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance,” American Psychological Association, March 2017, online: <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf>.


2 Sallie McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

that there is much to draw on and much to critique in both the Bible and tradition.

Given the breadth of the conversation and the propellant anxiety, it is curious that more is not said about God's providence. To affirm or to teach God's providence is to believe that to some degree God both anticipates the future and provides for creation. A common biblical starting point is Genesis 8:22, where God responds to Noah's post-flood sacrifice with these memorable lines (NRSVUE):

*As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night
shall not cease.*

To what degree this and other passages imply that God anticipates the future and rules over its specifics is a matter of long-standing debate. For

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the purposes of this essay, I would like to set aside views of providence that assume God is all-determining. I set these views aside not so much because they are un-Anabaptist but because such a perspective defies both Scripture and our experience of the world. We Anabaptists have generally said little about God's providence. As strong believers in

human freedom, we are more apt to speak about the moral implications of the kingdom of God than to muse about whether God's rule includes control of the earth's atmospheric albedo. However, I can't help but wonder if there is something helpful that might be said here, something that speaks to our anxious age. I will explain by way of a story.

Two moving trips

In the early summer of 2022, my family and I moved from one edge of Ontario to another. I think the British call this process "moving house." This is an apt turn of phrase, since even though the house itself does not actually move, the trials endured by the self-mover suggest that it must: stubbed toes, sore muscles, conflicting schedules, mounds of stuff that magically grow. During the bleakest moments of our family's move, I was reminded that we had done essentially the same soul-crushing thing before.

Our earlier move took place in 2007. We had less stuff and less people. The difference that stood out most prominently in my mind, however, was auditory. As we rolled along the trans-Canada highway in 2007, the sounds of insects smacking against the truck were impossible to ignore. The pings and pops were the sounds of death: animal lives extinguished by the rush of steel, exoskeletons



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crushed, multi-faceted eyes smooched. I noticed far fewer pings and pops during our drive in the summer of 2022. Less life residue was smeared across the windshield.

Two moving trips carried out in different places, at different times of the year, with different equipment cannot prove that anything has changed in the intervening years. Perhaps my more re-

cent trip benefited from some great advance in rental truck design. Maybe the older, more tired me simply drove slower. Maybe those factors explain the difference, but I doubt it.

A 2019 review study published in the journal *Biological Conservation* found that 40 percent of insect species are threatened with extinction. The authors, Francisco Sánchez-Bayo and Kris Wyckhuys, reviewed seventy-three historical studies. The data set revealed both the scale of the problem and some of the key drivers of these population declines: habitat loss, pollution (e.g., pesticides), pathogens, introduced species, and climate change.³ All these dynamics may be at play in the parts of Canada our move traversed.

On a year-over-year basis ecological changes are often hard to notice. Our sense of normal changes gradually. Over the longer term the difference is clearer. It is important to acknowledge that, though we lament these losses, we also contribute to them. For instance, recall the international attention garnered by the expansion of Mennonite-run farms on the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico. This land conversion has been linked to the collapse of bee populations long cultivated by Maya beekeepers.⁴ I

3 Francisco Sánchez-Bayo and Kris A. G. Wyckhuys, "Worldwide Decline of the Entomofauna: A Review of Its Drivers," *Biological Conservation*, 232 (2019): 8–27.

4 Nina Strochlic, "An Unlikely Feud between Beekeepers and Mennonites Simmers in Mexico," *National Geographic*, April 12, 2019, online: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/unlikely-feud-beekeepers-mennonites-simmers-mexico>.

expect that most of us can identify our contribution to ecological changes even closer to home.

Cyclical and non-cyclic change

The difference in insects killed during my two house moves is a sign of something bigger. Changes can be fun, but when they relate to the ecosystems on which we depend, they rightly cause anxiety—maybe even a sense of doom.

Change is not all of one type. Think of the way a human life might unfold: we leave our parents' home, equip ourselves to make our way in the world, establish a household, acquire the necessities to care for our

young, rear them, send them off, and then rid ourselves of excess stuff. Not every life follows this arc, but many do.

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In the Dominion Arboretum in Ottawa, Ontario, there is a great, old Bebb's oak. The tree has a girth of nearly six meters. A few years ago, strong summer winds broke off several of the oak's largest branches. People worried.

Experts were called. Using tomography and good tree sense, it was determined that, despite its bedraggled appearance, the tree was healthy and sound. It was simply "shedding" limbs that were no longer beneficial. One expert summed the situation up this way: "In Great Britain . . . they say a tree will grow for 300 years, rest for 300 years and it will expire gracefully."⁵ What looked like life-threatening damage was really a sign that the tree was transiting to a new stage of life.

Changes of the variety that follow life's natural arc can be difficult, but they are not catastrophic. As annoyed as we might be with declining parental support or with the appearance of grey hair, we sense that these changes fit a pattern. Ancient exegetes made more of this than do our contemporaries. Some early theologians saw a neat seven stage arc of a human life depicted in the Bible and linked it to the days of creation.

Today social commentators and theologians try a similar trick to tamp down our anxiety about various worrying trends. They look for known patterns. They might say things like, *Every five-hundred years the church goes*

⁵ Joanne Laucius, "Iconic oak damaged in storm has decades of life left, says expert," *Ottawa Citizen*, October 3, 2017.

through a major reawakening. Or, *Every two generations there is a major social disruption.* Or, *The worth of your investments is declining because of a normal correction in equities valuation.* Identifying change as part of an expected pattern is comforting. It reassures us of our mastery and pushes uncertainty back to the edge of the firelight—even if it does nothing to change the facts. Moving house is harder at some points in life than others. Insect populations sometimes emerge at times and in places that put them at risk. These are cyclical changes.

Yet these normal cycles are not the only kind of change. There is another. The cold, analytical term is *non-cyclic change*. More colloquially we know this as the kind of change that makes us wonder, *What the hell is going on?* This is the change that occurs when familiar cycles and structures melt away.

Climate scientists can tell us with reasonable certainty the level of warming a given quantity of greenhouse gas pollution will create. The



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basics of this relationship have been known for more than a century. Measured observations, from places like the Mauna Loa Observatory, go back decades; measurements from ice cores extend our knowledge much, much further into the past. Decades ago, Rachel Carson famously told us of the potentially devastating impacts of heavy pesticide use. And long before that we knew

that destroying the habitat of a species could decimate the population. Yet, for all this longstanding knowledge, the current ecological crisis spurs our anxiety like little else.

Our trouble, symbolized by the fewer insect lives claimed by my moving truck in 2022, is that the biophysical disruptions caused by the industrialized economy are breaking the known cycles and patterns. This is new. We wonder—and worry—about the hellish forces being let loose upon the earth. In our imagination these changes do not evoke life's neat and vaguely biblical arc. They evoke the threatening riders of the apocalypse. It's with the drum of these hooves in our ears that we now think about God's providence. Like the original audience of the opening chapters of Genesis, we long for God to bring order, for God's Spirit to brood over the unpredictable churning of the climate with motherly attention.

God's providence

Whither God's providence? David Fergusson, who has written quite a bit about Christian views of providence, describes this segment of Christian teaching as "the sequel to creation."⁶ The 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* illustrates this well. Article 5, "Creation and Divine Providence," opens this way: "We believe that God has created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, and that God preserves and renews what has been made." The final section of the Confession, Article

24, "The Reign of God," restates the sequence: "We believe that God, who created the universe, continues to rule over it in wisdom, patience, and justice."⁷

There is the niggling worry that looking to Christian teaching on providence, even in the context of creation, will lead to impotence and passivity. Pursuing the question of God's providence, this wise and patient rule, should do otherwise. We pursue this question best by using it like one might use a medical

imaging technique. Our hope is not for a locked-in vision of the future but for an outline of how God might be present within a complex and troubling reality. To query providence is to look for how it is that, even when 40 percent of insect species are endangered, God is working to preserve beloved creation along with the garden caretakers who are both its blessing and curse.

One place we find God's providential care at work is in the persistence of nature's cycles. Though stressed, these patterns remain. There are seasons. There are migratory patterns. There is the host of biogeochemical cycles—water, nitrogen, and carbon, to name a few. We sometimes identify this aspect of God's ongoing provision as *creatio continua*. In the face of our worries about environmental doom, we would do well to see these cyclical changes as an expression of God's patient and wise rule. God's

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6 David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

7 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995); online: www.mennoniteusa.org/who-are-mennonites/what-we-believe/confession-of-faith/.

providence is not anticipated as an emergency backup. It is found in the system itself, the arc of life.

We must be careful here, for there are those who would reduce the ecological crises from a catastrophic outworking of over-consumption to a natural cycle itself. This is a sham comfort, like the false proclamations of peace in Ezekiel's day. We would be wise to take note of the prophetic response (Ezekiel 13:10–12, NRSVUE):

Because they have misled my people, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a flimsy wall, these prophets smear whitewash on it. Say to those who smear whitewash on it that it shall fall. There will be a deluge of rain, great hailstones will fall, and a stormy wind will break out. When the wall falls, will it not be said to you, "Where is the whitewash you smeared on it?"

The explanations of those who deny climate change fail to match reality. They are like whitewash on a flimsy wall. The ecological crisis is not a cycle. It is an outworking of sin across systems and entire populations. Providence provides judgment, not easy comfort.

The fact that the earth's biogeochemical cycles will not allow negligent consumerism and greed to continue indefinitely is a form of divine provision. That fire and wind erase all doubt that the economies of the Global North are misguided is a call to repentance. To be clear, many who suffer the near-term consequence of climate change are not the ones responsible, just as the many plant and animal species erased from the earth are not the cause of their own demise. God's providence exhibited in the earth's circuit-breaker systems requires scientifically informed prophetic voices. This is the pattern of the Hebrew Scriptures, where God's providence requires the ministry of prophets.

God's providence is in the earth's systems, yes, but it is not only there. For some reason—a tangle of philosophy and historical accident, no doubt—we tend to think of providence as something carried out by God the Father (to use the classical formulation). We imagine a disinterested king moving pieces around a game board. We imagine a being at infinite arm's length from the suffering of creatures. There are lines in Scripture that suggest this, but the full arc of the story promises more.

Divine solidarity with creation

We are wrong to think that our uncertainty and anxiousness are unprecedented. Plagues, social disruption, and natural disasters are not new. We are not the first ones to experience a theological collision between belief and reality. At the core of the Christian response to such catastrophes has always been the preeminent act of God's providence. John's Gospel tells us that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14). There is no greater act of divine care for and solidarity with suffering creation than this.

The Incarnation, divine solidarity even unto death, points us toward Pentecost. In John 14 Jesus promised his students that they would not be left "orphaned." The Holy Spirit, the "Advocate," would be sent among them. The old King James Version uses the term "Comforter." We experience God's provision for creation through the presence of the Spirit. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson helpfully widens the scope of our thinking when she writes, "The stunning world opened up to our wonder by evolutionary biology and ravaged by our consumerist practices calls for attend-



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ing to the presence of the Giver of life not at a distance, presiding from beyond the apex of a pyramid of greater and lesser beings, but within and around the merging, struggling, living, dying, and evolving circle of life."⁸ Johnson goes on to riff on Augustine: "Like a saturated


sponge creation is dripping with divine presence. . . . The life of the Spirit pervades the world."⁹ This is important because, without an ability to see God's provision within an eco-state marked by death and uncertainty, we are apt to turn away from the severity of the crisis. To be present with those who suffer, to know and to see, to not turn away—this is God's way of ruling amid creaturely freedom. This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit at a time when a great deal of death is smeared across the windshield of our extractive economy.

This affirmation of the presence of God's Spirit as an enactment of providence brings us to a surprising place. It brings us, in a sense, back to the answer we most want to hear: that the doom we fear may not come

8 Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 133.

9 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 137.

to pass. Throughout the Scriptures God's Spirit is an agent of surprise, bringing life out of death, bringing new ways of being out of the decrepit. With so many species facing extinction, the fact that this Spirit is the one who raised Jesus from the dead is no small thing, but think also of



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the surprise of Pentecost, the inclusion of the gentiles, the marvelous sign acts that marked the emergence of the early church. The demise of the Hine's emerald dragonfly is not locked in.

The uncertainty, the non-cyclic nature, of the ecological crisis has two sides. There is the fearsome side, the threat of "environmental doom," but there is another. Thomas Homer-Dixon puts it this way: "The uncertainty in the zone between the impossible and the inevitable

creates a mental space; our imagination can then populate that space with desirable possibilities, some of which we can make objects of our hope."¹⁰ The terrifying ecological changes we observe are not the opening salvo of an entirely predictable slide. It is more complicated. Because the earth, coupled with our social systems, constitutes a highly complex system, the future is genuinely uncertain. This uncertainty includes room for repentance and space for hope. Though God may not magically save us from the repercussions of our profligate way of life, the future may yet surprise us. Life from death, seed time and harvest—as long as the earth endures. God's providence may yet bring about repentance.

About the author

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¹⁰ Homer-Dixon, *Commanding Hope: The Power We Have to Renew a World in Peril* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2020), 98.