

## Article

# The Web of Life: A Critique of Nature, Wilderness, Gaia and the «Common Household»

Anne Marie Reijnen

Theologicum, Institut Catholique de Paris, 21, Rue d'Assas, CEDEX 06, 75270 Paris, France; am.reijnen@orange.fr

**Abstract:** A two-word summary of the following article might be «Words matter». It matters whether we conceive of the non-built world as nature, as «wilderness», as Gaia/Mother Earth, or as «our common home». We analyze the emergence of each of these four notions. Nature, by far the most multi-layered of the words, has a complex history rooted in the Greek word *phusis*. Nature is problematic because of its opposites: supernatural; nurture, culture and civilization. Nature seems to require dualism. Wilderness started out as something terrifying (the realm of the wild beasts), later acquiring a specific American understanding of an area conserved for recreation, of nature partially preserved, all desirable goals inspired by John Muir. In the Scriptures, wilderness becomes filled by promise. Gaia is short for the Gaia hypothesis of Earth as a living, self-regulating organism. It was coined by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis and discussed critically by Bruno Latour. Compared with the view of the Earth as dead matter, «Gaia» is conducive to respect for all living beings. When it is coupled with Mother Earth, the concept becomes problematic from a feminist point of view. The common home or household stem from the teachings of Pope Francis. Although *Laudato si'* is rightly viewed as a prophetic text regarding ecology and spirituality, «common home» implies a domestication of all that lives in a worldview that remains anthropocentric (homes are artefacts). A better concept is the «web of life» of which humankind is a part, but not the master. It is such a decentering that may herald hope for the Earth.

**Keywords:** Lovelock; Pope Francis; Tsing Lowenhaupt; Le Guin; Muir; nature; Gaia/Mother Earth; common home; web of life



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Hope is a home where there is something to eat, but also to cook.

## 1. Introduction

«Nature» is a social and political battleground. Who wields the power to decide the conservation or the destruction of a wetland? Is it legitimate to cut down trees for a «green» purpose like a bicycle path?<sup>1</sup> These are contentious arbitrations. Likewise, defining the nature of «nature» raises moral, spiritual and theological quandaries.

In the motto which opens this paragraph, I placed quotation marks around the word Nature, even though it seems to be a straightforward use of a familiar word. «Nature», *prima vista*, is a factual term; but if we look into its origins and evolution, we find many problematic aspects, e.g., the construction of a «supernatural» dimension which is supposed to be more noble than the «natural» world (Mcfague 1997). In this paper, we analyze four concepts of the outer, non-built world of humankind: first, «nature» (as opposed to nurture, culture, society and as distinct from the «supernatural»); then, wilderness; third, Mother Earth/Gaia; and finally, the expression popularized by Pope Francis, «the common home». I will briefly examine the emergence of these four notions, submit a critique of each of them and offer a fifth as an alternative: «the wild weird web of life». Let it be clear that behind the semantics lies the crucial pressing existential question: where is hope for the Earth found, for the flourishing of life on the blue and green planet?

Theology is turning away from metaphysics in favor of the dimensions of history, of the body and of ecology in a movement that may be called «the greening of theology»,

although this remains the subject of critical scrutiny. John Milbank, for one, balked at this greenwashing: «In the false spring of our times, everything painted green: it has become the appointed liturgical colour for our post-historical sabbath (. . .). The colour has a utopian hint, or rather that of a puritan Arcadia, but at the same time it soothes the passages of capitalist exchange (. . .)» (Milbank 1997, p. 257).

In the wake of Black theology and other liberation theologies, starting at the end of the 1960s, there has been a considerable «turn» away from the intangible to the tangible. Attention has shifted to the shape and quality of the human community on earth, rather than on speculations about individual redemption. In the literature related to ecology and theology, the traditional topos of the Last Judgment is displaced by the vision of a judgment within history where «Nature» rises in judgment against humankind. While it is difficult to imagine a Christian theology that would be entirely devoid of metaphysics, the turn toward «nature», toward society and toward the body, as legitimate preoccupations for theological discourse, appear to have become commonplace. Next to the classical tripod of the Scriptures, of tradition and of reason, experience has become authoritative. Furthermore, theology relies heavily on experience in the field of «life sciences» such as ethology, biology and botany. Jim Conlon offered a tribute to Pope Francis and *Laudato Si'* in the new edition of his book *Geo-Justice*, expressing his gratitude «for the way in which evolutionary science is woven into your letter» (Conlon [1990] 2017, p. 7).

Hardly anyone, I believe, cavils at the axiom that hope, even in Christian terms, implies life for the Earth and life on Earth, for the other-than human and for humans. Thus, the departure from Christian *otherworldliness* is the tacit backdrop for this article. Therefore, my criterium for judging the four conceptions is *pragmatic*: do they steer toward hope for the Earth, as defined above? Or do still they reflect the unhelpful postures of dualism, i.e., separating matter and spirit, and of anthropocentrism? Consider one example: «environment» is a useful word, because you can forge words with it that will be easily understood, such as «environmental» and «environmentalist». A child grasps what should be the purpose of the «United States Environmental Protection Agency» (see [www.epa.gov/](http://www.epa.gov/), accessed on 31 October 2023). The advantage of the word is to reinforce the trust in human responsibility and agency. Its drawback is the illusion that we are merely surrounded by environment, as if it were a reality distinct from us. In fact, we live and breathe our «environment». We breathe viruses, microbes and bacteria in, and we breathe them out. We are walking biomes of many small organisms that thrive in our intestines and the manifold creatures that live on our skin. Recent research suggests there are slightly more bacterial cells in our body than human cells, to which we should add viruses, yeasts and other fungi. We could not live without the symbiotic exchanges with those micro-organisms, as shown by Tim Spector, professor of genetic epidemiology (Spector 2022, pp. 3–5). In our opinion, «environment» falls short in doing justice to these myriads of intertwined processes.

The approach of Mary Tucker and John Grim differs from mine in that they draw an arc from one period to another. The advantage of their method is to demonstrate the shift from an anthropocentric to an anthropocosmic perception (Tucker and Grim 2014, p. 56). By contrast, in this article, there is no linear progression from an a superannuated to a more contemporary and useful word. The four expressions I have chosen partially coexist in time. Nature stems from antiquity and has never fallen out of use. Gaia is a 1970s repristination of a Greek myth. The most recent one («the common household») has garnered widespread support, but has, in my view, the shortcoming of a vestigial anthropocentrism, as I will attempt to show *infra*.

To state something fairly obvious: how we understand a word has to do with our presuppositions, with our *Weltanschauung* precisely. A philosopher friend of mine remains leery about the use of «planet» rather than «world»: we must acknowledge the deep underpinnings, for a philosopher, of the concept of world (*mundus*, *Welt*. . .). By contrast, for me, the expression «planet» or «third planet of the solar system» makes sense because of the resonance with the planetary perspective on life, which stems from the new scientific

field of astrobiology, the search for telluric exoplanets in the habitable zones of stars, that might harbor forms of life. To summarize: one's cultural context and spiritual heritage are decisive factors in how we describe ourselves within the web of all that lives. For the Sino-American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, there is one single concrete object which stands for ecological relationships and the disturbed world, against the backdrop of economic globalization: «the mushroom at the end of the world» (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015). For a Hindu thinker and activist like Satish Kumar, it is natural to conceive of a triad of Sanskrit terms: *yagna*, *tapas* and *dana*: soil, soul (discipline) and society (Kumar 2013, p. 16).

Venice, where I wrote the final draft of this article, is of great relevance for the topic under discussion: the Serenissima and her lagoon are a fragile microcosm. Everything in this world afloat relies on everything else: the currents and tides, the wind and the seagulls, the putrefying wood that still supports the palazzi, the human activities of maintaining and consuming, of building and wasting. To live here is like watching a soap bubble that keeps aloft, by miracle almost, and feeling apprehensive of the moment when it finally must burst. This is an apt analogy for the living Earth and its web of relationships. Nature's architects provide us with many examples of such resilient, beautiful and precarious constructions: beehives, birds' nests and spider webs (as shown by the contemporary Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno). Venice is like an arachnid's web, trembling in the waft of a breeze.

The purpose of a critical deconstruction of the four concepts (nature, wilderness, Gaia, and finally, the common home) is to clear a space for a more adequate formulation of the relationship between non-human lives and ourselves. As Albert Camus observed, «To give a wrong name to an object is to increase the misery of this world». However, we should acknowledge that there is no ideal way to express the relationship; when we look closer at each term, it has its *pro* and *con*. The most we can strive for is to find a category that here and now will be *least harmful* for this planet and all living beings in it, one that carries meaning for us, given our personal past and the current situation, and one that opens a path of hope, in spite of the sense of impending doom.

## 2. Today's World

Who could have anticipated, in the 1960s, the wave of technological innovations that was about to engulf the world? My generation of the post-war baby-boom had grown up with bulky telephones that plugged into the wall and witnessed the timid transition from mechanical typewriters to the first electrical machines. Devices and processes have changed more in a few decades than they had changed over centuries. These changes, hailed as the digital revolution, have come upon us with such a speed that many of our older fellow citizens feel bewildered and left behind. So much for engineering, for the world of human made objects, of artefacts. What about the changes in the outer, so-called «natural» world? Here, too, *the speed of change* is dizzying: the dwindling populations of birds, the collapse of the insect and amphibian populations, the disappearance of great rivers (in Spain, for instance). In countries long used to predictable seasonal weather and fairly stable conditions, we are suddenly faced with catastrophic droughts and frequent heatwaves, as well as unseasonal warm spells in the autumn or even the winter. We are confronted with a surge in tropical cloud-breaks, floods and tornadoes. Before our very eyes, in our own lifetime, the snow-covered glaciers of the Alps are turning brown. We were not prepared for these drastic departures from our formerly temperate climate in the Western world. And, of course, the phenomena are even more marked in parts of the world where the climate has been historically more extreme.

One response to the overwhelming technological shifts is to refuse to acknowledge them, to cling to the old ways of doing things, as one observes in some elderly citizens. In a similar manner, one response to the shifts in the conditions of the «natural» world is to deny them, or to ignore them. A third attitude is more widespread nowadays: it is to acknowledge the data in theory, but without changing behavior significantly. It is an instance of «cognitive dissonance». Do you remember shaking your head in disbelief when hearing about people who return to settle, again and again, next to an active volcano?

Humankind is balancing on the edge of the brink, partying on the rim bone of nothingness. An urgent question is: how can we overcome this cognitive dissonance between what we know, or by now should know, of the conditions of the world, and the ways we inhabit the world? A majority of people in the West is perpetuating the excessive use of its natural resources, the consumption of the same meat-based diets and the modes of traveling that flourished during the previous era of modernity.

My hypothesis is that *the very language* we use to describe our place in the world reveals our assumptions about the relative importance of the realms of minerals, of the plants and trees, of humankind.<sup>2</sup> If you are tempted to consider this as an exercise in hairsplitting, then reflect for a moment about the consequences of being called «the weaker sex», a «Negress», or «a decide people». Words can inflict pain, and they do cause terrible harm.

### 3. Nature

This is, in my opinion, by far the most complex of the concepts under discussion, for its simplicity is deceptive. To start with the most obvious, one registers its positive meaning: «The word «nature» means birth. Natal, nativity, native and nature all come from the same root. Whatever is born and will die is nature. Since we, humans, are also born and will die, we are nature too. Thus nature and humans are one.» (Kumar 2013, pp. 18–19). The first difficulty we face in this appealing description is that we must question the definition of nature as the realm, including humankind naturally, of whatever is born and will die. It encompasses the traditional realms of vegetal and animal, but what about the mineral realm? The role of tectonic plates and their activity, the formation and erosion of rocks all contribute, to a large extent, to rendering Earth a living planet. We must distance ourselves from the static representation of the mountains, rocks and the hard crust underneath the waters, «locked» in passive immobility, underneath the biosphere. A far more helpful term for the thin layer of air around and above us is the newly coined expression *critical zone*, which points to the dynamic nature of this sphere. Rocks are far from being immutable: they are constantly exchanging their elements with the outside, in unceasing chemical and physical processes of reactions. Instead of imagining closed-off communities of people, plants, rocks and clouds, impervious to each other, it is more fruitful to describe the many ways in which they are mutually *entangled*. Trees «make» the weather and the soil; over time, the micro-organisms in the soil transform rocks into organic compounds; and human beings can facilitate or hinder these manifold exchanges. This is *not* necessarily to attribute agency to the non-human elements; it is to recognize their own immanent *logos*. I draw attention to this methodological precaution, since one of the baffling aspects of Lovelock's writings on Gaia (see *infra*) is his tendency to construct a teleological frame around an anthropomorphic Gaia («her purpose»).

Next: nature, natural, natal, native and nativity, etc., all stem from the Latin «*nātūra*», which represents a clumsy attempt to render the Greek root *phusis*. (Cassin 2014, p. 703). In the Oxford Latin dictionary (Glare 1982), we find 15 meanings for the single word. The definition that is most generally associated with nature is probably «the power which determines the physical properties of animals, plants, and other natural products» and «the power which governs the physical universe and directs all natural processes». I will not discuss the matter of «natural order as a source of law», which falls outside the scope of my article. But the dictionary reminds us that *nation* also stems from the verb *nascor*, which means to be born. Like everything else in nature, human beings are born somewhere, the word nation applies to a people, a race. This leads us to underline that «nature» cannot be taken as the opposite of culture, society or politics, because of the «rootedness» which is precisely expressed by the word nation/to be born. Christy Wampole has offered a brilliant survey of the numerous ramifications of the metaphor «rootedness» (Wampole 2016). In the realm of politics, it is important to note that concepts of people, races or nations cannot be claimed as «natural» phenomena.

«Nature» inspires awe and has strong ties with the religious dimension: the third aspect of «nature» therefore concerns the *worship* of natural phenomena or entities. What

stands out here is the dimension of events or bodies that are beyond the control of human beings: thunder and lightning, earthquakes and the tsunamis caused in the ocean by tectonic activity; outbreaks of volcanoes. And, of course, the celestial bodies that give life and can kill (our star, the sun), and the «shape-shifting» moon whose waxing and waning has fascinated human beings since the beginning (Eliade 1987, pp. 324–28). But today the consciousness of these phenomena no longer associates them with the numinous. Because they are increasingly better understood and predicted, they have lost their power to attract and to terrify. Like the Divine, «Nature» was understood as numinous (Otto 1917, pp. 141–42). Our experience of nature is no longer habitually conditioned by the awe felt by the women and men of yore.

Instead, the prevalent feeling is one of nostalgia, or indeed *solastalgia*, a word coined by the Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht. This neologism describes the wistful sense of loss of a familiar «natural» place which used to give us joy. It is not so much a concept (theoretical), as a *percept*, or feeling. Our emotion of loss and regret now extends to the entire Earth. We are painfully aware that there is no longer a single habitat in «nature» that has not been exposed to the consequences of human activities, including our natural satellite, the moon. There is no brook, river or mountain lake, even in the remotest part of the planet, that has not been polluted to some degree. The most seemingly impenetrable forests are exposed to changes in the chemical composition of rainfall («acid rain»). Plastic waste is everywhere, in the seas and oceans and, to some extent, in every fish. But here, too, we must beware of words that carry value judgments: pollution is such a word, always assumed to be taken as negative. As a Christian, and therefore a humanist, I must disagree with the following statement quoted by the scientist James Lovelock. He repeats the blunt assertion: «There is only one pollution. . . people» (Lovelock 1979, p. 122). A synonym for pollution is «disturbance», but the latter term affords far more leeway, compared with the binary of «natural versus polluted». Indeed, Tsing’s protagonist, the much sought-after delicacy, the matsutake mushroom (*Tricholoma matsutake*), only thrives in «disturbed» woods, that have been deforested, for instance. She observes: «Deciding what counts as disturbance is always a matter of point of view. From a human’s vantage, the disturbance that destroys an anthill is vastly different from that obliterating a human city. From an ant’s perspective, the stakes are different. But points of view also vary *within* single species. Rosalind Shaw has elegantly shown how men and women, urban and rural, and rich and poor each conceptualise «floods» differently in Bangladesh, because they are differentially affected by rising waters; for each group, the rise exceeds what is bearable—and thus becomes a flood—at a different point.» (Tsing 2015, p. 161).

Nature, formerly imagined as undisturbed and pristine, permits us to segue to that most American «invention», wilderness: who coined the term, and with what expectations?

#### 4. Wilderness

Although it is not included in Barbara Cassin’s fascinating *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, wilderness cannot as such be rendered in French: it would require a sentence to describe the dual meanings of this word, in ecological and Biblical terms. Wilderness is defined as a «wild uninhabited and uncultivated region, or any desolate tract or area» and it has an arresting etymology: it combines «wild» with «deer», deer or beast. It would require a considerable leap of the imagination to find anything appealing or positive in the wilderness, where the wild beasts rule, far removed from human culture (Collins English Dictionary [1979] 2011).

In Webster’s dictionary, we discover Wilderness II, which now bears the hallmark of human intervention. Wilderness is an area, as of national forest land, set aside by government for the *preservation* of natural conditions. This shows the characteristically American transformation of the alien and dangerous into a portion of «nature that is engineered to remain «natural», for the purpose of human leisure or scientific endeavours». This specific understanding became part of the American collective psyche, as Roderick Frazier Nash has shown in his *Wilderness and the American Mind*, a seminal book for



environmentalists published in 1967 (Nash [1967] 2014). Wilderness becomes the object of conservation, in the sense of a national park, and this shift owes a great deal to the Scots-American naturalist John Muir ([1876] 2017). John Muir, born in 1838, and Ralph Waldo Emerson bore each other great admiration. In 1903, Muir took Theodore Roosevelt on a camping trip and convinced him of the need to preserve areas of wilderness. Muir presided the Sierra Club from its birth to his own death in 1914. At the age of 73, he accomplished his dream of exploring the araucaria forests of the Amazon. In the early conservation movement in North America, «wilderness» became desirable. It was a condition to be restored and then preserved, at least within well-defined boundaries. Thus far, we have described a biological wilderness (I) and a place that is *both biological and spiritual* (II), as experienced by John Muir. He once wrote «I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.» (Muir 1954, p. 311). We would like to point out that the appreciation for «wilderness» is a fundamental tenet of that typically American philosophy, transcendentalism. Transcendentalist philosophy, in turn, provides the rationale for that uniquely American experience which has forged the character of generations of women and men, the «summer camp».

We can now go further and say there exists a «Wilderness III» which appears in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and in liturgy and hymns. It, too, is ambiguous. The desert is a place fraught with the dangers of exposure, of thirst, of hunger and of temptation. John the Baptizer fulfilled his task in the wilderness. Jesus of Nazareth spent 40 days in the desert, hungering and thirsting (Mt 4, Luke 4, Mark 1). But now the wilderness is turned inside out. Its wild animals do not threaten the life of Jesus: «he was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered unto him» (Mk 1, 13, AKJ version). In the shared revelation of *TaNakh* and the *First Testament*, respectively, «wilderness» is the rocky, inhospitable place crawling with scorpions, snakes and beasts of prey, but it becomes a good place to dwell. It is where people meet their God; it is where the bride and the groom enjoy the bliss of solitude. The wilderness of the desert flowers with life abundant and the wild beasts, too, praise God (see Dt. 1 and Dt. 8; Hos. 2 and Hos. 9; Jr. 2 and Jr. 31).

There is final aspect of «wilderness» which provides the transition to «Mother Earth»/Gaia. Wilderness was sometimes understood as the realm opposed to civilization, the domain of Man. Ursula K. Le Guin describes this mentality in a lucid albeit polemical manner. «Civilized Man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is Other—outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women and the wilderness, to be used as I see fit.» (Le Guin [1986] 1990a, p. 161). This fundamental dichotomy goes back to the «invention» of couples of opposites. To quote Le Guin again: “Listen: they do not say, ‘Nature is sacred’. Because they distrust that word, Nature. Nature as not including humanity. Nature as what is not human, that Nature is a construct made by Man” (ibid., p. 162).

## 5. Gaia/Mother Earth (James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis; Bruno Latour)

Gaia is often used as a shortcut, meaning the Gaia hypothesis or theory: the Earth may be understood as a large self-regulating body. The *pro* and *con* of this expression are the same: it is an image that speaks to our imagination, and because it is an image, our imagination tends to run away with it. We have heard the story of how the word was coined: two befriended neighbors walking in the English countryside are talking about their work. One is the famous writer William Golding, author of the novel *Lord of the Flies* (and several other beautiful books). He is encouraging his friend, the scientist James Lovelock, to find a name for his theory that will grab the attention of the public, and he proposes «Gaia», the Greek name for the goddess of the earth (Lovelock 1979, p. 10; 2006, p. 146).

Let us try and make our way back to the source of Gaia. It is an ancient name found in the work of Hesiod, described as the first European poet who put himself as an individual into his work. He flourished in the latter part of the eighth century BC and was the author

of the *Theogony* and of *The Works and Days*, where he refers to quarrels with his brother over their estate. The two works have in common the myth of Prometheus and the figure of Pandora with her jar (*nota bene*, a jar rather than a box). The *Theogony* presents its readers with about 300 gods, classified according to genealogy. Chaos, yawning void, came into existence, followed by Earth (Gaia) and others; from Earth came Uranus (Heaven), mountains and the sea, to simplify a story where monsters proliferate. In the Greek text, regarding one of the early occurrences of Gae'a (also sometimes called Gē), we find «Earth with her wide flanks, solid foundation offered forever to all the living» (verse 116, according to some manuscripts).

This may seem far removed from our world, belonging to the era of pagan polytheism. It is indeed bygone in the sense that Christianity superseded Greek and Roman deities. However, we should keep in mind that for Hinduism, a faith that is alive and thriving today, these are not superannuated superstitions. «Hindus talk about the rain god, Indra; the wind god, Vaya; the fire goddess, Agni, and the earth goddess, Bhoomi.» (Kumar 2013, p. 20). As a consequence, «Nature is divine, sacred and holy, as well as abundant» (ibid.) Yet another way of expressing this is to affirm that «It is the divine, and the divine alone, who appears in everything animate and inanimate». (ibid.) Christianity has actively battled against the holy springs and holy trees which it encountered as it spread across the Roman Empire. But then the pendulum swung too far. Large sectors of Christian thought and practice in the West became captive to a *Kosmosvergessenheit*, to the marginalisation of «nature». Faith, especially in its Protestant temperament, became mostly indifferent to the other-than-human world, to the mute lives of animals and plants (Santmyre and Cobb 2006, pp. 115–24). Naturally, for us, there exists no way back to the worship of nature. Between pantheism (everything is divine) and panentheism (God makes Godself known in, under and through everything in creation), we must draw a line. But *panentheism* is a perfectly Orthodox position which deserves our full attention as a way to repatriate ecology into our spirituality. For a full account of panentheism, I recommend the article by John Culp (2023).

We should now return to the Gaia theory put forth by Lovelock and the biologist Lynn Margulis. In his preface, Lovelock writes: «I have frequently used the word Gaia as a shorthand for the hypothesis itself, namely that the biosphere is a self-regulating entity with the capacity to keep our planet healthy by controlling the chemical and physical environment. Occasionally it has been difficult, without excessive circumlocution, to avoid talking of Gaia as if she were known to be sentient» (Lovelock 1979, p. XII). But this represents, in my eyes, a great drawback: we continually have to correct the anthropomorphism imposed on Earth, e.g., when Lovelock writes of Gaia's «impatience» (p. 81), of Gaia turning something «to her advantage» (p. 100). True, the name Gaia rolls off the tongue more easily than the acronym for Biocybernetic Universal System Tendency/Homeostasis, but these terms at least avoid the misunderstanding that Earth is like a great sentient Mother. The men Hesiod, Lovelock, Kumar and Latour may subliminally equate «Mother» with unconditional love. A woman is allowed to think otherwise. First of all, motherhood has been removed from its pedestal as it no longer defines the life of women: it is an *optional* episode in the lifespan of, on average, 80 years. This is not to deny that for a phenomenological account, «motherhood» (or more generally parenthood) implies shifts that are permanent (Donohoe 2012, p. 193). I count myself extremely fortunate to have given birth once, but you can be fully a woman without ever giving birth, and if you *are* a mother, there is life beyond mothering. Also, as the daughter of a mother, I found that there was a time to be close, very close to her, and a time to move away. The use of «Mother Earth» to describe the relationship of human beings, alongside all the other creatures, to the non-built world, seems highly problematic.

Mother, smother. . .there was something of a teenage rebellion against Mother Earth's apron strings in the early chapters of space exploration. For some commentators, the era of the Sputniks meant the cutting of the umbilical cord. «Should the emancipation and secularization of the modern age, which began with a turning-away, not necessarily from God, but from a god who was the Father of men in heaven, end with an even more fateful repudiation of the Earth who was the Mother of all living creatures under the sky?» Such

was the astute analysis made by Hannah Arendt in the prologue of *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958, p. 2).

The old binary of man versus nature implies other supposed dichotomies: mind versus matter, man versus woman. If Earth is Mother, then women/mothers find themselves assigned to the side of nature and of matter, as opposed to culture and mind, which is no longer tenable. Lovelock recognizes the difficulties caused by his metaphor. He writes: «We are two sexes who respond differently and both metaphors may be needed» (Lovelock 2006, p. 154). The scientist suggests we may prefer either a «muscular» Gaia who is about to take revenge for the mistreatment inflicted by humankind, or a «nurturing» Gaia on the other hand. The definition of Gaia as «a complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; the totality constituting a feedback system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet» (Lovelock 1979, p. 11) has become a mainstream notion. As the activist Satish Kumar writes: «In the new paradigm, Earth is Gaia, a living organism, a biotic community, a self-regulating, self-sustaining, living system.» (Kumar 2013, p. 156). Bruno Latour gave the 2013 Gifford lectures «on natural religion»—since that is their historic mandate—calling them «Facing Gaia. Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature»; he revised them for publication in French (Latour 2015). The book is extremely dense and subtle; it is truly facing Gaia, in that it both debunks the anthropomorphic misunderstandings of Lovelock's theory, and reclaims Gaia, because «Nature» no longer adequately describes the complex loops of feedback between the oceans, the glaciers, the forests and ourselves. Latour tends to borrow from the spheres of (parliamentary) politics and of diplomacy (Latour 2015, pp. 329–73).

## 6. The Common Household: A Critique

It is not an exaggeration to state that since Vatican II, there have been no Roman Catholic documents as popular and widely read as *Laudato si'*. *Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home*, the declaration made by Pope Francis on 24 May 2015. So how dare one criticize one of its pivotal aspects, the appeal to care for Creation as «our common home»? First, we measure the consensus around this image of a «common home». Seizing the occasion of the COP 21 held in Glasgow in November 2021, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, drafted and signed a «Joint Message for the Protection of Creation». Their urgent appeal concludes: «Caring for God's creation is a spiritual commission requiring a response of commitment. This is a critical moment. Our children's future and the future of our common home depend on it» (JMCP 2021).

But we say: a home is an artefact, a result of human planning and engineering (though non-human animals too are skilled as «architects»). The Earth is *not* an artefact: it contains forces that are beyond human control and realities that remain practically unknown, like the abysses of the Oceans and their amazing life forms. As Arthur C. Clarke has observed, «How inappropriate to call this planet Earth, when clearly it is Ocean». (quoted by Lovelock 1979, p. 84). A critique of the «common home» must acknowledge both its positive intention and the possible deleterious effects it induces. To invoke «our common home» underlines the need to share fairly all of nature's resources among the people living on Earth. Every human being is entitled to her share of arable land, of breathable air and of sufficient clean water. Every individual and all communities are stakeholders in the God-given *oikonomia*. Why? Because there is one humankind, one «family» as it were. The teachings of the Catholic church in this regard are an antidote to racism. We might also notice the importance of «family» generally in the Catholic tradition. Remember Francis of Assisi, whose name was deliberately chosen by the current pope: he famously invited fellow believers to say «Laudato si'», Praised be thou, God, for brother Sun, for our sister the Moon and the stars, and for brother Wind. No one takes the hymn to mean literally that the wind is our brother; tornadoes and hurricanes make the wind an unlikely playmate. Did the domestication of the other than human world start here? We are familiar with the medieval images that illustrate the four seasons and the cycle of life. In them, indeed,



human beings take center stage, they are the agents who chop down the trees, kill the pig and spin the wool.

Our knowledge has deepened, and we recognize that the world is not our orchard; we cannot «manage» it the way we manage a farmstead. The web of wild weird lives precedes us by far: life emerged on the third planet well before *Homo sapiens*. Therefore, the biological planet exceeds us: the skylark, the lichens above the tree-line, the endless variety of fungi, the different species of plankton cannot be domesticated. The formula «common home» is a misleading, maybe counterproductive description of incredible array of entangled lives, from microscopic to gigantic. When the Pope writes, «Our common home is falling into serious disrepair» (LS § 61), we agree with his analysis but question the use of «common home», which strengthens the traditional focus on human activities like the building and upkeep of a home.

The Christian tradition, be it Protestant, Orthodox or Catholic, continues to assume the *central* position of humankind within creation. When I plead for an end to this anthropocentric captivity, I do maintain a moderate exceptionalism for humankind. Human beings have received the faculty to anticipate the results of their actions. The choice before them is put starkly in the Scriptures: «See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil (...) therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him» (Dt. 30, 15–20). The anatomy of the human brain and its functions are still not completely known but the size of the frontal lobes, seats of the faculty to deliberate, are far larger than in other mammals; this is what the neurologist Elkhonon Goldberg describes as the «executive brain» (Goldberg 2001). From a believer's standpoint, human freedom is not absolute (autonomy), nor should it be subject to arbitrary authorities (heteronomy): it should be lived in theonomy, mindful of God's grace and of God's commandments. Martin Luther saw human beings in their relation to the world (*coram mundo*), but he put the emphasis on the existence *coram Deo* (Lienhard 1991, pp. 19–20). Some authors prefer to speak of a theocentric perspective (Edwards 2015, p. 161), as opposed to the biocentric position of deep ecology.

I am deeply indebted to «the green patriarch», Bartholomew. It was at his invitation that I had the honor of participating in a dialogue among spiritual traditions regarding ecology, bringing together Christians, Jews and Muslims, but also a secular botanist, in September 1998, in Istanbul. For my contribution, I was compelled to study my Protestant tradition, especially Calvinism, on a topic which was not taught at seminary when I was a student myself (Reijnen 2000). Bartholomew has been a true pioneer. Not every assertion of the Ecumenical Patriarch is marred by anthropomorphism. In 1997, he proposed a vision that centers on God as Spirit who endows everything with a life-giving Breath: «The Lord suffuses all of creation with His divine Presence in one continuous legato from the substance of atoms to the Mind of God». (Moore and Nelson 2010, p. 136). Speaking jointly with Pope John Paul II in 2002, the Ecumenical Patriarch issued this clarion call for all of us who may be despairing of our planet's viability: «It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the Earth toward our children's future. Let that generation start now, with God's help and blessing» (Moore and Nelson 2010, p. 54). The Bishop of Rome published an Apostolic exhortation (note that it carries less weight than an Encyclical letter), *Laudate Deum*, which once more seizes the occasion of a Conference of the Parties, this time the forthcoming COP 28 to be held in Dubai. Two essential tenets are repeated: «Everything is connected» and «No one is saved alone» (LD 2023, § 19). It is a visionary and radical text, and Francis is the first pope to quote the philosopher and biologist Donna Haraway. Francis now calls for «a situated anthropocentrism» when he calls for the recognition «that human life is incomprehensible and unsustainable without other creatures» (LD 67). The master of the household has become more humble but continues to reason from the starting point of human life. In my alternative concept, there is a Copernican shift away from this centrality. We are part and parcel of a web of life that is sustained not by us but by God.

## 7. Our Alternative: The Web of Life

Alexander Pope famously said: «The main purpose of man is the study of mankind». This is not untrue: the mystery of the origin of consciousness still eludes us. It remains captivating and certainly useful to seek to understand the workings of the human mind. The breakthroughs in programming artificial intelligence (AI) summon us to think more deeply about the uniqueness of human creative processes. Also, we are far from understanding the great diseases that cut short our existence, or hamper us: viral pandemics, cancer, Alzheimer's or even arthritis. In that sense, Pope's aphorism remains valid. Another dimension where human beings never tire of studying humankind is the field broadly called «culture»: the kaleidoscope of customs embedded in language and ritual, the wealth of artefacts (from painting to poetry to the cinema. . .) produced by human beings to be enjoyed, studied, and handed over from one generation to the next. To be fair, we point out that the poet was championing the «study of mankind» over against with the studies about God. But the predominant modern trend «by man to study mankind» is part of the problem that faces humanity today: the obliviousness to *the cost of our living*. One ecological consequence is the loss of biodiversity: the becoming extinct of innumerable insects, birds and mammals and flowering plants through the loss of their habitat or the excessive use of biocidal products. Another is the pollution of human origin of the rivers, the seas and the ocean, of the soil and of the air. A third phenomenon, with far-reaching effects, is the ongoing global warming of the planet and the rapid change of climate. Three dire realities (the irreversible loss of so much wildlife and vegetation; the pollution of air, water and soil; and the rise in temperatures and shifting patterns of rainfall) that are sometimes identified as the *Anthropocene*. This unofficial interval of geologic time is characterized as the time in which the collective activities began to alter the surface of the Earth, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The neologism was coined in the late 1980s and popularized in 2000 by the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen, who pointed to the year 1784, the year that saw the invention of the steam engine, as the beginning of this epoch (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Yet we ask: is this the proper way to describe our epoch of late modernity marked by industrialization and by the digital revolution? After all, the suffix *-cene* is used to form the names of great *geological* eras, not to describe historical periods. By convention, we find ourselves in the Holocene, the most recent epoch of the Quaternary period which began 100,000 years ago at the end of the Pleistocene (whose etymology is perplexing since it, also, refers to «most recent»). It was during the Pleistocene that human beings emerged and evolved. The Quaternary succeeded the Tertiary nearly two million years ago. The stage of modernity we just described has started decades ago, a century at most. Although the global warming of the planet has already induced the melting of glaciers, it may be hyperbolic to draw upon the vocabulary of the ages of rocks to describe the crisis that human activity has brought about: «the industrial monoculture and systems of mass production are as the blink of an eye when set in geological time» (Kumar 2013, p. 169).

This *caveat* is not an invitation to live in denial, to perpetuate the cognitive dissonance we started out with. There are now many signs on the wall, as there were for the guests of Nebuchadnezzar's banquet. A requiem for melting ice (Claudia Piconi and Gunnar Kristinsson), a special issue of the French periodical *Critique* called «Living in a Damaged World» (2019), the nebula of thinkers around the notion of imminent collapses are all calling attention to what is already lost irretrievably. In *Emergent Ecologies*, Eben Kirksey provides a fascinating study of «multi species communities that have been formed and transformed by chance encounters, historical accidents, and parasitical invasions» (Kirksey 2015, p. 1).

What does the Christian faith have to offer, and what are the resources of theology? We have successively studied four expressions to designate the outer, non-built world, and have found them wanting. The way forward (literally, the *method*), in my opinion, is to borrow from the Wisdom traditions. Here, the practice of paying attention, of *noticing*, is cardinal. Observe the birds, the lilies, the ants. . .for they are living fables for humans seeking wisdom. The focus on hearing and of speaking, of listening to God's Word and of preaching in words is a powerful tradition within western Christendom, especially in

the historical Protestant churches. Yet, for Jean Calvin, «the world is the theatre of God's glory». It is probably true that Francis of Assisi (1181/1182–1226) represents a watershed in western Christianity because of his practice and his preaching. According to legend, he paid utmost attention to the other than human creatures: wild birds and fish, a wolf, some captive geese, but also to «his majesty brother Sun» (messor lo frate sole), to sister Moon and the stars» (sora luna e le stelle), to «brother wind» to the air and the clouds, to fair skies and all kinds of weather; to «sor acqua» and «frate focu»; to «our sister, our mother Earth» (sora nostra matre terra). Francis also includes, in his hymn of praise, the *Canticum Fratrīs solis vel Laudes creaturarum*, our sister bodily death from whom no living human being can escape. For all of these, Francis proclaims: «Laudato si'»: praise be to you, Lord God, for all these sisters and brothers. In our own time, Pope Francis' choice to take the Poverello's name at the start of his pontificate was unusual and significative (especially for a Jesuit). He took the leitmotiv of Francis' hymn as the title of his «green» encyclical, *Laudato si'* again breaking with tradition since encyclicals have titles in Latin, whereas the hymn of Francis of Assisi reflects his vernacular, Umbrian.

A later Franciscan friar, Bonaventure (born circa 1217) followed in the footsteps of Francis in putting forward the importance of the «Book of Nature» as a place where God is revealed. It is only because human beings have been blind and deaf to the signs of God around them in creation that it became necessary to have a second source of revelation, God's Word, which is found in the Scriptures, as Bonaventure wrote in his *Breviloquium*. The Franciscan's intuition survives in a hymn written by Isaac Watts (1674–1748): «Nature with open volume stands to spread her Maker's praise abroad and every labor of his hands shows something worthy of a God» (Hymn 434, Hymnal 1982).

The art of noticing is akin to the practice of gathering, of foraging here and there as you go. We might well learn valuable lessons from an anthropologist like Anne Lowenhaupt Tsing and her *Mushroom at the End of the World*. Tsing quotes Ursula K. Le Guin, and I would point out the K in the writer's name: she kept it in memory of her father, the illustrious anthropologist Alfred Kroeber. The following fragment shows the debt Le Guin owed to anthropology, and her method of noticing, gathering and sharing bits of the «natural world» around her shows us the way forward.

«If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it is useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of poach or bag, a container for people, and then later you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solider container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then next day you probably do much the same again—if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.» (Le Guin [1986] 1990b, p. 168).

Through noticing, we have gathered different items and done some discarding; now, what shall we keep? For this point in time, I propose the following way to describe the relationship with the «outer world» of other-than-human beings, things and phenomena. This encompasses animals, plants and trees; the mineral world, the Oceans, seas, rivers and lakes; but also the celestial bodies and events such as comets, lightning, earthquakes and erupting volcanoes. Human beings participate in the *web of life*. We are part of this web of life, but not at the center of it, since we find the web when as individuals we are born into the world. And this web is not of our making, although we have come far in the capacity to harm and disturb «natural» processes. Human beings can uproot a forest tree and plant the seeds for a new one but we are unable to manufacture even one single tree. As John Muir observed, «Any Fool Can Destroy a Tree» (Muir 1954, p. 231). Chief Seattle is credited with the observation that «Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it». Next, we notice that the web is a non-hierarchical structure: there is no supremacy of upper over lower since every thread contributes to holding the web together. Thinkers like the Hindu-Catholic Raimon Panikkar or the Hindu (former Jain

monk) activist and writer Satish Kumar reflect upon the appeal of the ternary, of triads. To the Greek binary of the good and the true, Christian thought adds the beautiful: *bonum*, *verum* and *pulchrum*. We believe in trinity of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Hindu trinity of Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva, each of them is known principally by one reality or type of action: creation, continuity, decay. In Christian terms, we recognize God as «the author of our salvation». Such has been the main focus of learning and worship. The advantage of the expression «web of life» is that it situates humankind within it, not above it. The drawback is that it omits an explicit naming of God as Creator.

Yet this was never forgotten, and it should maybe be said more forcefully in the current ecological crisis: God as Creator unfolds a triple *action*: God creates, sustains and governs, not only human beings but all of God's creation. Just as God hovered birdlike over the primordial waters, just so we can represent God spinning, like a loving spider, the shimmering web of life.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> «La nature est un champ de bataille social et politique»: such was the motto on a huge colourful banner unfolded around a tree on Boulevard Saint Germain in Paris where ecological activists supported the hunger strike of Thomas Brail who camped in the canopy for several weeks (September 2023), an urban battleground in which I was closely involved.
- <sup>2</sup> According to the traditional tripartite (mineral, vegetal, animal). A more precise taxonomy describes five kingdoms, to simplify: the Monera (bacteria etc); the Protista (algae); the Fungi; the Plantae; the Animalia or metazoa, which include the phylum chordata, vertebrates, among them humans. Here, one notices the emphasis on the importance of lives led on a much smaller scale than ours. Also, we are led to accept that the boundaries between animal and vegetal, and even between living and inanimate, are far more porous than we assumed previously.

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