"The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we belong. To be alienated from this community is to become destitute in all that makes us human. To damage this community is to diminish our own existence." ~ Thomas Berry

Colonization

Many indigenous peoples across global cultures have had a different epistemology and ontology with specific bioregions; these are described as lifeways. Their lifeways were perceived in the 19th century European anthropology and comparative religions as superstitious, primitive, and ignorant within a comparative schema of religions with the world religions moving up the evolutionary ladder with Christian monotheism at the top. This was used to justify Euro-American expanded colonization of lands. Colonization of the Americas and other continents utilized the Doctrine of Discovery and White Supremacy to promote the appropriation of indigenous lands. In the eighteenth century, the British jurist scholar William Blackstone wrote, “The Earth, all things therein, are the general property of mankind, exclusive of other beings, from the immediate gift of the Creator.” Property is derived from the Latin “proprius,” meaning “one’s own.” The English philosopher John Locke understood land not turned into property as “wasteland,” where resources were squandered or not used for profit. He argued that individual property was a natural right of citizenship. In Gaia and Climate Change, theologian Anne Primavesi writes, “God gave the land to be used by industrious and rational men. However, it was the potential to exchange the potential wealth of the land for hard currency that fueled the massive appropriation of the land by the English colonists in the seventeenth century.” Land (and Earth) became human property and a source of profit. In the US and many other countries, the land was considered legally empty, and indigenous peoples, who kept settlers out, were “thieves.” In his book After Nature, environmental law professor Jedidiah Purdy observes, “Apologists for expelling Native Americans insisted that the continent called out for ownership and development while indigenous people remained idle and vagrant, forfeiting any claim to the land.”

The Doctrine of Discovery did acknowledge land as divinely deeded property but not to indigenous inhabitants but to European colonizers, who had the sole right to take away undeveloped or wilderness lands. This was the doctrinal principle of terra nullius (“empty land”), lands occupied by people who did not use the lands for profit as Amero-Europeans approved. These legal justifications erased indigenous claims to their lands and commit indigenous genocide and conquest. The UCC has repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery and the history of its racism.

Decolonizing Nature: Who Will Speak for the Trees?
In nineteenth century, when Europe and America developed an addiction for hard wood, forests in Thailand were massively harvested for their hard wood trees. Thai Buddhist monks were attentive of the forest trees and responded to massive deforestation. They wrapped saffron robes around the trees and ordained them as Buddhist monks. Thai Buddhists were reluctant to cut down the trees since it would incur the serious karmic consequences of killing Buddhist monks, one of the serious crimes within Buddhism. They spoke for the trees with their ritual actions of resistance against colonial deforestation.

The proposed resolution for the Rights of Nature is a “no” to the colonization of Nature. It is part of the modern UCC legacy of fighting environmental racism. Continued corporate and governmental colonization of Nature has resulted in environmental harm to the poor living in proximity to industrial toxic dump sites. See UCC studies on toxic pollution, 1987, 2007, and more recently 2020. Inherent in these UCC studies of toxic sites is the various loci of harm: the poor and the wildlife living within proximity of the toxic waste, the bio-region of the site, and other environmental settings that are industrially mined or harvested. This is not only a form of white privilege but also human exceptionalism.

We have inherited a colonial history of property conquest of the land, designating the land and the Earth as property, to be used for our own purposes. This has led to intentional legal policy, ignoring the rights of trees and nature. It originated from an anthropocentrism, a prevalent belief and attitude that we are separate from and superior to the natural world. We view nature as a collection of things intended for human benefit and ownership. Prevailing laws in many countries, including our own, affirm legal authority over nature by claiming nature as human owned property. Current law does not provide nature with any legal standing in courts, while corporations have been granted legal standing of persons in the US. Laws permit tar sands pipelines to cross indigenous lands, mountain top removal for coal mining, deep ocean drilling and fracking, deforestation of Amazon Basin, destruction of tropical rainforests, the on-going privatization of, and damaging of eco-systems and its life.

In 1965, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas wrote a book, A Wilderness Bill of Rights. He called for a “Bill of Rights to protect those whose spiritual values extend to the rivers and lakes, the valleys and the ridges, and who find life in a mechanized society worth living only because those splendid resources are not despoiled.” Douglas pointed out that corporations and ships have long had legal right to sue, despite being artificial and inanimate. Douglas argued for extending rights to valleys, alpine meadows, rivers, lakes, estuaries, beaches, ridges, groves of trees, swampland, or even air that feels the destructive pressures of modern technology and modern life. He quoted Aldo Leopold, “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, collectively the land.” Douglas asserted that people and organizations could give legal voice to nature to shield the natural world from human environmental threats. In 1973, the Endangered Species Act passed in Congress and was signed into law.

In his book Ecopsychology, Theodore Rozak, professor of history, at California State University, Hayward wrote “Nature must have its natural rights.” (32, 41, 49) Environmental historian Roderick Nash wrote a book, The Rights of Nature, to explore the rights of nature for
environmental ethics. He observed the Rights of Nature constituted “arguably the most dramatic expansion of moral theory” ever embarked upon. It required a transformation of viewing Nature and its inhabitants from a commodified perspective as property to “rights holders.” Such a transformation from a property perspective requires a transformation revolutionary of education, law, religion, philosophy, and culture.

Eco-theologian James Nash proposes “A Bill of Biotic Rights” and ethicist Larry Rasmussen argues in support of Nash’s biotic rights bill. Theologian John Hart argues for a relational consciousness:

All creatures are, in a very real sense, related stardust: their common ancestry is traced to the original existents of singularity; they are descendants of the subsequent elementary forms, that have resulted from the birth of the universe in a burst of light from its primordial womb in cosmic darkness. All living creatures are children of the creating Spirit and the evolving Earth community. All life is called to share the Earth of the Earth commons. (*Sacramental Commons*)

Hart offers twelve principles of Christian ecological ethics that can defend the common good shared by humanity, non-human life, and ecosystems. He presents his principles as a call to action: “Earth commons good will be equally distributed to provide for the common good, to meet the needs of human individuals, communities, and biokind, as a whole.” These principles involve restorative justice: “returning to people, to the Earth, and to biota what has been unjustly taken from,” and distributive justice, “an equitable sharing of Earth goods.”

In his address to the United Nations, Pope Francis I affirmed. “It must be stated that a true ‘right of the environment’ does exist.” He continued, “Any harm done to the environment, therefore is harm done to humanity,” and he concluded, “The ecological crisis, and the large-scale destruction of biodiversity, can threaten the very existence of the human species.”

Indigenous peoples globally have introduced the “Rights of Nature” to become part of the national constitutions of New Zealand, Ecuador, and Bolivia. Many indigenous nations have adopted such rights of ecosystems as part of their constitutional polity. Bolivia, Ecuador, and other nations have proposed to complement the 1948 United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights with The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth at the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth (April 2010).

Biblical

Indigenous peoples have a different epistemology and relationship with the land and the inhabitants of the lands. It is kinship relationship and living with the land as divine gift. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Indigenous ethnobotanist Robin Hill Kimmerer articulates a gift economy, not purchased or earned but received from the Earth.
We are showered every day with gifts (from the Earth), but they are meant for us not to keep. Their life is in their movement, the inhale and exhale of our shared breath. Our work and our joy are to pass along the gift and to trust that what we put out into the universe will always come back.

Our biblical traditions overlap cross-culturally with numerous indigenous peoples who also perceive the land as divine gift. Leviticus 25:23 and Psalm 24:1 make clear that God owns the land. The phrase “the land of God” (‘erets YHWH) in the Hebrew scriptures assumes God’s ownership. There was tension between the perspectives that “the Earth is the Lord’s” (Ps. 24:1) and the appropriation of the land as “theirs.” In essence, this is a tension between the Creation-centered religion in the Hebrew Bible and imperial religion. Hebrew creation-justice traditions permeate within the First Testament and stand against the traditions of injustices of empire and imperial religion.

This same tension is experienced in the Second Testament, for Roman imperial colonization of the Palestine is a problem for the creation-centered spirituality of Jesus. The Romans promoted exploitative policies of land domination and acquisition of peasant lands into large plantation agriculture. The heavy burden of Roman tribute and Temple tithes were a primary means of social control, and the failure of paying the tribute was backed up by the threat of the military might and destabilized the landscape of small farms for large plantations.

The Matthew version of the prayer Jesus taught to the disciples to address these needs: “Give us this day our bread, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” These petitions for food and no debt should be taken literally. In The Greatest Prayer, John Dominic Crossan observes, “The positive ideal of enough bread for today and the negative one of no debt for tomorrow are standard hopes of the ‘have nots’ of history.” Spiraling indebtedness in Palestine led to forfeiting peasant land to the Temple and debt slavery of family members. These fears haunted the peasant farmers of the first century CE. It is apparent that the colonization of the land has displaced both Jewish peasants then and later indigenous peoples of the Americas. In both cases, forfeiture of land to colonizers was perceived a forfeiture of the divine gift of land.

In recent decades, there has been a shift in biblical studies to understand the political role of empire(s) in as the foreground for the development of the Hebrew and Christian Testaments. One important study of the imperial context for both testaments is Wes Howard Brook’s Come Out My People. Howard Brook presents the struggle the two testaments as between two competing religions: the religion of creation and the religion of empire. These are two divergent religious perspective in conflict and struggling for the hearts of the people of God. The first is the religion of creation “grounded in the experience of and ongoing relationship with the Creator God, leading to a covenantal bond between God and God’s people for the blessing and abundance of all people and creation.” The religion of empire, “sometimes claiming to be grounded in the same God is actually a human invention used to justify and legitimate attitudes and behaviors that provide blessing and abundance for some at the expense of others.”

Howard Brook sets a typology for both the religions of creation and empire. Hebrew creation-centered spirituality and the imperial religion of Roman Empire and the coopted Jerusalem Temple formed the conflictive, cultural and political matrix in which Jesus and his movement
arose. Creation-centered religion provided the focus for a retrieval of ecological interpretation of the historical Jesus and his conflict with imperial religion.

There is a notion of distributive justice in both testaments. Justice is liberation from an oppressive system that produces deprivation, suffering, and exclusion. The creation-centered biblical tradition promotes a liberation that includes restoration and redress. It not only includes humanity but also impacts on the land (Zephaniah 1:2-3 and Jeremiah 4:19-26). Biblical justice involves restoration of well-being and flourishing of human beings and to the land. Non-human life is included in the on-going restoration and redistribution of justice.

**Other Resources:**

Jim Antal, *Climate Church, Climate Change*

Forthcoming in October 2020 is Shore-Goss’ *The Insurgency of the Spirit: An Animist Liberation Theology in an Era of Empire and Climate Catastrophe.* It details Jesus’ wilderness experience and the development of Creation-centered religion as the basis for his political resistance to empire and his spiritual ecology.

Another resource on Judeo-Christian relationship to nature is Steven Chase’s *Nature as a Spiritual Practice.*

Sallie McFague: *Life Abundant* and *Blessed are the Consumers.*

Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth and Cry of Poor* and *Virtues*

Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Christianity’s Dangerous Memory.*

Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (2nd edition) and *Prophetic Imagination.*

**The Three Great Loves Campaign of the United Church of Christ**

The United Church of Christ has promoted a campaign of the Three Great Loves: Love of Neighbor, Love of Children, and Love of Creation. These three loves are interrelated, biblical principles found in our Hebrew and Christian biblical traditions. The Three Great Loves was an outgrowth of the UCC commitment to build up a just world and inviting the denomination to undertake an self-examination of ministry of justice in the world and to shares stories of love and justice. President and General Minister Rev. John Dorhauer affirmed: "Three Great Loves is an invitation to act as one and to deepen our impact by pulling together in love, for justice, and with purpose. As disciples of the Risen Christ, we call ourselves to embody love and incarnate justice."

The Three Great Loves emerge from Jesus’ Revolution of the Levitical Torah on neighbor love. (Leviticus 19:9-18. The proposed “Resolution for the Rights of Nature” is congruent with the UCC commitment to the Three Great Loves” and to build a just world for all life and the Earth.
Climate change through human dependency on fossil fuels, over-consumption, anthropocentrism, and corporate greed has produced instabilities in the sustainable balances of earth’s climate and processes. These human causes of climate change now threaten both human and non-human life, whose mutual interdependence is, in turn, interconnected with a flourishing and thriving Earth. All Three Great Loves face a tsunami of cascading threats to ecosystems that support sustainable life.

**Love of Creation**

The Priestly introduction of Genesis presents a theological truth of God as Creator. God the Creator is envisioned as Householder of the Heaven and the Earth. The Creator was involved in the creation of the cosmos nearly 14 billion years ago with planetary emergent life forming 2.2 billion years ago. The Creator declared it was good and delighted in creation.

The Hebrew scriptures clearly affirm that the Earth belongs to God (Leviticus 25:23, Psalm 24:1). The Hebrew phrase “the land of God” or God’s earth (‘erets Yhwh) makes clear God’s ownership of the land. The love of God includes the love of creation—to treat the Earth as gift and transfer God’s mercy, steadfast love, generosity, and compassion in engaging the divine gift.

Jesus gave the name to God as Abba, Father. In his book *The Greatest Prayer*, John Dominic Crossan notes that the biblical term “Father” is inclusive shorthand for father and mother, and that inclusiveness indicates “householder” and its extended multigenerational household. God as Householder includes a number of metaphorical implications for the divine drawn from human social experience: God is Householder as Creator (1 Cor. 8:6), Protector (Isaiah 63:16), Provider (Isaiah 10:1-2), and Parent. These metaphors express a close, loving, and intimate relation of the Creator to creation.

**Love of Neighbor:**

The Hebrew instruction to love your neighbor (Lev. 19:18) was interpreted by Jesus to include love your neighbor as you love and yourself (Mt.22:27-28). He expanded the Great Commandment to love to comprise the love of enemy, outsiders, the poor, and the vulnerable. When a lawyer asks Jesus, “Who is my Neighbor?,” Jesus narrates the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). Many eco-theologians have refigured the assaulted traveler, robbed and beaten, left for dead with the Earth. They have continued Jesus’ revolutionary expansion of the Great Commandment by extending the notion of neighbor to include Nature and/or the Earth. They have called for a further expansion of Great Commandment to include the Earth community in order consistent with the earth-loving Jesus’ spirituality.

Eco-theologian Sallie McFague observes that who are considered the oppressed has changed over historical periods. “The oppressed” includes not only the poor but has been widened to include suffering due to gender, race, sexual orientation, and physical and mental challenges. She notes, “If the Redeemer is the Creator, then surely God cares for the 99 percent of creation, not just for the 1 percent (actually less than 1 percent) that humans constitute.” In her book *Life Abundant*, she consequently concludes,
To say that Jesus’ ministry to the oppressed should be extended to nature is the same as suggesting that the Great commandments should be. We are told to love God and neighbor as subjects, as valuable in and for themselves, as ends rather than means we are given no instructions concerning nature. Should we not extend that model of loving others as having intrinsic worth and hence deserving of justice and care—to the natural world.

Jesus’ ministry reflected a justice perspective that was inherited from a Hebrew creation-centered worldview. Similarly, UCC clergy and environmental activist, Rev. James Antal echoes McFague in his book *Climate Church, Climate Change* by reformulating the Golden Rule as the Golden Rule 2.0:

No longer can we claim the moral high ground when we treat only our nearby human neighbors as ourselves. No longer is it morally adequate to expand our understanding of justice to include in the circle of neighborly treatment more distant neighbors. We must recognize that all people, indeed, all creatures alive and all those yet to be born, are our neighbors. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “We are caught in the inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” God is calling us to reorient our hearts, our lives, and our laws so that honor and respect the independence of all of creation. God is calling to reorient our hearts, our lives, and our laws so that we honor and respect the interdependence of all creation.

Both McFague and Antal make explicit our neighbor is not only the natural world but extended to future generations of the Earth and its community of life.

**Love of Children (Future Generations)**

The expansion of the Golden Rule obligates the inclusion of our children and future generations. Love of children includes unborn generations. Future generations are also our neighbors.

Climate change is impacting our planet, and our children have understood that humanity is facing a Kairos moment, an opportunity to triumph over human inaction. Our Children’s Trust has filed a lawsuit (*Juliana v United States*) based on the failure of the government to provide the right to a carbon-free atmosphere and the right to have the future planet remain inhabitable. Youth groups such as Water Protectors at Standing Rock, the Sunrise Movement, the global Youth Climate Strike, and Extinction Rebellion have called us to listen to the pain and suffering voices of the traumatized Earth and vulnerable life and to alleviate the consequences of the current climate catastrophe.

The millennials and the youth generation behind them have stepped into role of the meek of which Jesus spoke in the beatitudes (Mt. 5:5). Meekness includes those who live non-violently with the Earth, and this is easily extended to those who provide Earthcare and defend the land...
against willful degradation and exploitation. The meek—the youth today—invite the United Church of Christ to join them in protecting and defending life on this planet now and for future generations.

**Conclusion: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”**

This beatitude is “attentive to the Earth as gift.” Land (Earth) means wealth and gift. Leviticus 25:23 and Psalm 24:1 make clear that God owns the land. In an article for *Sojourners*, Walter Brueggemann argues, “In affirming that the earth belongs only to God; Israel’s faith means to deny ultimate ownership to any other.” He acknowledges that there was tension between the perspective that “the Earth is the Lord’s” (Ps. 24:1) and the appropriation of the land as “theirs.” Brueggemann claims, “…love of God means to order the land in ways that are congruent with Yahweh’s character; this character we know everywhere in scripture, is marked by mercy, graciousness, steadfast love, compassion, fidelity, generosity, and forgiveness” (*Remember You are Dust*).

God’s character is embedded in love for the neighbor, and God intends that human creatures, like all the creatures of the Earth, enjoy the fruitfulness of creation. Thus, this understanding of the land belonged to God was subverted by the elite and imperial rule through various power strategies of creating indebtedness and appropriating the land. This contributed to peasant spiral indebtedness and their loss of familial lands incorporated into large plantations of the local elites.

For Jesus, the meek understand the land as divine gift. God will redistribute the injustice of land appropriated violently by the Roman system of domination, which furthered the interests of the local elite in accumulating peasant lands. God’s kingdom will end the unjust control of the land by the wealthy by redistributing the lands back to the tenants (Lev 25:23) and restore the fruitfulness and flourishing of the land. The opposite to the meek (*praous*) is non-meek (*apraus*). The Greek meaning of non-meekness is translated as violence or murder. The meek are those colive with the land as divine gift. The non-meek live unjustly and violently with the Earth.

Human beings, who are part of the environment, speak up for themselves and for the ecosystem that are unable to assert their rights. In *The Season of Creation*, Norman Habel, David Roads, and Paul Santmire claim: “If God knows the fall of every sparrow, ‘who speaks for the sparrows?’” Many indigenous people and environmentalists hear the cries of the Earth and thus advocate for the Earth’s behalf through ecological activism and legally resist how corporations and governments have exploited and harmed particular locations.

Brueggemann notes how Israel understood that the land belongs to God and was gifted to the Hebrews. God owns the lands, for the land is for sharing:

> When the Creator God is eliminated from the question of the land/creation, then the land is characteristically resolved...on the basis of power, without any question of legitimacy. Thus, in a large scope it is fair to say that the story of ownership, control, and governance of the land is a narrative of strength against vulnerability.

Brueggemann’s observation is equally applicable to corporate and governmental colonization of indigenous lands and disregard for their land spirituality. The powerful, in their greed, colonize
the Earth, exploit the resources without regard to the poor and other life. Once the Creator God is shelved, humans arrogantly appropriate the land for greedy exploitation, break treaties with indigenous peoples, appropriate lands despite agreements, desecrate sacred lands and despise all Earth spiritualities.

Quaker activist Parker Palmer contravenes this American notion of ownership of the land:

> The ownership of private property has long been a touchstone of the American dream — for better (when we’re able to meet our basic needs) and for worse (when need becomes greed and overwhelms generosity and economic justice). But when “ownership” is applied wholesale to nature, there’s no better, only worse. The arrogance that leads us to say “We own this patch of the planet” has also led us to foul our own nest and desacralize much of the earth. (“We are owned by the Wilderness?”)

Creation faith in God’s ownership of the Earth subverts the imperial attitudes of control and property ideologies. In *God the Economist*, M. Douglas Meeks grounds God’s ownership in the primary datum: “God owns by giving.” Meeks describes a qualified human claim of property. God has absolute ownership through self-giving:

Ownership cannot mean the free choice to do anything one wants with property. There can be no such thing as absolute ownership. Property is for use, not holding or hoarding. To be possessed justly, property must be used according to its nature to meet human needs and create human community…Property is meant to serve the livelihood of others, not their domination and exploitation.

Property is based on God’s self-giving to humanity and all created life; property is neither absolute nor eternal for humanity. It is a responsible tenancy of the gift, caring and nourishing the gift. The Earth is inherited as gift. Humanity has no entitlement to exploit the natural world, to exterminate many species, and lay waste to bio-regions. Walter Brueggemann notes that the church has forfeited its capacity to proclaim that the Earth belongs to God by its endless preoccupation with privatized salvation, property, and sin. This preoccupation led to abandoning the land as God’s gift for land dominance and allowed “absolute possession and property.” Brueggemann observes:

Once the claim of the Creator God has been sidelined, the sense of human entitlement aggressive pursuit of oil as “our oil.” The inevitable outcome is a loss of common good, and a refusal through taxes an infrastructure that will keep life livable (and sustainable my addition), because taxes take away from private self-aggrandizing.

Brueggemann’s work has ecological implications though he never developed them fully. McFague’s three planetary household rules (Taking only what you need, Heal the harm we do to the Earth, and Keeping the Earth in repair for the future) raise an eco-economic justice or policy of distributive justice or fair share. By regarding the land within a capitalist ideology of ownership, the church has sacrificed the biblical principle that Earth belongs to God and is bestowed as gift for a property ownership driven ideology that makes the land and natural world
into a commodity. Antal makes a creative suggestion in lieu of churches not reversing society’s insistence of ownership:

…it’s easy to imagine many churches embracing the biblical command to be stewards of the land. A few pioneering churches have done so. These churches have turned much of their land into community gardens—often organic or permaculture—tended by both church members and community neighbors. This provides a public witness that invites the community to consider what for many amounts to a new relationship to the land.

The question before us in the proposed Resolution for the Rights of Nature is the UCC prepared to proclaim Nature (Creation) is our neighbor, beloved of the Creator, and has Rights as member of the Earth Community.

Questions for Processing:

Are we to listen to the cries of Earth and the species becoming extinct?

Are we able to take the next step in our defense of Nature to reclaim our interconnected to the Earth Community and the web of life?

Are we to stand up exploitative and reckless activities that harm our natural environments?

Are we to defend the Rights of Nature—mindful how valuable and beloved creation is to our Creator?

"We lose our souls if we lose the experience of the forest, the butterflies, the song of the birds, if we can't see the stars at night." ~ Thomas Berry