

# Eco-Tethered Liberation: A New Spirituality for the Anthropocene

Simon Appolloni

Volume 34, Number 1, 2018

Focus on Laudato Si'

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1060952ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1060952ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Athabasca University Press

ISSN

1705-9429 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Appolloni, S. (2018). Eco-Tethered Liberation: A New Spirituality for the Anthropocene. *The Trumpeter*, 34(1), 131–152. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1060952ar>

Article abstract

To counter the Anthropocene epoch marked by complex webs of exploitation, this paper elucidates an ethics of liberation that applies to all of creation replete with its concomitant relational complexities, which the author calls eco-tethered liberation. The paper delineates how we can both understand and actualize the liberation of the whole of creation, which is an invariably messy communal process of dialoguing and negotiating with many others. This paper further explores the concept of *sumaq kawsay* as an example of eco-tethered liberation being lived out by the largely Indigenous Bolivian population today. The paper culminates in suggesting that this new ethic of liberation for the Anthropocene is itself a new spirituality for the Anthropocene.

Copyright (c) Simon Appolloni, 2019



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**é**rudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

# Eco-Tethered Liberation: A New Spirituality for the Anthropocene

---

*Simon Appolloni*

## **Introduction**

While poverty and oppression continue to afflict the majority of the human world population, anthropogenic global environmental degradation is increasingly plaguing the planet. These realities mark our epoch, labelled by many as the Anthropocene. The situation before us could be defined by what theologian Cynthia Moe-Lobeda aptly labels “complex webs of exploitation”:<sup>1</sup> they defy easy characterization and resist ready solutions. One of the major reasons for this predicament, I suggest, is the multi-layered and interrelated nature of these exploitations: environmental and social, individual and collective, local and global. The result is that we can no longer compartmentalize an ethical approach to problems in our search for a just and sustainable world. This predicament is no different when considering how we approach liberation.

Herein lies the query that prompts this paper: if the problems before us reside in complex webs of exploitation, would it not be logical to pursue an ethics of liberation with its concomitant relational complexities? In other words, in pursuing liberation, do we need a new sense of relationality on this planet, one that is inclusive of the whole of the natural world? If we answer this question in the affirmative, any liberationist agenda must be tied with an environmental planetary ethic, one where an individual’s welfare is closely tied to those many others both in the human community and among subjects in the natural world. It would follow that the common good must also be re-imagined as the whole of creation living well together.

This paper advances contemporary deliberations on the liberation of the human within a larger web of relationality reimagined as the liberation of the whole of creation. It proposes a framework by which we can both understand and actualize the liberation of the whole of creation in the Anthropocene, something with which ecological thinkers are still grappling. To do this, I am reconsidering the Catholic-inspired concept of liberation in light of the cosmological evolutionary perspective proposed by geologist Thomas Berry and cosmologist Brian Swimme. In doing so, I will illustrate a vision of how global ethical deliberations in the

---

<sup>1</sup>Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 2.

Anthropocene might proceed. In my framework, the liberation of the human and indeed of the human community becomes ineluctably bound to the liberation of other-than-human communities. Liberation in its new understanding, an eco-tethered liberation, becomes a comprehensive process of honouring the web of relationships that mark the whole Earth community.

In the course of explicating an ethics of liberation for the Anthropocene, four interrelated questions arise: (1) How should we understand liberation, especially when referring to the other-than-human subjects on Earth? (2) Why is it necessary to seek the liberation of all creation at this point in time? (3) In what manner can the other-than-human express liberation? (4) How does one weigh the liberation needs of the human community along with those of the other-than-human community? In responding to these queries, I am weaving into the cosmological evolutionary perspective mentioned above the writings of liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, who was an early proponent of the concept of liberation for all of creation, and philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel. The novel understanding of liberation ethics I will be promoting is what I have labelled an eco-tethered liberation, one that is messy (which I will show is not a bad thing) and relational. Not wishing that this examination remain in the realm of abstract thinking, I culminate this discussion by showing how an eco-tethered liberation is, in large measure, being lived out by the Bolivian peoples today. That Bolivians are a population largely comprised of Indigenous peoples is not incidental:<sup>2</sup> in comparison to Western society as a whole, they have been able to nurture and maintain a spirituality of living well (termed *sumaq kawsay* in the Indigenous language Quechuan) with all of creation, which they consider sacred. Nurturing such a spirituality is an important component of living out an eco-tethered liberation.

I am mindful that, when discussing ethics, context and clarity always matter. This is especially important here as I am working with the chiefly Catholic-inspired principles of liberation as well as the common good, and reconsidering them within a planetary and cosmological context. I am also mindful of the past and present colonization of the Indigenous peoples of Bolivia and, in many instances, at the hands of Catholics. Wading into the philosophy *sumaq kawsay* is not intended as an appropriation of an Indigenous wisdom, but proposed as a means to understand and learn from their lived experience through their writings. So before venturing into my argument it is necessary to discuss our situation and clarify some terms.

---

<sup>2</sup>It is estimated that over 60% of the Bolivian population identifies with indigenous ancestry. See CIA Staff, *The World Fact Book*, (12 June 2018), accessed 18 June 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bl.html>.

## Defining Our Context

The term “Anthropocene,” coined by scientists around the turn of this century, points to a rather recent geological epoch in Earth’s history when humans have re-shaped the planet.<sup>3</sup> While this point in itself is not too contentious (humans have indeed re-shaped the composition of much of the planet’s atmosphere, waters, and land), the term—certainly as I am employing it—carries a negative tone and an indictment of human activity, and it points to the devastating results from our industrialized way of living.<sup>4</sup> This term underscores the fact that anthropogenic pressures on the Earth systems have reached a point where the prospect of sudden planetary environmental change occurring is real. Already crossed are three thresholds of safe operating zones in regard to climate change, the rate of species extinction, and changes to the global nitrogen cycle. According to Earth system scientists, in transgressing these limits, we are no longer assured that life can continue relatively safely.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, crossing these boundaries could further exert pressure on other biophysical system processes (atmospheric aerosol loading, global fresh water and land-system use, and chemical pollution), causing them to destabilize, thereby affecting Earth system functioning to such a degree that the resilience of Earth’s interacting physical, chemical, and biological processes continue to destabilize. This could have a deleterious effect on potentially all life.<sup>6</sup>

Paralleling and increasingly emanating from this environmental crisis are a growing inequality and persistent poverty afflicting the majority of human beings today. Almost three-quarters of a billion people still live in extreme poverty, well below the international poverty line of \$1.90 a day. These people are struggling to fulfil their most basic needs such as health, education, and

---

<sup>3</sup>Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives,” *Philosophical Transactions: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369, no. 1938 (2011): 842-67. The authors state that the term suggests two phenomena: “(i) that the Earth is now moving out of its current geological epoch, called the Holocene and (ii) that human activity is largely responsible for this exit from the Holocene, that is, that humankind has become a global geological force in its own right.”

<sup>4</sup>In their influential (and scientific) paper, Rockström et al. state: “The exponential growth of human activities is raising concern that further pressure on the Earth System could destabilize critical biophysical systems and trigger abrupt or irreversible environmental changes that would be deleterious or even catastrophic for human well-being.” Johan Rockström, Will Steffen, Kevin Noone, Åsa Persson, F. Stuart III Chapin, Eric Lambin, Timothy M Lenton, Marten Scheffer, Carl Folke, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, Björn Nykvist, Cynthia A de Wit, Terry Hughes, Sander van der Leeuw, Henning Rodhe, Sverker Sörlin, Peter K Snyder, Robert Costanza, Uno Svedin, Malin Falkenmark, Louise Karlberg, Robert W Corell, Victoria J Fabry, James Hansen, Brian Walker, Diana Liverman, Katherine Richardson, Paul Crutzen, and Jonathan Foley, “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (2009): 1-32.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

access to water and sanitation. Dollar-a-day figures, however, do not convey the social exclusion and lack of participation many of these individuals or groups experience daily in their societies. Women, in particular, as well as specific socio-ethnic communities, tend to be among the poorest of the poor, often bearing the brunt of a patriarchal system of domination and exclusion.<sup>7</sup> It is also inaccurate to confine poverty solely to countries in the global South.

While there is much improvement with regard to overall child well-being in the past decade in wealthier countries, a report card conducted by UNICEF in 2017, assessing the well-being of children in light of sustainable development goals across 41 countries of the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), found that “An average of one in five children in rich countries lives in relative income poverty,” which makes it unsurprising that it also found, “Food insecurity is high in some of the world’s richest countries.”<sup>8</sup>

Within this scenario, the search for the common good becomes difficult, if not unfeasible. Part of the reason for this is that common good, a prominent principle of Catholic social teaching, is too often defined through an anthropocentric lens: “the sum total of social conditions which allow *people*, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.”<sup>9</sup> Yet how is one even to apprehend this principle today when the projected rates of biodiversity loss are anthropogenic in origin, and so huge in proportion, that they constitute the sixth major extinction occurrence in our planet’s history?

It is not solely the social and environmental contexts that confront us. Our ethical context today is unique and presents us with challenges. We live at the end of a five hundred year-old hegemonic system, Dussel tells us, that has reached “absolute limits”:<sup>10</sup> the ecological destruction of the planet and the destruction of humanity itself. As a result, he maintains, we find ourselves constantly searching for solutions to problems we have to think about for the first time.

---

<sup>7</sup>United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), *Rethinking Poverty: Report on the World Social Situation 2010* (New York: United Nations Publication, 2009), accessed 15 January 2018, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/docs/2010/fullreport.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup>Building the Future: Children and the Sustainable Development Goals in Rich Countries. UNICEF Office of Research, accessed 2 February, 2019, <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/890-building-the-future-children-and-the-sustainable-development-goals-in-rich-countries.html>.

<sup>9</sup>*Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City, VA: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), #164, accessed 15 January 2018, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html). Emphasis added by author.

<sup>10</sup>Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In an Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta, Camilo Pérez Bustillo, Yolanda Angulo and Nelson Madonado-Torres (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 39.

Conventional modes of ethical thinking do not seem to be helping us create sustainable and just communities. Simplified formulas, rigid procedures, decontextualized abstract reasoning, or reductionist analyses can be deaf to the voices of many others living on the margins of society. Even those utilitarian or deontological theories focused on reducing the suffering of sentient beings in the world can retain an abstractness that belies personal ties and attachments. Consider, for example, how in our globalized world, what we buy and consume arrives produced or manufactured from myriad places around the world via complex marketing structures. How can we promote the common good of these exporting communities, indeed the welfare of the very producer of the good itself, when we cannot clearly envision the causal connections between our consumption of their goods and the conceivable untold exploitations experienced by these producers' goods? The right action is not so obvious. Yet, as Dussel contends, ethics can no longer omit the voices from the periphery, nor can it participate in conciliating the irreconcilable (such as a just society within a free market system) or covering up ruptures (like colonial legacies) so as to avoid conflict.<sup>11</sup>

### **Considering Liberation**

Why is it specifically an ethics of liberation that is so important to foster at this juncture? To be sure, justice in all its forms—including communicative, distributive, restorative, procedural, participative, and social—is required. Social justice, for instance, seeks to correct oppressive and alienating developments in a society. If we describe social justice in a way that resembles Christian biblical understandings of justice, we could look at it as “right relationship”<sup>12</sup> where the needs of all are met in such a way that relationships can flourish and community can be preserved. This is an important aspect of justice considering the emphasis I am placing on seeking a new sense of relationality.

Missing in the general call for social justice is a key distinction between it and liberation: the person who is suffering domination must be allowed to participate in her or his own flourishing as a human being. One could *bring* social justice to individuals or groups suffering injustice, but one can never *liberate* another. The process always requires self-participation. In a sense, one needs an array of forms of justices to describe the liberative project. A good way to understand this process is to consider the building of housing for homeless people: while an ethical duty to build some form of abode is demanded by both social justice and liberation principles, the

---

<sup>11</sup>Fernando Gomez, “Ethics Is the Original Philosophy; or, The Barbarian Words Coming from the Third World: An Interview with Enrique Dussel,” *Boundary 2* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 19-73.

<sup>12</sup>Moe-Lobeda presents a good synopsis of the various aspects of justice in chapter 7 of her book.

latter insists that the people who are to live in the dwelling participate in its design and construction, ultimately allowing these people to participate directly in their self-fulfilment. In this view, justice is subsumed within a larger liberative project.

Dussel contends that, for the most part, Western ethics is detrimental to fostering human liberation, as it perpetuates modernity's systems of domination and, by extension, the suffering and oppression that results.<sup>13</sup> This happens because Western ethics accepts modernity as its point of departure. In fact, reflecting on the past (and continuing) colonization of the Americas by Europeans/Americans, Dussel suggest that "conqueror" becomes the new ontology for humanity. To characterize these systems of domination, he re-frames Rene Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum*, as "I conquer, therefore, I am."<sup>14</sup> This is our modernity: a centre-periphery system that begins in 1492 when the first Europeans conquered the lands of America, treating the land and its human inhabitants as possessions to be colonized and enslaved to serve the centre.<sup>15</sup>

### **Reconsidering Liberation for all Creation**

In discussing the *necessity* of a liberation from such a system not just for the human but for all of creation, it is helpful first to underline the causal relationship between the exploitations of humans and of Earth's waters, air, and soils. Long before Pope Francis called for an "integral ecology" in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which underlines "just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace,"<sup>16</sup> liberationist thinkers made the connections between destitute persons and diminished ecosystems.

For example, in his landmark book *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Leonardo Boff argues that these two cries,

stem from two wounds that are bleeding. The first, the wound of poverty and wretchedness, tears the social fabric of millions and millions of poor people the

---

<sup>13</sup>This is a common theme found in many of Enrique Dussel's writings; for a succinct argument, see his Introduction chapter, "World History of Ethical Systems," of Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of liberation*, 1-52.

<sup>14</sup>Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, ed. and trans. Eduardo Mendieta (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), 20.

<sup>15</sup>Dussel gives a detailed account of the world history of ethical systems in his first chapter of *Ethics of Liberation*. The centre, originally Europe, has shifted in the last century to the United States and, in time, will shift again (perhaps to China) as long as the centre-periphery system continues.

<sup>16</sup>Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City, VA: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), #10, accessed 15 January 2018, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

world over. The second, systematic aggression against the earth, destroys the equilibrium of the planet, threatened by depredations made by a type of development undertaken by contemporary societies, now spread throughout the world.<sup>17</sup>

Put another way, the logic that exploits peoples for the sake of a few rich and powerful countries is the same logic that destroys ecosystems. From a similar standpoint, but framed within a North American urban milieu, ethicist Stephen Bede Scharper posits the existence of “unequal ecologies” between impoverished and wealthy humans to illuminate why toxic municipal landfills or chemical plants are disproportionately located where the poor and most disenfranchised people live.<sup>18</sup> He concludes, “The environmental crisis runs along the same fault lines of economic, racial, and political oppression that pockmark our global village.”<sup>19</sup> This causal relationship between the exploitations of humans and the natural world is why eco-theologian Charles Birch can argue,

It is a cock-eyed view that regards ecological liberation as a distraction from the task of liberation of the poor. One cannot be done without the other. It is time to recognize that the liberation movement is finally one movement. It includes women’s liberation, men’s liberation, the liberation of science and technology, animal liberation, plant liberation, and the liberation of the air and the oceans, the forests, deserts, mountains and valleys.<sup>20</sup>

In discussing the impulse for liberation of other-than-human creation, a scientific cosmological perspective is needed. Here, the thinking of Berry and Swimme is most helpful. Assuming the form-producing dynamics of evolution to be the same at every place in the universe, they suggest that three principles or intensions govern the universe.<sup>21</sup> The authors identify these as differentiation, communion, and subjectivity. Only when we understand these three governing principles, they maintain, can we begin to understand the cosmology or, as Berry prefers, the story of the universe, which they portray as a cosmogenesis (to denote its constant changing

---

<sup>17</sup>Leonardo Boff, “Liberation Theology and Ecology: Alternative, Confrontation or Complementarity?” in *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, eds. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 67.

<sup>18</sup>Stephen Bede Scharper, *For Earth’s Sake: Toward a Compassionate Ecology*, ed. Simon Appolloni (Toronto: Novalis Publishing, 2013), 172.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>20</sup>Peter W. Bakken, Joan Gibb Engel, and J. Ronald Engel, *Ecology, Justice, and Christian Faith: A Critical Guide to the Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995), 10.

<sup>21</sup>Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era: A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

and developing nature).<sup>22</sup> While neither Berry nor Swimme ever proposed the word liberation, my contention is that these same principles form a basis for an evolutionary impulse to liberation. A brief description of these impulses as described by Berry and Swimme will help me explain what I mean.

Differentiation, also known as increasing diversity or complexity, or, as it is known in biological terms, a mutation, refers to the extraordinary variety and distinctiveness of everything in the universe. When the universe burst out in every direction some 13 billion years ago—in what is commonly referred to as the Big Bang—there was an expansive and differentiating force at work.<sup>23</sup> This force embodied the pervasive insistence to create anew, which means no two things are completely alike. “To be,” say Swimme and Berry, “is to be different.”<sup>24</sup> Diversity in all its forms becomes important, for “Were there no differentiation, the universe would collapse into homogeneous smudge.”<sup>25</sup>

The principle of communion immediately came into play when the universe began, as gravitation pulled the primordial particles together. Communion, also referred to as interrelatedness, interdependence, or kinship, and biologically as natural selection, is the ability to relate to other objects or realities. Because of its relational underpinnings, communion receives much import from Berry who views the universe as being bonded.<sup>26</sup> This bonding enabled the first atomic beings of hydrogen and helium to form. Within these first billions of years, galaxies also began to form—over one hundred billion galaxies in all. This process continued and, eventually, as Berry likes to say, because of communion, the music of Beethoven also came into being.<sup>27</sup> Gravity, then, plays an important physical, if not poetic, role, for “without the gravitational attraction experienced throughout the physical world, there would be no emotional attraction of humans to one another.”<sup>28</sup>

Finally, since all living beings, including humans, emerge out of this single community, Berry maintains that there must have been a consciousness component of the universe even in primitive form from the beginning. Consciousness here refers to the interior numinous component that the authors posit is present in all reality, which is the basis of subjectivity, also

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 73-75.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 74.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>26</sup>Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower Publishing Group, 1999), 162.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>28</sup>Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 46.

known as autopoiesis, self-organization, self-articulation, or interiority, and biologically as niche creation. The universe is filled with structures that exhibit self-organizing dynamics, a power or spontaneity that each thing has to participate directly in its own flourishing.<sup>29</sup>

Boff emphasizes this category of autopoiesis (or self-organization) in a liberationist light.<sup>30</sup> He does not necessarily imply the need for self-reflective consciousness. Rather, he describes it as the power each thing has to participate directly in its self-fulfillment and evolution. If life is the interplay of self-organizing relationships and interactions, instead of entropy—the process of increasing disorder or disorganization of a system through time, as explained by the second law of thermodynamics—then syntropy (a term Boff coins to denote solidarity) is what prevails. For this reason, the most important universal laws, for Boff, become synergy, interrelationship, collaboration, cosmic solidarity, and communion in kinship or, simply, syntropy.<sup>31</sup> The key to our survival, it would seem, lies in a gestalt of relationships interacting with each other, which he would characterize simply as love. While such a classification is perhaps too simple, the import is clear: being ethical begins by being in solidarity; being in solidarity then demands that we learn to limit our human desires insofar as they lead to *our* advancement at the cost of class and planetary exploitation.<sup>32</sup>

From a cosmic level, then, we see how, in an analogous way to human self-participation, liberation can apply to all of creation. Each subject follows its evolutionary impulses leading to greater differentiation, subjectivity, and communion. It is not just the human, but the rivers, trees, and animals who ought to be free to follow their own interiority without the domination from political, economic, or social structures. By way of a more concrete example, consider

---

<sup>29</sup>Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 189-193.

<sup>30</sup>From an evolutionary cosmological perspective, as I apply it here, autopoiesis speaks to the power of each thing has to participate directly in its self-fulfillment and evolution; see Hathaway and Boff, *The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 284. Francisco J. Varela, who collaborated with Humberto Maturana in developing the theory of autopoiesis, places it “at the core of a shift in perspective about biological phenomena: it expresses that the mechanisms of self-production are the key to understand both the diversity and the uniqueness of the living”; Francisco J. Varela, “Autonomy and Autopoiesis,” in Roth G. & Schwegler H. eds. *Self-Organizing Systems: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Campus (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1981), 14-24.

<sup>31</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 20. Given Boff’s propensity to use sometimes poetic metaphors to explain scientific concepts, it is worth mentioning that physicist Frijtof Capra affirms Boff’s scientific cosmology to be fully compatible with the spiritual dimensions of liberation; see Capra in his foreword to Boff and Hathaway, xviii.

<sup>32</sup>The praxis of being in solidarity first and foremost is in keeping with the liberation theology methodology that considers theology, or any form of reflection on the matter, a secondary act to solidarity; see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. and eds. Caridad Inza and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

ecosystems as a complex and diverse community of producers, consumers, decomposers, and detritivores, living out a certain form of liberation, all interacting within the boundaries imposed by their physical surroundings. Through time, and by the processes of mutation, niche selection, and natural selection, each member of the community helps shape life: the detritivore (an earthworm, for instance) will ingest then digest and excrete dead organic matter, from which a producer (a green plant, for instance) receives nutrients. With the advent of the Anthropocene, these evolutionary dynamics can be (and have been) radically altered: even large consumers such as cheetahs, hippos, and gazelles are no longer evolving in the wild, but through interactions with human structures and actions; their location, size, and populations are in many ways determined by humans.<sup>33</sup>

It is important at this juncture to understand what I am not implying here. While the terminology Boff employs, like love, can seem overly poetic to what can be a harsh reality for many organisms and animals, what I am proposing is not a rosy view of nature. Panglossian is a term applied by religious scholar Lisa Sideris to indict many ecological thinkers (specifically Christian theologians) for misrepresenting the science by portraying nature as being harmonious and peaceful. She raises a valid point, averring that these thinkers (for instance, Sallie McFague) have not taken into account and, therefore have not fully realized, the implications of scientific evidence on evolution when generating their ethics, most particularly that “many ecological theologians have not dealt adequately with the implications of natural selection” as presented by Darwin.<sup>34</sup> These thinkers, she states, downplay or gloss over the dark and negative Darwinian processes of the natural world, such as predation, competition, and disease by relying too heavily on rosy appropriations of lessons from ecology that characterize an interdependent, cooperative, and harmonious world. She concedes,

Darwin’s darker vision of nature has never completely triumphed over a pleasant, harmonious interpretation. In popular imagination, as well as in the science of ecology, there has been an ongoing tug-of-war between ecological models of harmony and evolutionary accounts of struggle and disorder.<sup>35</sup>

Sideris’ point reminds us that animals and other organisms still suffer from predation, starvation, and other sometimes gruesome privations. And all this will continue whether at the

---

<sup>33</sup>See Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 101, and David Suzuki with Amanda McConnell, *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2002), 148-156.

<sup>34</sup>Lisa H. Sideris, *Environmental Ethic, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

hands of the human or not. As ecologist Peter F. Sale points out in his discussion of ecosystems, “life is tough, but it is tough in varying ways from place to place and time to time.”<sup>36</sup> While he does not employ the term chaos himself, he does imply that even within ecosystems undisturbed by humans suffering can occur. Put another way, if nature’s processes are in disarray, it is not solely due to humans disobeying nature’s limits and engaging in competition.

The liberation framework I am espousing here is not one where suffering ends. The framework I employ is not to be understood solely at the biological level, which is where Sideris places her argument, but at the larger cosmic evolutionary level simultaneously.<sup>37</sup> Taking a broader, more holistic cosmological look at evolution, the emphasis lies on allowing each subject to follow its evolutionary impulses leading to greater differentiation, subjectivity, and communion. Evolution does not make suffering disappear. Nor does it imply an unreal harmony or peace.

Perhaps the crux of the matter is understanding suffering. Adult faith educator and author Diarmuid O’Murchu offers a helpful framework in this regard by introducing the reality of paradox. O’Murchu makes a distinction between cosmic and human processes, between meaningful and meaningless suffering. As we have little control over the dark paradoxes within the cosmic processes—where we see both creation and destruction—we ought to come to terms with their reality. We do not have to understand them, and probably never will. Human processes, however, are a different matter. These, he maintains, are often marred by “wrong human intervention”<sup>38</sup> or human ignorance and, for this reason, any suffering that arises from human processes is senseless, holding no meaningful import. According to O’Murchu, such suffering must be avoided or eased. The irony, O’Murchu avers, is that in befriending creation’s cosmic paradoxes, we are less likely to go wrong in our interventions. Contrarily, our desire for a pain-free world devoid of depletion and destruction sets in motion our attempt to control life processes, which lies at the root of wrong intervention.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup>Peter F. Sale, *Our Dying Planet: An Ecologists View of the Crisis We Face* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 183. Sale, to be sure, is emphatic that humans are the perpetrators of great disturbances to nature at this time, to a point of crisis levels. But he also stresses that were humans never to have existed, nature would still exist in a non-equilibrium state.

<sup>37</sup>For more discussion on this issue, I address Sideris’ points in more detail in chapter 6 of my book *Convergent Knowing: Christianity and Science in Conversation with a Suffering Creation* (McGill-Queens University Press, forthcoming November 2018).

<sup>38</sup>O’Murchu, *Adult Faith, Growing in Wisdom and Understanding* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 134-135.

<sup>39</sup>Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Adult Faith*, 134-135. By way of example to help clarify this point, O’Murchu writes of the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which registered 7.0 in magnitude, while a month later in Chile that country experienced its most severe earthquake ever recorded, registering at 8.8 on the Richter scale. Though the earthquake in Haiti was nowhere near as strong as the one in Chile, far more people died in Haiti than in Chile as a result of the quake, the former resulting in some 230,000 deaths, while in Chile, even though the quake struck

## Negotiating Liberations

This understanding of paradox is helpful, as we cannot always make sense of destruction and suffering. Moreover, it is not always a case of greed but of genuine human need that the evolutionary dynamics of an other-than-human subject are curtailed (perhaps for community protection or food). Such an occurrence is undeniably always a possibility and perhaps even unavoidable in instances, yet one is presumably more likely to occur as human populations continue to grow thereby encroaching on ecosystems and leading to their degradation. Here, I am concerned with the human non-genuine and exploitive practices, or what O'Murchu labels meaningless destruction. How does one ensure that a single subject's liberation does not impinge on the liberation of an other-than-human?

An examination of the various dimensions of liberation as espoused by liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez will help respond to the above query. Gutiérrez distinguishes among three dimensions or levels of liberation. As discussed above, the first level, correcting oppressive and alienating developments, lies at the social level, which relates to liberation from unjust structures within society that exploit subjects. The second level, where the subject participates in her or his own flourishing, lies at the personal level, which relates to an inner freedom so that subjects are in control of their own destiny or (in the cosmological sense) free to follow their evolutionary impulses. To ensure that one subject's liberation does not impinge on the liberation of another, however, Gutiérrez proposes a third and important dimension of liberation at a communal level. He refers to this theologically as liberation from sin. Framed at the human level, Gutiérrez sees sin as the severing of a relationship (or friendship, as he also calls it) with God and other human beings.<sup>40</sup> While Gutiérrez applies his three dimensions to the human alone, I would apply them toward the larger, other-than-human Earth community. The third dimension stresses that both social and inner freedom (or evolutionary impulses, as discussed above) from oppressive structures are dependent upon the larger communal relationship one experiences with all subjects in creation.

---

during the early hours of the morning when the population was much more vulnerable, only 1,000 died. Comparing the two incidents, O'Murchu determines that the main factor explaining why Haitians suffered more from Haiti's earthquake was the quality of its buildings. Wishing away earthquakes will not help: were we somehow able to succeed in stopping earthquakes through advanced technology, it would be counterproductive, as earthquakes (by replenishing minerals on Earth's surface) are essential to the flourishing of life on our planet. Yet, were technology used to construct earthquake resistant buildings in Haiti—as was the case in Chile—that would be productive and just.

<sup>40</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and ed. John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

Berry offers what I consider an effective framework to help us understand how self-organizing relationships interact within a communal relationship among two species within a bioregion through his concept of reciprocity. A brief illustration of the evolution of two animals, as given by Berry and Swimme, will show how this process of reciprocity might operate. The bison butted heads for self-protection whereas the horse, which shared the same environment, chose to gallop. Why? Berry and Swimme say it was their self-articulations or evolutionary choices that made them that way. But at the same time, these animals were made within the context of their broader community of beings, or bioregion. In a biological sense, these animals did not enter into a fixed rigid external environment. Berry and Swimme conclude that the animals worked out their existence in relationship with their larger environment. In another sense, the community said to the horse, “you may be a galloping energy” and to the bison, “you may be a ramming energy, but only if you include all of us and all of our concerns and realities in your life project.”<sup>41</sup>

Seen in this light, the concept of rights arises, such as the right a river has to flow. Berry suggests this concept makes more sense when we think analogically. He contends that “each being has rights according to its mode of being.”<sup>42</sup> Berry says that a river has a right to flow, but because the value of the river is determined in relation to the larger biotic community (communion), its waters must also circulate throughout the planet so that they can benefit other lifeforms on the planet. When we normally speak of the rights of a human and the rights of the other-than-human, we have trouble assessing the two because of their apparent differences, and too often end with human rights trumping the rights of the non-human. However, if we employ the term rights as an analogous term, we see similarities and differences. In this way, we can say “a river has rights.” The river, however, does not have human rights because human rights would be no good for a river. A river needs river rights, such as the right to flow.<sup>43</sup>

Such a view of subjectivity, rights, and self-articulations denotes the type of liberation I outlined earlier. In an analogous way to how we understand liberation for the human, the subject is participating as an agent of its own freedom to follow evolutionary impulses; yet, rather than

---

<sup>41</sup>Swimme and Berry, 138. A similar story is given on page 133 where a population of woodpeckers wandering into a mountain community is confronted everywhere by “demands shouted at them, ‘your wings are too stubby...your beaks are too fat,’” and so on. The birds are told that if they are interested in entering the new community, they must pay attention to the whole community and live in an awareness of the needs of each member of the community.

<sup>42</sup>Thomas Berry, “The Wisdom of the Cross,” in *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 91.

<sup>43</sup>Thomas Berry, “Ethics and Ecology,” paper delivered to the *Harvard Seminar on Environmental Values*, Harvard University, April 9, 1996.

simply impinging on another's liberation, the subject negotiates that freedom among the larger community. If any animal, human or other-than-human, enters into a community, it must pay attention to the community and remain attentive to the needs of each member of the community.<sup>44</sup> From a human perspective, if seeking access to the water from the river, we must listen to the negotiations taking place among the river and the whole biotic community.

### **Liberation at the Bioregional Level**

Actualizing the above negotiations, it could be argued and quite rightly, would be too unwieldy a process given the vastness of Earth. This is why both Boff and Berry suggest a bioregional model in which all negotiations are to take place. A bioregion is an identifiable geographical area of interacting life systems. It is relatively self-sustaining in the ever-renewing processes of nature. Writing with Mark Hathaway, Boff states that humans must learn to "fit ourselves into the ecosystem and natural economy of the particular place, rather than trying to mold the place to suit our personal taste (albeit, presumably, some mutuality of shaping does occur)."<sup>45</sup> Dwelling on the land within a bioregion implies that we should listen to it, comprehending the kinds of soils, rock, and insects it has as well as its carrying capacities; we do this through critical reflection, mutual engagement, and what seems to be an interiorization of experiences (ostensibly a spiritual experience). This inculcating of the natural world as part of one's inner nature allows us to identify with the land not by force but by letting the "land reclaim us like ivy growing over an old house."<sup>46</sup>

Already, then, we can see delimitations on the vastness of this process. The negotiations or communal conversation would occur at the bioregional level and, if need be, among bioregions, in which case the framework need not be so unmanageable.<sup>47</sup> Yet the framework for

---

<sup>44</sup>Berry, *Great Work*, 51.

<sup>45</sup>Hathaway and Boff, 355-356.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>47</sup>Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka's *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) parallels the thinking by Berry on negotiating rights within a bioregion. The authors propose an expanded citizen-based animal rights theory by focusing on citizenship as we currently understand it within human realms. We make distinctions between co-citizen and foreigners but also those with in-between citizenship status like migrant workers or refugees. We apply certain rights and responsibilities accordingly. The authors suggest the same occurs with animals when we understand our interaction with them in political terms. Simply put, different types of animals stand in different relationships to human political communities. Domesticated animals become full members of human-animal mixed communities and receive a shared citizenship. Wilderness animals receive their own sovereign communities where they are entitled to protection against colonization, intrusion, and other threats to their self-determination. Another category is set up for the in-between (liminal) animals who are wild but live in the midst of human settlements (like raccoons); these residents of our societies are not fully included in

communicating remains vague. How are humans to engage in dialogue with all beings within their larger relational context? To achieve such dialogue, Boff proposes a perichoretic model as the best approach for realizing “the most inclusive stance possible,” and “the one that is least inclined to produce victims,” since everything interacts with everything at all points and under all circumstances.<sup>48</sup> His perichoretic model is an adaptation of the Greek term *perichoretic*, which, in Christian tradition, describes the mutual presence and interpenetration of the threefold nature and functioning of the Trinity. He likens the Trinity to the ecological model that functions like a “participative democracy”<sup>49</sup> whose members are spatially and temporarily unconfined, making his perichoretic model “transversal.”<sup>50</sup> By transversal, Boff implies a relation that extends simultaneously in multiple directions and in different manners: epistemologically and ontologically laterally among the ecological community; forward, toward the future of that community; backward, into the community’s past; and inward, into the complexities of that community with “all [its] experiences and all forms of comprehension as complementary and useful knowledge of the universe, our role within it, and in the cosmic solidarity that unites us to all.”<sup>51</sup>

To be sure, this process of universal interaction still seems vast and difficult to envision within a bioregional model. How does Boff see the perichoretic model functioning at the bioregional level? The process appears to require a conversation among a large quantity of subjects, comprising the human, terrestrial, and other-than-human biological world, all interconnected amidst complex sets of relationships, as discussed in my introduction.

Dussel offers some insight on this matter. He begins by pointing to the absurdity of suggesting that the vast communal conversation include those subjects who are not involved in any way in the ethical situation that undergirds the conversation. Dussel affirms the need for the symmetric participation of just those subjects who are affected by an issue. Nevertheless, he realizes the impossibility of identifying all those affected and “all the ‘possibly’ affected.”<sup>52</sup> True to his liberationist thinking, Dussel asserts that the procedural “first question” that must

---

rights and responsibilities of citizenship. To all of these animals, though, we owe respect for their basic inviolable rights. Where conflicts between rights and territories arise, the authors suggest the art of negotiation, which is ongoing.

<sup>48</sup>Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 24.

<sup>49</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Global Civilization: Challenges to Society and Christianity*, trans. Alexandre Guilherme (London: Equinox, 2005), 16.

<sup>50</sup>Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 4.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>52</sup>Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 293.

always, and seemingly constantly, be asked is: “Who may we have left ‘outside’—without recognition?”<sup>53</sup> In this manner, the primary consideration becomes not so much the quantity of those participating, but the quality, that is, who participates. Integrated into this vast communal discussion, as Dussel suggests, should be advisers, experts, scientists, technicians, and those with experience. The common good broached at the beginning of this paper no longer exists solely for the human. It must be for the whole terrestrial, biological world, with which humans share a destiny.

This conversation, even with the delimitations ascribed by Dussel, might still seem esoteric. But many humans do participate in some form of communal conversation with the natural world around them. Berry gives a good example of what listening actually implies day to day when discussing how a woman he encountered in Florida engaged with her surroundings: listening could be as simple as paying attention to a hurricane, but in doing so, she was able to learn things such as where and how to build a house in that area.<sup>54</sup> To be sure, this does not mean all humans have this ability to listen. In fact, arguably few today have such facility. Berry contends that those living within the Western industrialized milieu and mindset have “forgotten our primordial capacity for language at the elementary level of song and dance, wherein we share our existence with the animals and with all natural phenomena.”<sup>55</sup> We therefore have to re-learn how to do much of this listening, something, Berry contends, we can learn from Indigenous cultures. I will return to this subject shortly.

### **Liberation, Tethered and Messy**

The above discussion is pointing to a shared liberation within the larger Earth community. It can only occur within the constraints of a larger bioregional model. Here, the welfare of one subject or groups is entwined with the welfare of other subjects within the same community. Liberation becomes an ongoing process of listening and negotiating ultimately among the whole of creation. Within this framework, any authentic liberation can only ever be a tethered liberation or, as I suggest as a more fitting label, an eco-tethered liberation.

A word is necessary on the merits of an eco-tethered liberation. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, complex webs of exploitation can be countered by fostering complex webs of mutually enhancing ways of living. Ethics in the Anthropocene is necessarily complex. We know it needs to be relational. Boff himself stresses that relationality must be at the core of any

---

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 294.

<sup>54</sup>Berry, *Great Work*, 51.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 51.

ethical vision we pursue.<sup>56</sup> To be sure, there is no real how-to manual for fostering this ethical vision. I have described how simplified formulas, rigid procedures, decontextualized abstract reasoning, or reductionist analyses that espouse seeming one-size-fits-all ethical projects have failed and will continue to fail us. Espousing the greatest good for the greatest number, for example (a utilitarian procedure), does not ensure that we promote the common good of those exporting communities, including the other-than-human subjects, or the welfare of the individual subjects mentioned earlier in this paper. These formulas and ways of reasoning avoid the concrete everyday slow and complex processes required to foster a just and sustainable world. The process of discerning how all subjects within a bioregion might express their evolutionary impulses cannot be circumvented.

As such, an eco-tethered liberation is commensurately messy. I do not apply the term messy in a derogatory sense to imply careless reasoning, though. Nor do I suggest messy conveys a system that is chaotic, where anything goes. Yet if messy is understood to convey a process that is complicated and difficult to work with and lacking in precision, in many ways this characterization is not entirely inaccurate. Moreover, I contend that an eco-tethered liberation is viable not in spite of the messy character to it, but because of it. Such a radically new ethic marked by a process that is complicated, difficult to work with, and lacking in precision is precisely what we need today. It invites us to stand back and consider how *all* subjects interconnect and cooperate rather than compete. When realized within a bioregional context, the process becomes less daunting.

### **Indigenous Experience in Bolivia**

While much of what I have described might sound too abstract to be put into practice, the Bolivian peoples offer an example of how an ethics of liberation in the Anthropocene, an eco-tethered liberation, might unfold. Bolivia, it needs mentioning, is a landlocked country in the heart of South America. Much of the country relies on seasonal melt from the glaciers capping its high Andean mountains. Yet, with global temperatures rising due to GHG emissions, Bolivia's glaciers are melting rapidly, leaving one of the poorest countries in South America without sufficient water to meet its daily needs. In 2016, the government declared a state of emergency as the country faced its worst drought in 25 years.<sup>57</sup> Consider the 2010 declaration by the

---

<sup>56</sup>Leonardo Boff, "Earth as Gaia: An Ethical and Spiritual Challenge," in *Eco-Theology*, eds. Elaine Wainwright, Luiz-Carlos Susin, and Felix Wilfred (London: SCM Press, 2009), 30.

<sup>57</sup>Reuters Staff, "Bolivia Declares State of Emergency Over Worst Drought in 25 Years," *The Guardian*, 21 (November 2016), accessed 15 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/21/bolivia-drought-state-of-emergency-water-shortages>.

Bolivian government at the culmination of the arguably disappointing UN Conference of the Parties (COP) in Cancun, Mexico. Highlighting the dearth of attention from the world community to a liberation approach in environmental decision-making, the Bolivian government felt it imperative to underline the necessity of its peoples' participation in deliberations that directly affect their welfare, as well as the welfare of the land, glaciers, and waters they rely upon:

Bolivia has participated in these negotiations in good faith and the hope that we could achieve an effective climate deal. We were prepared to compromise on many things, except the lives of our people. Sadly, that is what the world's richest nations expect us to do.<sup>58</sup>

True to the liberative framework, the Bolivians were demanding that they participate as agents in their own freedom from oppression. They sought reciprocity in the negotiations. Yet, for the industrialized countries at the UN gathering, global capitalism was taken as a non-negotiable starting point in all deliberations. Speaking to *Democracy Now!* at the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009, Bolivia's president Evo Morales named this oppression, stating, "Capitalism is the worst enemy of humanity.... It's plundering natural resources. It's egoism and individualism. Therefore, in those promises of capitalism, there is no solidarity or complementarity. There's no reciprocity."<sup>59</sup>

Despite having been sidelined by the industrialized nations, Bolivians have proceeded, as much as they could, as architects and engineers of their own future. In 2010, the Bolivian government recognised the rights of Mother Nature as law within its nation, stating among other principles that "human activities, within the framework of plurality and diversity, should achieve a dynamic balance with the cycles and processes inherent in Mother Earth."<sup>60</sup> Recall, as stated earlier, the majority of Bolivians are of Indigenous ancestry. Accompanying this development is

---

<sup>58</sup>From Bolivian Ministry of External Relations Staff, "Press Briefing: Bolivia Decries Adoption of Copenhagen Accord II Without Consensus," (December 2018), accessed January 2011, <http://pwccc.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/press-release-history-will-be-the-judge.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup>Evo Morales speaking on Democracy Now, (17 December 2009), accessed January 2011, [https://www.democracynow.org/2009/12/17/bolivian\\_president\\_evo\\_morales\\_on\\_climate](https://www.democracynow.org/2009/12/17/bolivian_president_evo_morales_on_climate).

<sup>60</sup>See the Plurinational Legislative Assembly of Bolivia, "Law of the Rights of Mother Earth," accessed 19 June 2018, <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/Projects/Indicators/motherearthbolivia.html>. It should be noted that Ecuador had similarly placed the rights of nature within its constitution in 2008. I am not arguing here that entrenching the rights of nature in a law or even within a constitution is necessarily without problems or detractors, as the article below suggests is the case. I do maintain, however, that the principle of harmonious coexistence with nature, one with liberative impulses, is at play here; see Eija Maria Ranta, "Toward a Decolonial Alternative to Development? The Emergence and Shortcomings of *Vivir Bien* as State Policy in Bolivia in the Era of Globalization," *Globalizations* 13, no. 4 (2016): 425-439, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2016.1141596>.

the incorporation of the Indigenous philosophical ideas of the peoples of Bolivia, *vivir bien*, as it is called in Spanish, properly *sumaq kawsay* in Quechua. Loosely translated, *sumaq kawsay* means living well, though with the caveat of not living better to the detriment of the many others in community.<sup>61</sup> The concept implies that an individual's welfare is closely tied to those many others not only in the human community but also within the natural world. Here—unlike in the cosmological perspective described above—nature becomes a subject; human beings as the only source of values are therefore displaced. These Bolivian-Indigenous concepts promote the dissolution of the society-nature dualism. Accordingly, environmental scholar Eduardo Gudynas says,

Nature becomes part of the social world, and political communities could extend in some cases to the non-human. These include, as examples, the proposals of the biocentric environmental perspective, but also indigenous positions that recognize that the nonhuman (either animals, plants, ecosystems spirits) have will and feelings. Thus, the polis is expanded, and the concept of citizenship is widened to include these other actors within environmental settings.<sup>62</sup>

The Bolivian project reflects the central point of how we are to understand an eco-tethered liberation: no one liberation can exist in isolation of the liberation of other subjects. Nature has become part of the social world, as Gudynas puts it above, and political and the other-than-human community enters into political deliberations. Where conflicts between the liberation of human and other-than-human subjects arise, the key is not to circumvent the liberation of the larger biotic community—as humans have been doing for some time now (the above UN negotiations on climate change being a case in point)—but to address the larger and global preferential option for the rich, so that it is not Bolivians or Mother Earth who disproportionately bear the burden (for example, lack of water), but the entire human species that proportionately limits its actions.

It is not a coincidence that a country like Bolivia can foster the core elements of an eco-tethered liberation. Its largely Indigenous population has experienced oppression from European and American interests for centuries. While their understanding of what constitutes a liberation of all creation does not stem from the same evolutionary cosmological framework I present above, these Indigenous peoples recognize that the evolutionary impulses of all subjects matter. There is a common good where “Mother Earth is a dynamic living system comprising an indivisible community of all living systems and living organisms, interrelated,

---

<sup>61</sup>David Choquehuanca, “Suma Qamaña: Vivir Bien, No Mejor,” *Servicios Koinonia* (2012), accessed 1 February 2014, <http://servicioskoinonia.org/agenda/archivo/obra.php?ncodigo=760>.

<sup>62</sup>Eduardo Gudynas, “Buen Vivir: Today's Tomorrow,” *Development* 54, no. 4 (2011): 441-447.

interdependent and complementary, which share a common destiny. Mother Earth is considered sacred, from the worldviews of nations and peasant indigenous peoples.”<sup>63</sup> Liberation is inclusive, as “all Bolivians, to join the community of beings comprising Mother Earth, exercise rights under this Act, in a way that is consistent with their individual and collective rights.”<sup>64</sup> Yet, the liberation appears tethered as well: “the exercise of individual rights is limited by the exercise of collective rights in the living systems of Mother Earth.”<sup>65</sup> Negotiation in some form must take place because “any conflict of rights must be resolved in ways that do not irreversibly affect the functionality of living systems.”<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

Returning to the four questions outlined at the onset of this paper, it is clear that in an epoch marked by complex webs of exploitation, an ethics of self-participation is key. The Bolivians, with their experience of bearing the brunt of climate change and myopic political debates, have told the world community that its simplified formulas and decontextualized abstract reasoning do not work for them or, importantly, for Mother Earth. An eco-tethered liberation, as I have elucidated, is invariably a messy communal process of dialoguing and negotiating with many others, be they humans or rivers. Yet this process may produce the smallest number of victims. What appears messy and therefore ill-advised in a world spellbound by the ideology of efficiency is actually a virtue for an ethical vision in the Anthropocene epoch marked by a dominant economics of neoliberalism and exploitation. In all this, liberation for all subjects does not gloss over the reality that death and horrible destruction will still occur. Suffering is a paradox. It becomes easier to live with this paradox when we learn to distinguish between meaningful and meaningless suffering.

Bolivians, like the theorists I examined, are telling us that the process of someone living well in the Anthropocene is ineluctably tied to the welfare of those many others not only in the human community but in the natural world as well. A responsibility to the many others in community becomes the starting point in conversations, which occur at the bioregional level. Yet those many others participating in the conversations are primarily those most affected. And care is given to continuously ask the question, one the Bolivians were asking in 2010: Who is being left behind?

---

<sup>63</sup>Pluralnational Legislative Assembly of Bolivia Government of Bolivia, #3.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., #6.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., #6.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., #6.

It is not just an ethics of self-participation that is key here. An eco-tethered liberation implies an ethics of the common good as I have defined it. When Pope Francis speaks to the “inseparable bond” between our “concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace”, he alludes to an integral ecology.<sup>67</sup> In his understanding of integral ecology, “nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.”<sup>68</sup> It is in recognizing this inseparable bond that the traditional Catholic understanding of common good takes on a different, more integral hue. To be sure, Francis still defines the common good with anthropocentric wording; yet he also refers to Earth as “mother” twice. In fact, I suggest that the wording from the Bolivian declaration of the rights of Mother Earth quoted above, where “Mother Earth is a dynamic living system comprising an indivisible community of all living systems and living organisms, interrelated, interdependent and complementary, which share a common destiny,” would not seem too out of place were it to appear in Francis’ *Laudato Si*.

Is the above evidence of a sense of relationality growing among various populations of the world? Boff thought this was so over 20 years ago. He believed that our current planetary plight was prompting a new sense of relationality and sensitivity to the planet as a whole.<sup>69</sup> He also stressed then, as did Berry, that in order to nurture a new relationality with all Earth subjects, a new spirituality would be needed, one grounded in a mystical experience of the sacred. I have purposely left this aspect out of my discussion of an eco-tethered liberation. The process of nurturing a spirituality requires its own space to discuss competently. Still, if we take spirituality to signify a way of living well, but not at the expense of others also living well, then this relational characteristic of an eco-tethered liberation implies that it is a spirituality. In this case, a new ethic of liberation for the Anthropocene becomes a new spirituality for the Anthropocene.

What can be said with some certainty, as environmentalist and author Paul Hawken has demonstrated, is that there is evidence of a movement of immense magnitude growing throughout the world, diverse in nature and not necessarily aligned, from neighbourhood groups to well-funded international organizations. This movement is addressing the complex webs of exploitation that mark the Anthropocene.<sup>70</sup> Perhaps the dual and yet interconnected global crises our civilization is facing is what is needed to spur new ways of being human. If that

---

<sup>67</sup>Francis, *Laudato Si*, #10.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., #139.

<sup>69</sup>Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 11.

<sup>70</sup>Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

is the case, the Anthropocene becomes both a symptom and a cause.