Chapter 1

Toward an Ecological Theology of Liberation

The aim of this book is to develop the foundations for a Christian ecological theology of liberation. As I noted in the introduction to this text, this theology is twofold in its orientation. First, it grounds the preferential options for both the earth and the poor in its confession of who God is and what God desires. Second, it elucidates and energizes forms of praxis that make manifest these options in the world. In service of the broad goal of developing the foundations for this theology, the task of Chapter 1 is to establish a general methodological approach for Christian eco-liberationist discourse and further clarify the definitional understanding of this theology.

In the first part of Chapter 1, I take up my stated task by clarifying three basic methodological commitments for a Christian eco-liberationist approach: (1) privileging the discourse of political ecology over that of ecological cosmology; (2) affirming a qualified form of anthropocentrism; and (3) prioritizing the "book of scripture" over the "book of nature" as a source of revelation. These three basic commitments, as I demonstrate below, disclose a fourth commitment, namely, that a Christian ecological theology of liberation must clarify the relationship between the options for the earth and poor, and the mystery of salvation in and through Jesus Christ. On establishing this fourth commitment, I turn, in the second part of Chapter 1, to examine the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez, a key figure in early liberation theology. Gutiérrez's thought is explicitly concerned with the

question of soteriology, and, as I argue, his own theological method can serve as the template for organizing an ecological theology of liberation. Thus, the chapter concludes with an analysis of Gutiérrez's soteriological argumentation, showing how his arguments might be retrieved and broadened to accommodate eco-liberationist concerns.

METHODOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS FOR A CHRISTIAN ECO-LIBERATIONIST DISCOURSE

As I just noted, the argument of this book proceeds on the conviction that Christian eco-liberationist discourse should prioritize engagement with the discourse of political ecology (over that of ecological cosmology), affirm a qualified sense of anthropocentrism, and give pride of place to the book of scripture (over the book of nature) as a source of revelation. Since each of these moves is at least somewhat controversial, it is important to reflect on the reasoning behind making them. I begin by considering the discourses of political ecology and ecological cosmology, starting with a critical examination of the latter before turning to the former.

Privileging Political Ecology

The discourse and insights of ecological cosmology, especially within the Americas, have been significantly influenced by the work of the Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry.[1] Of particular note for this study, the influence of Teilhard and Berry is evident in the work of both Leonardo Boff and Ivone Gebara, the two thinkers most closely associated with connecting liberationist concern for the poor to discussions of environmental ethics.[2] Broadly speaking, ecological cosmology refers to a mode of analysis that reflects on the history of cosmic evolution.[3] Within this framework, the discourse also examines the advent of life on the planet earth, and the ways in which life on earth has evolved over the course of billions of years. Thus, Boff's approach, in his widely regarded book *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, is characteristic of the narratives of ecological cosmology. Boff tells the story of the evolving universe from “cosmogenesis” to the emergence of earth as a superorganism whose systems work not only to

sustain the superorganism but to propel life *forward* so that novel and more complex forms of life can emerge.[4]

In narrating the story of the universe, the religious variations of ecological cosmology emphasize the spiritual dimension of evolution and the sacred character of the cosmos. From this perspective, all of life, indeed all of matter, is worthy of reverent wonder. Accordingly, both Boff and Gebara echo Teilhard in describing the universe as a "divine milieu."[5] The sacred character of this cosmic context elicits not only reverence from the human person for the universe and its composite parts; it also demands a transformation of praxis. Humans must adopt what Boff terms a "holistic ecological stance" to the patterning of human life.[6] The "omni-relatedness and connectedness of everything" within the divine milieu demands that humans move beyond narrow forms of anthropocentric self-concern and come to live in solidarity with earth and the universe.[7] Humanity must come to appreciate, as Gebara writes, that "at every instant, every being maintains its own uniqueness, and in this context every being is worthy to live the fullness of its own existence."[8] For Boff, this requires nothing less than an ethic of "unlimited responsibility for everything existing and alive."[9]

I am not opposed to many of the viewpoints that ecological cosmology endorses. Indeed, the argument of this book affirms the goodness of creation and seeks to counter any worldview that presumes the human person is the sole measure of the universe. With respect to forms of ecological cosmology articulated in an explicitly Christian register, this book likewise affirms the need for a sapiential Christology that helps buttress both a sacramental view of creation and a Christian theological cosmology.[10] Nonetheless, the discourse of ecological cosmology has significant limitations in its ability to support the aims of an ecological theology of liberation. These limitations crystallize around two general characteristics of the discourse.

First, ecological cosmology is ill equipped for adjudicating, or even surfacing, the complex and often conflictual relationships that constitute historical reality. As we have seen, ecological cosmology provides a grand unifying vision of the universe. The difficulty, however, as Mary Midgely writes, is that "once we have this new vision, there are many different interpretations that we can put on it, many different dramas that arise, many directions in which it can lead us. It is quite hard to distinguish among those directions and to map them in a way that lets us navigate reasonably among

them."[11] Midgely points to the fact that, when taken by itself, ecological cosmology, rather dramatically, underdetermines ethics and praxis.[12]

To affirm that the universe is a "divine milieu" and the earth a "sacred body" *may* have the effect of undercutting pernicious forms of anthropocentrism, but they do little more than that. To state it somewhat bluntly, while the oft-referenced observation that "everything is composed of stardust" may engender in the modern Western subject a greater sense of connectedness to the earth, it does nothing to clarify how this person should respond when faced with the prospect of history's gas chambers and bullwhips, the Ebola virus, nuclear weapons, and growing concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide. After all, each of these is also composed of that same solar dust. With this indeterminacy in view, Lisa Sideris finds that the narratives of ecological cosmology "encourage expressions of wonder that are powerless to critique or correct environmentally destructive attitudes and patterns of behavior."[13] Sideris's description of the ineffectual character of ecological cosmology is true not only for environmental ethics but also for social ethics and, most important, the complex ways in which the two relate. Thus, as Peter Scott observes, although the intention of ecological cosmology is to orient the human person toward the world, it "has sustained difficulties engaging with the world." Indeed, despite its intent, ecological cosmology "seems strangely *other*-worldly."[14] Ultimately, this otherworldliness has the unavoidable effect of muting the cries of the earth and the poor or otherwise rendering them unintelligible within the narrative framework of ecological cosmology.[15]

Even more problematic than the ethically underdetermined character of ecological cosmology is the manner in which this discourse tends to orient one *away* from the preferential options for the earth and poor in an active manner.[16] In other words, to the extent that ecological cosmology is determinative of ethics, its recommendations actually cut against the commitments of an ecological theology of liberation. This is because ecological cosmology, too often, is informed by what Johann Baptist Metz describes as an "ersatz metaphysics" of evolutionary progress.[17] That is to say, "the universe story," as it is recounted in the discourses of ecological cosmology, is inclined to describe the unfolding cosmos as one in which complexification (of matter into life, and life into more intricate forms of life) is the inevitable and natural teleology of cosmic history. On this

account, higher forms of being emerge inexorably through the evolutionary processes of the unfolding universe in a manner that justifies the dissolution of the "lower" forms of life that preceded them. Thus, with regard to life on earth, the sufferings and unspeakable tragedies experienced across the entire panoply of biotic existence—including even mass extinctions—are explained away by pointing to the ways in which these tragedies have given way to the emergence of higher forms of life.[18] In effect, this interpretation of cosmic history becomes a triumphalist account that celebrates the victors of history.[19]

Ironically, the problem that narratives of cosmic evolutionistic progress pose for eco-liberationist commitment is evidenced most strikingly in the arguments of Boff. As we have already noted, Boff draws heavily on the insights of ecological cosmology in arguing for a connection between the concerns of liberation theology and ecological theology. However, Boff's desire to hear and respond to the "cries" of the earth and poor are undercut by his own argumentation. Reflecting on the destructive elements of cosmic evolution, Boff writes strikingly, "In the evolutionary process…there are falls, but they are falls on the way up. The emergence of chaos means the opportunity for more complex and rich forms of life to appear."[20] Here Boff justifies the myriad forms of destruction, death, and suffering that have characterized cosmic (and planetary) history as simply the means to the end of unceasing progressive complexification. But if this is the case, if every "fall" is simply a fall "on the way up," then why should anyone be concerned about the sixth great extinction, or for that matter, the annihilation of the human species (or, at least, the "least fit" elements of this species)? After all, on the view expressed by Boff, will not their destruction simply hasten the coming of more intensely realized forms of consciousness? From this perspective, the cries of the earth and the poor should not be met with care and concern but with either apathy or unabashed scorn.[21]

For the two reasons surfaced above, ecological cosmology does not lend itself to the articulation of an ecological theology of liberation (and certainly not in a foundational way). At least with regard to the first problem raised with respect to the arguments of ecological cosmology, a more helpful discourse is that of political ecology. As a mode of analysis, political ecology refers to the study of how the organization and exercise of power (be it discursive, political, economic, or metabolic) structures the symbiotic/hybrid relationship between a social system and the ecosystem(s)

to which it relates. Moreover, this mode of analysis pays particular attention to social and ecological conflicts that underlie the formation and sustainment of any given pattern of eco-social structuring.[22] For example, Joan Martinez-Alier's groundbreaking work in political ecology analyzes the manner in which political and economic interests of multinational corporations and their governmental allies function to remake and often degrade the eco-social context of poor and marginalized communities within the global south. Likewise, Martinez-Alier's work highlights the ways in which "the environmentalism of the poor" seeks to contest these dominative forms of eco-social structuring.[23]

For the task of developing an ecological theology of liberation, the discourse of political ecology is of far greater utility than that of ecological cosmology. This is because while political ecology remains open, in principle, to the possibility of affirming the sanctity of the created order, it is keenly interested in exploring the messiness of historical reality. In contrast to Scott's observation regarding ecological cosmology, the discourse of political ecology remains resolutely *this-worldly* in its orientation. In highlighting the conflictual character to the world's eco-social formations, the politico-ecological approach helps illuminate the concrete presence of or orientations toward the abuse of power within the world. Political ecology, then, provides a mode of analysis that can be of service to theology in naming the eco-social character of sin (or correspondingly the dialectical presence of God's saving grace) as it is made manifest within the world. Along these same lines, a politico-ecological mode of analysis is also necessary for specifying both the shape and content of the options for the poor and the earth within historical reality. The reader can note that this book's introduction began by describing the contemporary global context within a politico-ecological framework. However, I must note political ecology's own limitation. Although this discourse is vital for specifying how the options for the earth and poor can be made manifest, political ecology, in and of itself, does not provide the impetus for making these options.[24] The question of where this warrant might be located is an issue that I consider subsequently. However, before doing so, I must address the issue of anthropocentrism.

Affirming a Qualified Anthropocentrism

Contemporary concern in religious environmental ethics over anthropocentrism, referenced briefly in the section above, finds its seminal expression in Lynn White Jr.'s essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."[25] Published in 1967, the essay argues that the origin of the ongoing ecological crisis is located in the Judeo-Christian worldview. As White writes, "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen." Its religious ethos has "insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."[26] Accordingly, White finds that Christianity has desacralizd the natural world within the cultural imaginations that operate under Christian influence. This desacralizing process, in turn, has sanctioned and catalyzed the exploitation and domination of nature, resulting in the contemporary ecological crisis.[27]

White's criticism has profoundly influenced Christian theology and environmental ethics over the last fifty years, as theologians have sought in varying ways to wrestle with his claims.[28] Here I do not enter into evaluative judgments regarding the theological or historical veracity of White's arguments.[29] Instead, I raise White's critique simply to point out that at its core lies a sharp criticism of anthropocentrism. This critique has set the agenda for a great deal of theological reflection post-White. In the wake of White's critique of the Judeo-Christian worldview, it has become somewhat fashionable within various strands of ecological theology and environmental ethics to level generalized condemnations of anthropocentrism in all of its forms.[30]

To be clear, insofar as the term "anthropocentrism" refers to a worldview in which only human persons are accorded innate value among creation, it must be wholly rejected. Likewise, it is vital to denounce the oft accompanying view that the proper vocation of the human person is to dominate nonhuman creation. (These are points that I affirmed in the section above.) Nonetheless, the wholesale uncritical dismissal of anthropocentrism is both impractical and otherwise problematic. For one, it is doubtful that simply de-centering the human within any given system of thought will necessarily render that system more conducive to hearing and responding to the cries of the earth and the poor. An omnicentric or earth-centered worldview is just as likely to embrace a technophilic epoch, one in which artificial intelligence and various technologically advanced machines replace any number of earth's organic life forms, as it is to affirm an ethic of

biological conservation. After all, if the whole of matter is sacred, why give preference to the organic over the synthetic? Indeed, as my foregoing analysis suggests, the inclination toward technophilia appears endemic to the holistic approach of ecological cosmology (or at least to some paradigmatic articulations of this discourse).

Even more problematic, however, is the tendency of anti-anthropocentric criticism to minimize the responsibility that the human person bears toward nonhuman creation. According to versions of the anti-anthropocentric line of critique, it is arrogant to presume that the human can judge what is good for the earth.[31] To be sure, there is value in this viewpoint insofar as it can act as a hedge capable of interrupting the prideful surety of human valuations. The human person, after all, is not God. We would do well to be wary of the human capacity for hubris. Nonetheless, the danger of this line of criticism is that it can serve simply to relieve the human person of any sense of ethical responsibility. In alleviating the burden of responsibility for hearing and responding to the cries of the earth and the poor, anti-anthropocentrism arguments ironically open the way for the human person to lapse freely into unfettered narcissism. As J. Matthew Ashley writes,

> To state the matter polemically: Won't persons who are already weary of the high demands placed by the Enlightenment understandings of rationality and responsibility welcome the insight that humans are not really different from the rest of nature? Why not simply let the micro- or macro-subjects of history (genes, Gaia or "nature") take on the burden of history, while human beings seek what "niches" they can find to work out their individual destinies untroubled by broader questions of meaning and suffering in our common history?[32]

By minimizing the uniqueness of the human person's moral capacity, anti-anthropocentric arguments can simply give way to uncritical forms of self-concern and disordered self-love on the part of human beings.[33] This surrender feeds into a postmodern cultural milieu in which, as Ashley argues, "persons in general are increasingly numb to the sufferings of others and simply tired of appeals to the costly exercises of rational and moral accountability that come with being a subject in the modern sense."[34]

Anti-anthropocentric rhetoric, in attenuating or even rejecting the need for ethical responsibility on the part of the human person, fails to produce the

requisite moral imperative for contesting the pernicious forms of anthropocentrism that are actively at work in the world today.[35] This rhetoric creates an inhospitable terrain for eco-liberationist concern. In light of this, Ashley writes, "At the risk of misunderstanding, I would say that our current problem is not too much anthropocentricity, but not enough, at least in the form that arises from an understanding of the subject formed by the Christian narratives and the praxis of discipleship."[36] Although the human person is not God, the person must stand responsible before God. To affirm James Gustafson's distinction, although human persons are not the *measure* of all things, they remain the *measurers* of all things.[37] Within a Christian theological framework, this is the qualified anthropocentrism that is required for hearing and responding to the cries of the earth and the poor. From an eco-liberationist perspective, then, it is vital for human communities, in cooperation with the Spirit, to refine their ability to name the realities of both sin and grace as they are at work in the world and to then act in accordance with such judgments. In order to contest the global networks of power that relentlessly exploit the world, an ecological theology of liberation must *center* its discourse on the human person and the person's capacity as a knower and doer of the Word—a subject who can confront reality and bear its weight, while working to transform that reality.[38]

The Two "Books" of Revelation: Reading the Signs of the Times in Light of the Word of God

In affirming the moral responsibility of the human person to know and shape the world, it is worth underscoring the point made by Ashley above. The type of human-centered discourse needed today, at least from a Christian eco-liberationist perspective, is one that works to form the person through the Christian narratives and the praxis of discipleship. In recalling this point, the presumption on my part is that the narratives shaping Christian identity can and should be interpreted in a manner that orients the human person toward hearing and responding to the cries of the earth and the poor. Here, though, another set of questions arises that requires consideration: What constitutes revelation? What shapes the narratives that, in turn, form the Christian person (and the Christian community) as a subject who is responsible before God? Moreover, how do we work to interpret God's self-

disclosure so that human responsibility before God translates into a preferential option that responds to the needs of both the earth and the poor?

In responding to this set of questions, we can begin by noting that the Catholic Christian tradition long has affirmed the revelatory power of two "books"—the book of scripture and the book of nature. Here the book of scripture refers not only to the Bible but also to doctrine and the tradition through which the faith has been handed down.[39] The second of the two books, the book of nature, refers to creation. On this view, creation, in all of its wondrous complexity, is understood to communicate a "word" about the Creator, similar to the manner in which a text is capable of disclosing something about the character of its author.[40] Thus, as Pope Francis affirms in *Laudato Si'*, nature can be read like a book to gain insight into God.[41] Each of these two books, then, is partially constitutive of the Word of God—revealing something of who God is and what God desires, and offering testimony to Jesus Christ, the Word through whom all things were made. From this perspective, then, the books of scripture and nature together constitute revelation and in turn shape the narratives that form Christian identity.

The Christian tradition conventionally prioritizes the revelatory power of the book of scripture over that of the book of nature. In other words, the tradition affirms that the former book gives us clearer and more far-reaching insight into God and God's will than the latter. On the traditional understanding, the book of nature should be read in light of and through the book of scripture. However, in the wake of White's critiques regarding Christianity, some contemporary strands of eco-theology and environmental ethics have come to view the book of scripture largely through a hermeneutic of suspicion.[42] As a result of this suspicion, there is a tendency within environmentally concerned theological discourse to reverse the traditional prioritization of the two books and thus grant pride of place to the book of nature. This reversal characterizes the thought of both Boff and Gebara, who, in varying ways, marginalize the book of scripture within their arguments.[43] This move, however, is problematic not only for the view it takes with regard to the book of scripture but also for the ways in which it construes nature.

Sideris observes that, in granting primacy to the book of nature, theologians and environmental ethicists frequently point to the discipline of

ecology for warrant in making this decision. In appealing to this discipline, the discourses of eco-theology and environmental ethics typically foreground the notion of the "ecological *community*" as a way of highlighting the manner in which the various parts of nature fit together as a whole.[44] Eco-theology then emphasizes the ways in which this community is characterized by the interdependence, cooperation, and symbiosis of its members, in a manner that sustains the community as a whole. What emerges from this characterization of the natural order, Sideris notes, is a view in which nature appears largely benign and seems to produce the best of possible worlds.[45] From this perspective, the book of nature appears able to act as our guide in navigating and remediating the crises and harms that afflict the world that humans inhabit. If not the "universe story," then the "earth story" can properly order the dispositions and praxis of the human person. The morally responsible subject need merely attune himself or herself to the ways of nature. The formation of Christian identity for which Ashley calls can be largely if not entirely naturalized—the narratives and praxis informing this identity are effectively disclosed by the book of nature.

The line of argumentation that I have just rehearsed, however, is built on faulty premises that, when recognized as such, ultimately delegitimize the exaltation of the book of nature. Privileging this book as the preeminent source of revelation creates a highly unstable foundation for constructing the preferential option for the earth and the poor. This is because nature is itself a far more ambiguous realm than is often admitted in the discourses of eco-theology and environmental ethics. Sideris herself is highly critical of the ways in which eco-theology tends to proffer romanticized views of nature. To this effect, she notes that although it is true that nature, in varying ways, is characterized by cooperation, interdependence, and mutualism, these characteristics do nothing to reduce the realities of scarcity, predation, suffering, waste, and competition that are also endemic in the natural world.[46] Even when taking the principles of ecology into account, the natural order continues to remain "red in claw and tooth." In other words, the Darwinian principle of "the survival of the fittest" and the tenets of natural selection endure as defining traits of the ecological community. Were nature to function as our sole or even primary ethical guide, there seems to be little to contravene the specter of social Darwinism.[47] This should be particularly concerning given, as we have already observed, the manner in which notions

of evolutionistic progress can function to legitimize rather blithely the annihilation of a species or group.

Not only do appeals to the book of nature, within eco-theological discourse, tend to downplay the violence inherent in the natural order, they also frequently rely on outmoded scientific views that describe the natural world fundamentally in terms of equilibrium. From this perspective, nature inclines toward a definable stasis only to be driven from this point of balance by human interference. As David Lodge and Christopher Hamlin argue, this portrayal misrepresents the character of the natural order, which, in fact, exists in a state of constant change. For Lodge and Hamlin, it is more accurate to conceive of earth's ecology as an "ecology of flux"—one in which the myriad patterns of relationship within the biosphere are subject to ongoing transformation. As Lodge and Hamlin acknowledge, "This new ecology is terrifying because it exposes the inadequacy of our normative systems."[48] In other words, due to its constant flux, nature does not provide a clear "ought" with regard to social or even environmental ethics.[49]

In light of the opacity and constant flux of nature, Lodge and Hamlin find "it is not a matter then of doing things nature's way, but rather of deciding which of nature's ways or forms we want to establish, maintain, restore, or change."[50] Here nature provides neither unambiguous ethical norms nor a straightforward path on which orthopraxis might unfold. Most important for an ecological theology of liberation, neither the preferential option for the poor nor even the preferential option for the earth are inscribed in the book of nature. Rather nature presents any number of paths, each of which must be carefully observed and considered while discerning their ethical viability.

In light of nature's radical ambiguity, a Christian ecological theology of liberation should be wary of the move to privilege the book of nature over that of scripture. The argument of this text proceeds from the view that it is the book of scripture that presents the clearest warrant for the preferential options for the earth and the poor. Thus the book of scripture should be granted pride of place as the source of revelation that informs the narratives and praxis constituting Christian identity. This assertion may appear dubious to many environmentally concerned ethicists and theologians who have been conditioned over much of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to approach the book of scripture with a hermeneutic of suspicion. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the book of scripture is without its own ambiguities. Even less am I proposing that the disclosure of this book can somehow be

apprehended without an act of interpretation on the part of the person or community of faith. There is no perfectly stable or uncontestable foundation for an ecological theology of liberation. Nonetheless, the book of scripture is consistent in its affirmation that creation is a gift from a good God who, however inscrutably, works to redeem and save the world from the horrors of suffering and sin. In other words, the book of scripture allows one to conceive of the world within the drama of God's creative and redemptive love. Scripture articulates this view in a way that nature does not. This is vital because it is the trust and hope that one holds in the goodness and faithfulness of God that serve as the ultimate warrant for making a preferential option for the earth and the poor. Amid the whirlwind of creation, the book of nature could easily recommend the exaltation of the sword and spear over the plowshare and pruning hook. The book of scripture ultimately calls us to opt for the latter, trusting in the path of discipleship and the call to serve and not dominate. It is the task of Part II of this text to substantiate these claims more thoroughly. For now, I turn to consider an important ramification of the move to prioritize the book of scripture.

SALVATION: TURNING TO THE ORGANIZING THEME OF THE BOOK OF SCRIPTURE

In privileging the book of scripture, Christian eco-liberationist discourse should take the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ as the central locus for its theological reflection. The reason for this is straightforward. Salvation in Christ is the fundamental mystery of the Christian faith. This mystery lies at the heart of the book of scripture, and all Christian theological discourse is ultimately predicated on and rendered intelligible by the good news of salvation. Pheme Perkins's claim about the resurrection (the climax of God's unsurpassable saving act in Christ) can be extended to the category of salvation in general: “It is the condition for the emergence of Christian speech itself.”[51] Thus, the Christian character of God-talk requires an explicit grounding in soteriology. To extend the metaphor that I have been using, the mystery of salvation is not a page in the book of scripture, or even a chapter. Rather, it is the spine of the book to which all pages must adhere. Therefore, if eco-liberationist concerns for the “cries” of the earth and the poor are to be understood as central to Christian reflection and action, the

relationship between these concerns and the mystery of salvation must be made evident.

The embrace of soteriology is controversial within the discourses of ecological theology and environmental ethics for many of the same reasons that the methodological commitments outlined above can be viewed as contentious. Eco-theology has often been ambivalent about the prospect of embracing soteriology in its talk of God. This hesitancy can be understood as part of the legacy of White's critique of Christianity's anthropocentric character. The critique of anthropocentrism creates at least two difficulties for eco-theological talk of salvation in particular that bear noting here. First, Christian soteriology is necessarily human-centered in character. Since, salvation is from sin, an act of which human persons are uniquely capable, soteriology focuses on the manner in which God works to save the human person from sin. Second, soteriology can be looked on skeptically by ecological theology because talk of salvation is often suggestive of the human person's otherworldly and suprahistorical experience of God. Thus, in valorizing that which is not of this world, talk of salvation can have the accompanying effect of degrading the things that are of this world and, by implication, deaden the possibility of ecological concern and commitment.

As a result of the difficulties that soteriology presents for ecological theology, Jenkins observes that the response of Christian eco-theology to the issue of salvation is often "garbled." Even while attempting to "follow patterns of grace or reach for symbols of redemption," eco-theology tends to underplay the significance of soteriological discourse.[52] However, as we just observed, the problem with the marginalization of soteriology within ecological theology is that it also diminishes the Christian character of eco-theology. This move actually provides a tacit endorsement of White's view that Christianity is inimical to ecological concern. One is left, it would seem, with the choice of embracing ecological concern on the one hand or Christian belief on the other.[53]

Jenkins, for one, is dissatisfied with this dichotomy and proposes an alternative approach. He writes, "Christian ethicists…know that no matter their position on White, whether they agree or not with his indictment of Christianity, they share in a common task: challenging bad legacies of salvation and revaluing nature. Why not do that by engaging soteriology?"[54] Rather than attempting to avoid the issue of soteriology, Jenkins advises that ecological theology confront the issue directly by retrieving or rehabilitating

soteriological grammars that might allow one to locate ecological concern at the heart of the Christian faith.[55]

Ecological theology—including eco-liberationist discourse—might take its cue from early forms of Christian liberation theology, which also had to contend with "bad legacies of salvation." Like ecological theology, liberation theology was also confronted by the problem of otherworldly conceptions of salvation. Particularly problematic to liberationists was the manner in which such conceptions served to tranquilize the human person's capacity for liberating and transformative praxis by wholly deferring the hope for divine justice and salvation to the eschaton. However, when faced with these world-denying soteriologies, the tendency within liberationist discourse was not to marginalize the mystery of salvation in Christ from its speech about God. Rather, in a manner that aligns with Jenkins's recommendation, liberation theology sought to reconstruct Christian soteriology so as to place the historical struggles for justice at the center of their soteriological frameworks.[56] This move allowed liberationists to locate at the heart of Christian identity the commitment to a liberating praxis in history.

We can now begin to discern a way forward in the effort to articulate a theology that affirms both liberationist and ecological concern as integral to Christian faith. In constructing a Christian ecological theology of liberation, it is possible to begin by retrieving liberationist soteriology and then broadening the scope of that soteriological framework so as to include ecological concern within it. This, in effect, is to carry out Jenkins's recommendation (that ecological theology directly grapple with soteriology) through an engagement with liberation theology. Through this method it would be possible to locate the imperative to hear and respond to the cries of the earth and the poor at the heart of Christian belief and practice.

In this vein, a particularly promising avenue for advancing eco-liberationist discourse can be found by turning to the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the foremost expositors of Latin American liberation theology. The thought of Gutiérrez recommends itself here, not only for its paradigmatic character, but also because of the nuanced and penetrating manner in which it articulates a Christian theology of salvation. In short, a constructive retrieval of Gutiérrez's theology of liberation can serve as the basis for establishing the proper framework for a Christian ecological theology of liberation.[57]