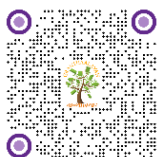


ECO-THEOLOGY AND THE PARADOX OF CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM IN ALEXIS M. SMITH'S MARROW ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

Smith (2016) is an eco-thriller set in the aftermath of an environmental catastrophe that tests the fragility of the relationship between humankind and the environment. Rooted in the discourse of eco-theology, this paper analyses how the novel critiques mainstream Christian tradition's perspectives on nature while proposing an alternative eco-spiritual vision. The novel portrays an eco-theological movement that seeks to remediate the land but cannot escape the entanglement from the hierarchical anthropomorphic positioning of humans over nature. Through this analysis, the paper adds to discussions on the viability and implications of eco-theology within Christianity. The paper thus situates Marrow Island within a broader critique of Christianity's anthropomorphism and exposes the limitations of the expectations of easily integrating environmentalism within religious frameworks.

Keywords: Religion, Alexis M. Smith, Marrow Island, Eco-Theology, Anthropocentrism, Nature, Environmentalism

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. INTERSECTING RELIGION, ENVIRONMENT, AND CHRISTIAN ECO-THEOLOGY IN MARROW ISLAND

Every religion presupposes that its believers possess a common spiritual foundation and that all aspects of spirituality within that religion, such as rituals, are conditioned by set rules that define conduct, behaviour, relationships and the treatment of non-believers and nature. Judeo-Christianity supposes a connection between mankind and God, therefore explicitly stating a natural hierarchy where man is more significant than all non-human entities that reside upon the earth. Judeo-Christian theology concentrates on man and his relationship with God and

organised religion subscribes to this notion of the singularity of the male God who has sanctioned man's dominance upon earth.

While mainstream Judeo-Christianity has not isolated itself from the problems of environmental degradation and acknowledges the severity of the current ecological crisis, the gap between humans and the rest of creation cannot be easily bridged due to the very nature of theology. As with other patriarchal systems and movements like capitalism and colonialism, religion has also defined nature in human terms. In Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (New International Version). The idea that man is central and everything else is secondary is propagated easily by Judeo-Christianity and readily finds a place in the structures of politics, society and economics. When it comes to the environment, while Judeo-Christianity has never proposed the destructive pattern of human domination over nature, it has historically never actively propagated the spiritual and ecological importance of the natural world. Nature is secondary to humanity.

In his essay titled "Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", historian [White \(1967\)](#) emphasises that the anthropocentric nature of Christianity is responsible for many of the planet's ecological problems, stating that Christianity, "not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (p. 1205). Historically, Christianity has failed to address its lack of environmental consciousness and, consequently, environmental issues, which [McFague \(2000\)](#) identifies as stemming from "centuries of indifference, ignorance and destruction of nature" (p. 39). Leonard Boff also states that the Church tends to "leave the universe, nature, and daily life outside the realm of spiritual existence" (p. 189). The exploration of the interrelation of Christian worldviews and the human domination of nature has led to widespread reflections on Christian responses to the current ecological crisis. Such reflections are articulated in the theological movement of Christian eco-theology, which [Bredal-Tomren \(2023\)](#) identifies as "theology developed to motivate religious individuals and institutions to engage in ecological sustainability" (p. 2). In simple terms, eco-theology explores the relationship between religion and environmentalism.

Alexis M. Smith's Marrow Island is analysed for its suggestion of an eco-theological Christian vision through Sister J's environmental activism and for its portrayal of how the position of nature as a category outside the realm of Christian spirituality complicates the eco-theological approach to environmentalism. In the novel, traditional Christianity, represented by the Diocese, is indifferent towards the plight of nature. Sister J refuses this complacency and leads a radical environmental movement within the Church. She recruits scientists, invites volunteers and activists and even harbours radical environmentalists hiding from the FBI and begins an off-the-grid conservation movement on Marrow Island. She faces backlash from her Diocese because the religious authority disapproves of her radical ideas towards environmental conservation and does not want to integrate environmentalism as a religious duty. Sister J arrives on Marrow Island and begins her "earth ministry" outside the mandates of organised religion ([Smith \(2016\)](#), p. 108). For Sister J, her work on the island is a "higher calling to minister to the earth, not men" (p. 108).

The ArPac Refinery explosion of 1993 decimated Marrow Island where the petroleum refinery was situated and the surrounding areas. The leaked petroleum, the fires that burnt for days, and the flame retardants and oil-dispersing chemicals used in the clean-up toxified the soil and groundwater. Lucie remembers:

there were more dead shorebirds than I had ever seen, cast among the jagged hulls of small boats, rope and fishing gear, fish and crabs trapped and suffocated or starved in the mesh. We had pulled our shirts over our noses to filter the air, thick with sea rot and animal rot, mixed with the eye-glazing fumes of the chemical dispersants they had eventually used on the oil slicks around Marrow. Everything had an oily gloss, a sheen like a puddle in a gas station parking lot. (Smith (2016), p. 35)

The damage done to the land and water is so severe that ArPac's clean-up measures prove futile, and the reparation efforts are abandoned. The abandonment of the island highlights capitalism's utilitarian treatment of land and nature, as ArPac can relinquish the culpability of the eco-catastrophe. Even homeowners and locals who had lived in the area for years abandoned Marrow Island to its fate. Sister J arrives on the island when it is in this vulnerable state, gathers like-minded individuals and establishes the Colony, whose sole mission is the "resurrection" of the island (Smith (2016), p. 144). In 2014, when Lucie arrives on the island after ten years away, she learns that the Colony has managed to remediate the soil in a small portion of the island. The once-dead Marrow Island now supports a community of humans who farm the earth and eat its produce. Even wildlife begins to return to the island, harkening to the potential of the recovery of Marrow Island's biosphere.

In referring to the remediation of the island as a resurrection, Sister J appropriates the resurrection of Christ, a central doctrine of Christianity which marks Christian victory over sin and death, thus equating the resurrection of the island as an act akin to attaining salvation. This blending of Christian doctrine and ecological concerns transforms resurrection from a profound Christian symbol to a metaphor for a lived, experienced spirituality. She tells Lucie, "The island sustains us as we have sustained it", metaphorising the earth as a living entity (Smith (2016), p. 135). Sister J's estimation of the island is distanced from the traditional Biblical estimation of the earth as an inferior realm which is associated with sin. In the Genesis 3:17, God tells Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life" (New International Version). The traditional Christian estimation of nature differs from other religious systems, such as the Sanskrit philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam which Dwivedi and Reid (2007) understand as "the family of Mother Earth" where "every entity and organism is a part of one large extended family presided over by the eternal Mother Earth" (p. 307). Sister J does not present the earth as othered and alienated from human beings but as essential for human survival. There is a reciprocal relationship between the island and the humans who live on the island, and her comment on the island and the Colony sustaining each other highlights not just mutual dependence but also mutual destruction.

2. ANTHROPOCENTRIC TENSION IN THE COLONY'S ECO-THEOLOGY

The Colony on Marrow Island lives off the grid and sustains itself off the land, engaged in a symbiotic relationship with the land and more specifically, with the mushrooms they cultivate. The community revolves its ecological aims around the study and cultivation of various strains of mushrooms that they refer to as miracle workers. Troster (2013) writes that eco-theology can be seen as a continuation of

"New scientific perspectives of the natural world that have developed over the last several centuries. This new knowledge, especially from the sciences of

cosmology, biology, genetics, ecology, and evolution, has radically altered our understanding of the human relationship to the natural world." (p. 383)

His comment highlights the inseparability of eco-theology from ecocritical perspectives, thereby arguing for Christian perspectives on nature and environmentalism that integrate discourses from sciences. As part of the spiritual mission to remediate Marrow Island, Sister J and the Colony employ the scientific practice of mycoremediation, which utilises the properties of fungi to absorb and degrade pollutants and toxins. As stated earlier, Sister J posits the life-sustaining properties of the land as part of a reciprocal symbiotic relationship with human beings. She thus acknowledges the role that humans have had to play in preserving the island. The island's ability to sustain humans is directly linked to the fungi that the humans have introduced to the island, which over years of the mycoremediation process have formed a web of "threaded white mass" that runs under the soil of the island [Smith \(2016\)](#), p. 47. Therefore, when Sister J declares, "We are living a resurrection!" (p. 144) as she refers to the regeneration of the plants and wildlife on the island, she credits this resurrection to the Colony's labour in rehabilitating the earth's regenerative capacities.

Herein lies a problem with Sister J's eco-theology as it cannot be distanced from the anthropomorphic hierarchy in which humans are placed at the top in terms of their relationship with God. [Deane-Drummond \(2008\)](#) writes, "The rise of religious environmentalism in particular adds its own voice to debate, for it seeks to trace the malaise of environmental decay as rooted in spiritual issues, along with its potential solution to environmental understanding" (p. ix). This understanding highlights the disharmony between theology and the position of nature, as nature has been portrayed as a category subject to human domination in the Christian tradition. Eco-theology thus not only reflects human responsibility towards the environment but also calls for the reformation of Christianity around the estimation and treatment of nature.

In Genesis 1: 28, God says to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (New International Version). The Bible thus privileges humans over other creatures, even granting them power over the earth and its creatures. Sister J appropriates the privileged status accorded by religion to man and positions humans as stewards tasked with the duty of caring for the Earth. The act of stewardship of God's creation appears on the surface to be a well-intentioned eco-theological attempt towards environmentalism but is problematic when it does not address human complicity in the ecological devastation of nature. James Lovelock starkly describes the Christian model of stewardship concept as "sheer hubris" [Moore \(2005\)](#). He further comments. "We are no more qualified to be stewards or developers of the Earth than are goats to be gardeners" [Tickell \(2006\)](#), p. 225. The idea of stewardship presupposes a hierarchical relationship with God in which humans are given the charge of caring for or improving the condition of nature, thus positioning nature as passive and inferior to human beings.

Sister J tells Lucie that suffering, sickness and even death, if encountered during the stewardship of the earth, should be embraced: "What if we choose to take great risks so that others can continue to live in the world and have relationships with each other?" [Smith \(2016\)](#), p. 135. Sister J's altruistic approach towards stewardship necessitates suffering and she associates the suffering of the members of the Colony with martyrdom. This is highly problematic as the "risks" she alludes to are cancers, infertility and miscarriages that the Colony members suffer from due to their

prolonged exposure to the toxicity of the island. They also do not avail medical intervention due to the Colony's seclusion and rely on mushroom and herbal concoctions due to their belief in the purity of the island and its produce. There is a sinisterness in how she nonchalantly disregards the fact that the members of the Colony are dying. The women suffer countless miscarriages, and a section of the graveyard is dedicated to babies, serving a farm to grow a peculiar type of mushroom the colony cultivates. Sister J's egalitarian, nature-oriented society effectively cultivates dead fetuses from its female members to sustain its eco-centric ways.

Another aspect of Sister J's eco-theology that the novel addresses is the lack of rituals within the Christian tradition that are nature oriented. Sister J declares that environmentalism is a Christian duty but does not rely on Biblical discourse or approaches in her sermons, rituals and efforts towards this Christian duty. Her sermons are not from the Bible; instead, she derives her teachings from nature. Rituals of death are distanced from sacraments and mimic pre-Christian pagan rituals. The Final Sacrament in the Catholic tradition is replaced with the consumption of psychedelic mushrooms. After Marrow Island is shut down, Sister J spends the remainder of her life with the Sisters of the Holy Family that she had once left. Before Father Peter can perform the final rites before her death, she secretly consumes the psychedelic mushroom with Lucie's aid and commits suicide. Lucie recalls Kate telling her: "Mycelium takes everything we give it and transforms death into life. It communicates directly with the soul of every living thing that touches it" [Smith \(2016\)](#), p. 47.

There is also no Christian ceremony associated with funerals on the island. Bodies are wrapped in shrouds and laid on a bed of sawdust in a grave, essentially preparing them to feed the mushrooms. Final offerings of shells, lichen and flowers are scattered on the body until it is covered almost entirely. "No one spoke, not even Sister. Only the tokens placed lovingly around her, the prayer was the act itself. Then each bowed a head to the dead woman. There was no song, no prayer" ([Smith \(2016\)](#), pp. 173-74). There is no conventional Christian prayer on Marrow Island. The Colony does not direct daily morning prayers to God; instead, they engage in "work prayer", a silent personal meditation as an individual performs daily chores. Katie tells Lucie that the idea of the work prayer "is that we let our bodies move in the world before our minds get caught up in analysing everything (p. 75). Work prayer replaces the primacy of God in prayer with the primacy of human interaction with the world and the daily acts that humans perform as creatures on the island. Furthermore, work prayer prioritises the physical body and physical labour over the soul and intelligence, thus refuting the elevation of culture over nature.

On the occasion of the harvest supper, Sister J welcomes the Colony members who have gathered "once again under a harvest moon, on our great green island" [Smith \(2016\)](#), p. 141 and speaks of the blessing of finding herself "among the creatures-one of the creatures of this island, our island, this Earth" (p. 142). In her speech, Sister J. encapsulates the problem of the Colony and its ideals. Marrow is at once "this island" and "our island". The earth is a living entity on its own, yet at the same time a possession of the humans who sustain it. The members of the commune are unable to effectively dislodge the idea that it is man who exerts control over nature, and this is where their attempts towards a utopia fail. In their stubborn and dangerous desires to run Marrow Island as they deem fit and the unethical means they adopt to keep their secrets, the island devolves into a dangerous dystopian landscape where the mycelium demands bodies to feast on. Sister J. hints at the slow

deaths of the Colony when she says, "Death waits. Death watches. Death sings from the branches while we work, lifts our unknowing souls, calls us to fly" (p. 144).

3. CONCLUSION

What occurs on Marrow Island is the forced amalgamation of anthropomorphic religion and nature-oriented spirituality. The Colony attempts to negotiate eco-spirituality with the imposing tenets of Christian tradition which does not make space for nature at its centre. Despite the attempts upon the island to establish an eco-utopia, the conventions of religion complicate the coming together of radical environmentalism and dynamic, evolving Christianity, both of which are individually threatening to religious male authority. Despite modern religion's apparent profundity to environmentalism, the centre still cannot make space for nature. The creation of a utopian universe with human beings dedicated to rectifying injustices committed to the environment eventually morphs into a secretive cult with a limited range of power. In the creation and downfall of this utopian universe, one can also see the story of the failure of eco-theological principles within a religious tradition that does not make space in the centre for nature.

Alexis M. Smith's Marrow Island offers an exploration of the tensions, potentials and limitations of eco-theology as a transformative power in Christianity. The novel proposes an alternative eco-spiritual Christianity but problematises it by revealing how eco-centric Christian visions struggle to negotiate with theological hierarchies that legitimise human domination over nature. By exposing these contradictions, the study of Marrow Island joins broader discussions on the viability of eco-theology within institutional and organised Christianity. While the novel acknowledges the positive impact of eco-theology, it reveals the difficulties in implementing eco-centric values, thereby urging for the reimagining of the relationships between faith and the environment over the simple adoption of alternative models that do not rework traditional hierarchies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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