

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Original Sin and Fossil Fuel Industry Spin

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Abstract

My aim in this paper is to suggest the theological concepts of sin and evil as the most appropriate forms of language available to the church, and the most powerful, in addressing human-induced climate change. As we witness the planet being convulsed by the reckless use of fossil fuel, and its increasingly irreversible damage to the Earth System, the church is called to name the responsibility and sinful culpability of those who wilfully imperil life to satisfy their greed. I will deploy the Serpent in Genesis 3 to provide a biblical motif to connect the theological language of sin and evil with the “merchants of doubt” serving the fossil fuel industry. They are deeply implicated in the harm being wrought upon creation by human-induced climate change. Only in correctly naming the sinfulness of these powers theologically is the church fulfilling its prophetic calling.

Keywords

sin, evil, fossil fuel, serpent, climate change, creation, theology

*A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil.
A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.*
— Luther (1518)

Australian Flames

In my own context, the Australian landscape has experienced heat and fire every summer for millennia. The indigenous peoples of the continent used fire to care for the land for tens of thousands of years. Their knowledge of the vegetation, and of the movements and habitats of its animals, is so vast they have always used fire selectively, intermittently, to rejuvenate its landscapes. Now, however, the Australian landscape is not rejuvenated by controlled burning; it is scorched and terrorised by heat and fire every summer.

¹ This article is an expanded version of a public lecture delivered by its author at Pacific Theological College in Suva on the 2nd of May, 2024.

The year 2020 was the beginning of a new era in the long history of fire on the continent. That summer, millions of hectares of land were devastated, hundreds of homes were burned to the ground, unknown numbers of animals were cremated, human lives were lost, and the skylines of smoke, cloud, and flames were apocalyptic. The military was deployed to manage mass evacuations to secure people from the blazing enormity of the fire emergency. In some settings, entire coastal townships had no way to escape the raging flames other than by retreating to the ocean shore, where they sheltered for days until collected by the Australian Navy. The climate is changing before our eyes.

The Anthropocene

These Australian infernos are just one aspect of a global drama impacting, especially, so many people in the Global South. That global drama looms as a play that may end in tragedy. Just like a human finger that bumps a spinning top from its perfect rhythm so that the spinning toy wobbles out-of-balance before either finding a new equilibrium or collapsing and stopping altogether, the Earth System is being bumped into a new Epoch, and the hand of humanity is doing it. The Australian ethicist Clive Hamilton has summarised this emerging shift from the Holocene to what is being forecast as the Anthropocene Epoch:

Paleo-climate records show an Earth history punctuated by periods of dramatic change ... This often-violent geological history stretching back to the planet's formation 4.5 billion years ago has been the product of the blind forces of nature, ranging from solar fluxes, volcanism and weathering to subduction and asteroid strikes. Yet in the few years after the Second World War, something almost inconceivable happened. A conscious, willing, decision making 'force of nature' began actively changing the functioning of the Earth System as a whole, so much so that a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, is expected to be added to the Geological Time Scale to supersede the Holocene. (2018, 1)

We humans are that decision-making force of nature, the force that is changing the functioning of the Earth System as a whole. Earth System Science, a discipline born late in the twentieth century, asks us to complement our localised, contextual ideas of the environment and understand, as well, that the Earth is "a single, dynamic, integrated and ever-changing reality" (Hamilton 2018, 1). Planet Earth in its entirety is a calibrated, finely tuned system, which we may (and must) consider *en globo*, and upon this integrated planet there is one species that has irreversibly damaged the whole system. There is one species—and particularly the privileged among that species—that has now made the planet serve its needs to the extent that the cost to the whole Earth System has become intolerable. That species, *Homo sapiens*, is now impacting the Earth System in ways comparable to the way asteroids, volcanoes, and solar fluxes had previously impacted in the paleo-climate record. One species is now a force of nature rivalling the very forces of the Earth itself.

Disrupting Carbon

Human impact on the Earth System is caused primarily by our disruption of an enormous amount of carbon from its settled state within the Earth and our relocation of that carbon into the atmosphere above the planet. The process is profoundly unnatural and yet has become second nature in the Global North (in particular) for over two hundred years. Oil and coal (liquid and solid carbon) are pulled from the Earth and burned in engines and smelters to fuel the activity of industry.

Because of this process, the previously unharmed carbon in the soil below is turned into harmful carbon dioxide in the sky above. A layer of carbon dioxide has been placed around the planet that is creating a greenhouse-like effect. Heat is held within the Earth's atmosphere, unable to escape the carbon layer, and the

planet's temperatures have risen, and continue to rise. As temperatures rise, one consequence is the melting of the polar ice caps and sea level rise. Another is that land and trees become tinder-dry sources of fuel. A bushfire in Australia, for example, is now as close as one cigarette thrown into the bush from a car window.

The overwhelming majority of scientific research concluded long ago that these changes to the Earth System are predominantly the work of the industrial economies of the Global North. The evidence that the greed and wilful negligence of human beings are the significant factors behind rising temperatures has had the near-unanimous support of climate scientists for decades. Early in his book *Political Theology of Climate Change*, under the sub-heading "A Slow Catastrophe," Michael Northcott points out that the link between rising temperatures and rising human emissions of carbon dioxide was first accurately modelled as long ago as 1975.

There are now four Global Circulation Models run by supercomputers belonging to the U.S. and U.K. governments. According to their modelling, rising greenhouse gas emissions may see global temperatures rise by 4 to 7 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by the end of the twenty-first century (Northcott 2014, 4). The U.K. Meteorological Office has published a projected map of a four-degree warmer planet. It shows that three quarters of the Earth's land area will be unsuitable for food growing or secure human settlement in a four-degree warmer world, including most of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific (Northcott 2014).

This is Not a Scientific Debate

The abuse of the Earth emanating from industry in the Global North has been sitting in plain sight for decades for all to see. In 2004, a literature review of the esteemed journal *Science* found that precisely none of the 928 peer-reviewed articles it had carried on the general topic of "global climate change" had disputed the reality of human-induced global warming (cited in McIntyre 2015, 72). A recent global poll of all known university faculty working in climate science or a closely related discipline found that 96% agreed that global warming is real and 97% agreed that the main contributing factor was human activity (McIntyre 2015, 72).

Among the most confounding things of all is the fact that the debate about climate change is not a scientific debate. The science was settled long ago. Climate change has been, however, a deeply polarising *political* debate. To give one example from my context, climate change has been a deeply contentious and partisan political issue in the world's largest per capita emitter of carbon dioxide, which is Australia. Why did the near unanimity of the scientific community about the causes of climate change become confused in the political and public arena in places like Australia and the United States (which is the second largest emitter)? How did the reality of human induced climate change become contested ground?

Merchants of Doubt

The story of the strategic attack on scientific knowledge in the public arena, of the attempt to confuse truth and create doubt in the public mind about climate change, is forensically explored by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway in *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (2011). They reveal how ExxonMobil and other corporations funded selected think-tanks which then hired their own experts to challenge scientists in the public domain, especially in the popular press. In a transparent strategy of placing profit before truth, climate change was portrayed as just a *theory* by these "experts." Therefore, they argued, no changes to energy policy should be entertained while the science was still in doubt.

The apparently shameless Heartland Institute is one case study. While working with the cigarette manufacturing corporation Phillip Morris in the 1990s to raise doubt over whether passive smoking caused lung cancer, they followed a playbook called “manufacturing uncertainty” (McIntyre 2015, 75). A leaked company memo from that time reveals the strategy. “Doubt is our product, since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the mind of the general public” (McIntyre 2015, 75).

By 2012, the Heartland Institute’s self-professed primary agenda was to apply that playbook to raise doubt about whether global warming is true. The *New York Times* reported that Heartland’s strategy was focused on “... undermining the teaching of global warming in public schools [and promoting] a curriculum that would cast doubt on the scientific finding that fossil fuel emissions endanger the long-term welfare of the planet” (McIntyre 2015, 76). Tragically, this strategy of challenging knowledge, not by countering it with scientifically based arguments but simply by manufacturing doubt, has worked. The merchants of doubt are the reason why the clarity and near unanimity over climate change in the scientific domain became confusion and contested ground in the political domain.

Resurrecting Sin

It is time to draw theology into this conversation. The concept of sin is disappearing from public discourse. Discussion of sin has been moved to the private sphere where, even in the domain of Church and personal faith, it continues to fade (McFadyen 2000). In fact, broadly speaking, we seem to be setting aside the language of theology for other forms of discourse, such as therapy, in an attempt to present Christian beliefs within more widely accessible concepts and language (Farudi 2004). I agree with Ernst Conradie that the climate emergency is a time for Church leaders and theologians to resurrect the language of theology and, in particular, the concept of sin to arrest attention about what is going wrong in creation and to provoke conversion: a metanoia, a turning-in-our-tracks.

The famous twentieth century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that the “Christian view of human nature is involved in the paradox of claiming a higher stature for human beings and of taking a more serious view of their evil than any other anthropology” (Niebuhr 1941, 18). What did Niebuhr mean? Principally, he meant that Christian theology finds human beings a confounding contradiction. We are the likeness of the Creator, according to the Book of Genesis (Genesis 1:27), and yet personally and corporately we are characterised by selfishness, disunity, and brutality.

Famous Christian thinkers like the apostle Paul, Augustine of Hippo, and Martin Luther all wrestled with this contradiction, with such utter seriousness that we can only conclude that they saw it as a great fault line in the Christian message. How is it that human beings are capable of inspiring goodness as well as appalling cruelty? The doctrine of sin is the way in which Christian theology seeks to address this unsettling mystery.

The essential goodness of human beings is theologically tied to the concept of the *imago Dei*: that we have been set within creation as a reflection, icon, or image of God. It is the burden of the doctrine of sin to explain why that image has been fractured—why human history and behaviour have consistently presented a dark contradiction to belief that we reflect God within creation. It is important to say that the depth of the Christian concept of sin is not reached if sin is understood only as a violation of moral codes. Rather, we are nearer to reaching an understanding of sin when sinfulness is viewed as a condition. Our acts of selfishness and violence are the outward sign of a greater problem.

That problem has been framed by theologians in various ways, yet most of those framings have their source in a common biblical story in early Genesis portraying our alienation and dislocation from God, from one another, and from the rest of the creation (Hall 1996). These are relational concepts. That relational state of alienation from God, one another, and creation is the condition of sin; damaging actions are its symptoms. To speak of the damage we do to others, to creation, and to ourselves as sin is for Christian theology a claim that “the essential character and defining characteristic of such pathology, however else it may be described and identified in non-theological languages, is theological: the disruption of our proper relation to God” (McFadyen 2000, 4–5).

“Original” Sin

Chapter three of the book of Genesis narrates this disruption between God and the first humans as a falling-out that is a consequence of the intervention of a wily Serpent. That story in Genesis 3 is the source of a well-known yet not well understood theory about the failure of human beings to live up to our stature as the image of God within creation: the doctrine of original sin. The doctrine of original sin, which has its origins in the work of Augustine and holds a significant position in the history of Western Christianity, does not stand up to scientific scrutiny, and becomes fragile under sustained theological scrutiny. It proposes that sin is an inherited condition of guilt for which we will be judged, a stain passed from generation to generation which had its source in one *original* sin in the biblical Garden.

While I am not inclined to support Augustine’s formula, it is intriguing that if human sin is understood as an inherited condition of alienation from God and from creation, and is understood as a condition of our species that is passed from one generation to another whether we like it or not, it may still have some meaning when speaking about what has gone wrong in this climate emergency, and why it has gone wrong. If theological language is found to speak of human beings as inheritors of this broken state, which we in turn perpetuate, it might become meaningful in a fresh way. If this “original sin” is described not as a guilt communicated to us from the first humans, as if it were part of our genetic coding, but as a set of fractured relations within creation that we inherit at birth, which radically and universally afflict our species and the planet, it can hold explanatory power for us today when discussing human-induced climate change. As anachronistic as the language of Christian theology may seem, this climate emergency may well be the time to resurrect the language of sin.

Original S(p)in

Turning to the Serpent in Genesis 3, this verse is of particular interest: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, You shall not eat from any tree in the Garden?’” (Genesis 3:1). The early chapters of Genesis focus on human beings as both “the glory and the central problem of creation” (Brueggemann 1982, 40). Daniel Castillo summarises them as follows: “If Genesis 2 describes an idyllic situation in which all things are ordered by and held together in accordance with the wisdom of God, then Genesis 3 narrates the manner in which all things fall apart” (2019, 76).

Interesting work has been done on connecting this myth of humanity’s origin to the present climate crisis. Intriguingly, some of that work highlights how Adam and Eve first appear in the Genesis narrative as forest-dwelling gatherers of fruit and nuts, whereas their exile from Eden, which is understood to be a consequence of their sin, requires that they raise their food thereafter by the back-breaking methods of

agriculture. In that reading, the Genesis story is a mythical portrayal of humanity's transition from hunters and gatherers to agricultural labourers. Humanity's transition to agricultural modes of production becomes the source of our alienation from nature, and of nature's subordination to our needs. As interesting as that may be, there is an even more telling aspect as we consider the climate emergency.

Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel all carry substantial symbolic meaning within the Genesis narrative. Adam and Eve represent the significance to God of humanity's place in creation, their son Cain murdering their other son Abel with an agricultural implement soon after God evicts the primal family from the pristine garden. Yet the character of greatest interest to me is the Serpent. The Serpent makes its mark in Genesis 3:1–7, a handful of verses interpreted by some as an explanation for how evil came into world, often described as “the Fall.” While that interpretation is simplistic, chapters two and three of Genesis certainly do present themselves as ancient Israel's canonical attempt to understand humanity's determination to live in the world as if it were its own rather than God's. They also address the consequences of our determination to do that. The role played by the Serpent is significant and can help us to reflect on sin and evil and the fossil fuel industry's “merchants of doubt.”

In Genesis 3:1, the Serpent echoes to the woman what she has heard from God shortly beforehand, namely, “You may freely eat of any tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Genesis 2:16–17). Yet the Serpent repeats God's injunction with the inclusion of a gentle distortion. In doing so, the Serpent introduces confusion and lack of clarity regarding the point of God's speech. “*Did God say*, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” On the Serpent's tongue, what was intended as a given has now been made to appear like an option. In Brueggemann's view, “The serpent grossly misrepresents God in 3:1 and is corrected by the woman in verses 2–3. But by then the misquotation has opened up to consciousness the possibility of an alternative to the way of God. From that point on, things become distorted” (Brueggemann 1982, 48).

To be clear, the Serpent is portrayed in the Genesis narrative not as the embodiment of evil but as the one who manufactures doubt, the creator of uncertainty. The primordial couple, Adam and Eve, go along with the Serpent—knowingly, it would seem. The peaceful communion of the garden cedes to alienation and death (Casillo 2019). God's response is clear. The couple are judged and punished; they are cast out of the garden (Genesis 3:8–22). The Serpent has manufactured doubt. And it has worked. The original communion of God, humanity, and all creation is broken.

Ernst Conradie has written a fine book in which he seeks to answer the question, in light of human-induced climate change, “What has gone wrong with the world?” Answering that question is an interdisciplinary task Conradie describes as “social diagnostics.” He proposes that the Christian language of sin has an important contribution to make to this inter-disciplinary work:

The core intuition of this proposal is that Christian discourse on sin may contribute to the collaborative task of what I call ‘social diagnostics.’ My agenda is to address the colloquial yet dangerous question: What has gone wrong with the world? Indeed, what on earth is wrong with us humans that we are destroying our own home (oikos)? ... This is not only an ecological problem, but also a moral and a spiritual problem. (Conradie 2017, xii)

For Conradie, despite the strangeness of this language, the Church and its theologians should “redeem sin” (hence his title) as public discourse (2017, xxii). Conradie argues that “the Christian tradition

has developed a remarkably sophisticated and diverse pastoral and prophetic vocabulary to name sin,” and some of that vocabulary still cuts through (2017, 232). He also adds,

Further, through a prophetic impulse that has been yoked to the naming of sin and evil, the Jewish-Christian tradition has “helped set a standard of ‘speaking truth to power’ by putting (not pointing) the finger where it really hurts. The courage that this demands is only possible when evil is recognized, named, and exorcised. (2017, 232)

Conradie concludes that there is only one thing worse and more dishonest than making an unsolicited contribution to the collaborative task of social diagnostics, “and that is failing to make such a contribution when it is required” (2017, 231).

Conclusion: Name the Serpents

The first article of the Apostle’s Creed reads, “I believe in God, the Father almighty, the creator of heaven and earth.” That ancient affirmation is a confession of the Church’s faith that the Earth and all life within it belong to God. In light of that confession, and centuries of Christian proclamation about the nature of sin, any abuse of the Earth must surely be named as sinful—the abuse carried out by the decision-making force of nature, *homo sapiens*, which is taking such a massive toll on the planet.

Further, where merchants of doubt wilfully create confusion about what is happening to creation to serve the greed of the fossil fuel industry, then surely that must be named as evil. Those who are manufacturing doubt about our impact on the Earth have done so to ensure that an extractive, abusive, and sinful relationship with creation may continue unchecked. This planet abuse has seen the extinction of an unimaginable variety of animal and plant species and now threatens the survival of our own species. Creation, or rather one species within creation, is displacing the Lord named in the Apostle’s Creed and asserting itself as the Lord of all.

There was speculation in early 2020 about whether Pope Francis might name humanity’s abuse of the Earth as sinful in his much-anticipated statement on the plight of the Amazon and of the Church in that region. He did not. *Querida Amazonia* (Beloved Amazon) was released in February 2020. It is a splendid document in almost every regard. Pope Francis denounced the unrestrained development taking place around the Amazon and the destruction of that most critical of the Earth’s forests. He wrote: “The businesses, national or international, which harm the Amazon and fail to respect the right of the original peoples to the land and its boundaries, and to self-determination and prior consent, should be called for what they are: injustice and crime” (cited in Roere 2000).

The language of injustice and crime used by Pope Francis is powerful. However, it is not the most inherently powerful language available to the church. The most powerful language available to the church is the language of theology. And so, while I have admiration for the Pope’s statements in *Querida Amazonia*, it is surely past the time now to name the abuse of the Earth as a *sin*. Furthermore, the confusion of scientific evidence and the wilful manufacturing of uncertainty about what the industries of the Global North have done to God’s good creation, and continue to do, is *evil*. The serpents should be named.

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- All Bible quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV).