

Response to Noah Toly: “The Macondoization of the World: Global Environmental Governance and Christian Ethics”

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With enlivening literary range (from Greek tragedy to magical realism), Noah Toly’s essay makes two basic connections between religious thought and environmental governance that together have the potential to transform work in both fields. I will suggest that “Macondoization” is a misleading metaphor for cultivating that work and that Toly’s strategy of religious imagination obscures some of the dynamics of social power that he wants to address. However, I want first to explain the transformative potential in Toly’s way of connecting Christian ethics and environmental governance.

Environmental governance discussions often overlook religion, despite the return of religion to political science and the emergence of the field of religion and ecology. There are several plausible reasons for the omission. While its science-shaped intellectual culture is comfortable with ecological complexity, it still struggles to think cultural complexity. Despite high-profile calls for renewed engagements of science and religion for the sake of sustainability, governance discussions struggle to get beyond merely acknowledging the importance of religious constituencies. “Global” arenas of discussion seem unnerved when religious communities enter with strong claims about justice framed in particularist narratives. (Witness the awkwardness of global climate negotiations in receiving indigenous peoples’ condemnations of climate injustice framed within *Pachamama* cosmologies.) Environmental pragmatists, including some post-environmentalists mentioned by Toly, often support problem-based governance processes by dismissing ‘radical’ and ‘ontological’ environmental frames, which would seem to include many religious ones.

By outlining several important roles for religious imaginations and communities of faith in responding to systematic productions of risk, Toly shows that the absence of religion in global governance conversations jeopardizes their social range and calls into question their ability to interact with cultural messiness and plurality. At stake is how the *anthropos* of the anthropocene will be understood, and whether the diversity, creativity, and imagination of its religious habitats will show up in questions of planetary power. Will environmental governance for the anthropocene era happen in a thickly anthropological world?

The second basic connection pursued by Toly would increase the ability of religionists to engage that question. Toly calls for Christian ethics to engage the economic tradeoffs, social risks, and ambiguous politics involved in confronting a problem like climate change. Against a tendency of religionists to treat global environmental problems as manifestations of worldview dysfunction, which allows them to avoid reckoning with the particular features of particular problems, Toly wants Christians to develop concrete initiatives of responsibility as part of their imitation of Christ. In a nice pivot toward theological realism from post-environmentalist governance and the imaginative style of Gabriel Garcia-Marquez, Toly calls for a “tragic realism” that recognizes uncertainty and scarcity.

Those two connections have the potential to transform interdisciplinary understanding of environmental problems. However, Toly’s title metaphor could misdirect those connections in subtly dangerous ways. “Macondoization” exploits a double reference to the explosion of

the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig over the Macondo Well in the Gulf of Mexico and the city of the same name in Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (for which the well was named). Toly's riff on the ironies is worth the read but I doubt whether the Gulf disaster adequately serves as synecdoche for the kind of ecological risks that Toly wants religionists to address. The Macondo disaster was fantastical: a sudden explosion caused by corporate villains with blunderingly obvious vices threatened helpless, innocent, and proximate communities. Problems like climate change or pervasive toxic exposure are not like that. At least, a significant aspect of their difficulty is that the consequences unfold slowly (in political time anyway), and then in ambiguous ways within non-linear systems. Explosions are rare, villains few, and the contributing vices are also the only options of everyday life in the North Atlantic world.

Here begin the subtle dangers. Toly makes Macondo stand for the systematic production of risk and its unjust distribution. In problems like climate change and toxic exposure, however, power and violence must be thought as functions of socio-environmental systems that also sustain human (and much other) life. As philosophers like Iris Marion Young and Stephen Gardiner have argued, inherited ideas of liability and malevolence seems less relevant for shaping responsibility for such problems than do tactical accommodations of perverse outcomes and conceptual incompetence. Tragically realist engagement with problems like climate change must then start from that predicament: moral incompetence to deal with overwhelming problems.

How religionists respond to moral incompetence models how they think cultural imaginations adapt to problems and powers that seem to overwhelm inherited capacities of responsibility. Toly follows the moves of William Schweiker, who attempts to extend cultural capacities of responsibility by developing religious symbols that can interpret anthropocene powers. That strategy, I worry, seems to imply that North Atlantic religious theorists should take the lead in answering perils produced by the ways of life they inhabit by reconfiguring symbolic worldviews. Offering a "cruciform imaginary" may then imply the mandate of North American elites to keep guiding global dynamics. That confidence shows up in Toly's call for "us" (U.S. Christians?) to undertake Dietrich Bonhoeffer's call for "vicarious representative action" on behalf of the world. Now Toly does not intend for the cross to become a warrant authorizing U.S. responsibility for terraform power. Neither does he say, however, that the cross summons theology to arise from the places that power is suffered or in the practices through its meaning is already borne and transformed. Bonhoeffer said something like that, as do contemporary theologians from the Global South working on climate change.

So what sort of theological productions bear the most fitting response to "the systematic production of peril as incidental to the production of wealth, power, and control"? Climate change and other problems of systemic risk, it seems to me, should engender a more troubled hesitation within religious communities. Theologians should not be afraid to doubt the present moral competency of their communities and traditions. That sort of moral uncertainty can drive ongoing moral learning from problems that involve non-linear feedback and long-term risks. It can also push communities to develop relations of moral inquiry across the geopolitical and moral borders that alienate current political debates. What global governance projects most need to learn from religionists is how to learn responsibility for planetary powers within conditions of cultural complexity, moral uncertainty and

religious plurality. Religionists, and maybe theologians especially, invite that sort of learning by cultivating the cross-border communities and practical relations within which it can happen.