

11 Religion and cosmivisions within environmental conflicts and the challenge of ontological openings

Eduardo Gudynas

In Latin America, debates over development and the environment have taken on increased importance in the context of many recent political and cultural shifts. The most well-known manifestation of these debates are the conflicts surrounding issues such as the contamination created by surface mining and the loss of natural habitats at the hands of advancing agroindustry. An initial glance at these debates reveals their main themes as revolving around ecological, social, political, and economic issues. However, more rigorous investigation demonstrates that in many of these cases, despite receiving less attention, religious components and, in a broader sense, various spiritual sensibilities are at play.

The aim of this chapter is to address some of these elements, motivated by the new impulse of reflections and practices promoted both by Christian churches, as in the case of Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* (2015), as well as by spiritualities based on alternate cosmivisions, as with the recognition of the rights of Nature or the concept of *Buen Vivir*.

This chapter is not intended as an exhaustive examination or overview of these topics; rather, it attempts to indicate some pertinent elements drawn from the most recent reflections in the field. Additionally, it engages in a dialogue with the other chapters in this volume, drawing on the fact that it approaches religion in a broad and plural sense, as present in spaces of "encounter and contestation about environment issues" (as Albro and Berry indicate in their introduction), and reflecting from the perspective of my personal experience with social organizations and movements in various countries.

Although environmental conflicts date back decades, they have been exacerbated by recent development strategies. They have spread and transformed on various fronts, but they continue particularly to affect the poor, whether urban populations, indigenous or peasant communities. It is clear that there is a new drive by religious figures to address these problems, but there has also been a shift in outlook that makes it possible to discover, or rediscover, other religious and spiritual stances. Their importance becomes evident in Latin America, as it is a continent where all sorts of development and political options have been tested out, making it clear that any real alternative

must work toward the deepest roots that sustain the knowledge and sensibilities of life in common and life in the environment. It is at that very level where recent practices, like those defending the rights of Nature or *Buen Vivir*, intervene.

A continued environmental crisis

Latin America, since its colonization, has been a provider of natural resources, responding to the demands of global consumption. It is for this reason that since then it has experienced the continuous loss of its natural heritage, which never lets up and occasionally reaches extreme heights, as with the saltpeter, silver, and cacao booms beginning at the end of the 19th century, and the export bonanzas of oil, copper, and various crops in the 20th.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the extraction of natural resources motivated by the high prices of commodities again reached new depths. This was driven, above all, by the push of so-called extractivism in various sectors (of minerals, hydrocarbons, and agricultural products), which set off an avalanche of environmental, territorial, and social problems (Gudynas 2015). The net export of natural resources from Latin America has been enormous, rising from 200 million metric tons per year in the 1970s to nearly 700 million metric tons by the middle of the 2000s (PNUMA 2013). It is important to point out that the annual loss of natural resources has tripled, particularly due to the export of minerals and hydrocarbons, which produced an increase in social conflicts in response to the resulting environmental effects.¹

The current situation should not lead us to imagine that this is a 21st century phenomenon. We must not forget that conflict over environmental issues has its precursors in movements analogous to today's since at least the beginning of the 20th century. The structures and dynamics of these conflicts began to change at least by the 1970s, in part due to the active participation of individuals or groups that defined themselves as "environmentalist," new uses of scientific data, growing ties with political ideologies, and attempts to create new environmental legislation. In the 1980s, this panorama became much more diverse, supported by movements that reached their heights possibly between 1989 and 1994 (more or less coinciding with the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit).

All of this has meant that the progress, the arguments, and the figures involved in these conflicts became much more complex. A number of disputes recurred, such as those over the impact of mining ventures, the deforestation of tropical forests, and the industrial contamination of cities. But approaches now differed, with local groups and contributions from NGOs and academics more aligned, technical information invoked with greater precision, and with a second generation of environmental legislation and the creation of environmental ministries now underway in various countries.

During those years, one of the important components of these processes was the religious approach to these issues, with the active participation of

Christian base communities, and with Catholic as well as Protestant theological reflection on the topic. In turn, the prevailing approach linked environmental issues with social demands, particularly those to do with poverty and racial marginalization, and human rights, especially in countries that were making the transition from military governments to democracy. (Kerber's chapter addresses several of these issues.) For reasons that cannot be analyzed in depth here, this environmental and religious momentum flagged in the mid-1990s. A secular framework seemed to grow stronger, as prominent members of neoliberal governments staked their approach on traditional religiosity. The influence of the Catholic Church waned in a number of countries, while various evangelical and Pentecostal churches gained prominence, and traditional worship practices (e.g. Umbanda in Brazil) became more widely and readily accepted (Berry and Kerber explore such processes in this volume).

Beginning in the 2000s, the extractivist drive added new conflicts to pre-existing dynamics with their own particular characteristics. This in turn occurred in a context of profound political change in a number of countries in Latin America, as with the series of so-called progressive or "New Left" governments.

On the first point, the growth in exports was based on the expansion of and emphasis upon the extractive economy. Certain undertakings, such as large-scale surface mining, oil extraction in tropical forests, and the spread of the single-crop farming of genetically modified soy, multiplied the social and ecological impacts of this expansion, which led to increased debate, popular resistance, and conflict. In addition, the extraction of resources produces accumulated effects, so that health and environmental effects became evident as time went on, even in some places where there had been no initial resistance. As a result, in recent years conflicts related to these issues have been registered in all countries, without exception.

These development strategies imply differing types of human rights violations: everything from restrictions on the rights to information, inquiry, and civic participation, to the invasion of indigenous lands, and various forms of the criminalization of protest (see, for example, the report from the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights], CIDH 2015). Extreme cases even see manifestations of violence, as with deaths during protests or the assassination of civic leaders. Indeed, a recent global assessment reveals that the greatest number of assassinations of environmental activists and of those defending the land in 2016 occurred in Brazil (49), followed by Colombia (37), and the Philippines (28), with a high proportion of indigenous deaths (Global Witness 2017). This demonstrates that a significant portion of development strategies based on the exploitation of nature make use of varying levels of violence, and thus the current ecological situation is intimately connected to the defense of the right of people.

Situations of this sort are not new. Putting aside some academics' insistence upon referring to a new phase of environmental or territorial conflict,

all of these situations have a decades-long history behind them. It is more likely that what is happening now is a shift in some academic communities, particularly in the social sciences, which are now beginning to pay attention to recent environmental conflicts.

In this situation, we can point to a return of religious figures to roles of greater prominence. A small number of people appeal to religion in defense of extractivism, as in Colombia in the conference series “Christianity and Mining,” which, with the participation of government officials and businessmen, promoted the mining industry, downplayed its impact, and cited the story of Genesis to legitimate it.²

However, the majority of interventions from the religious arena denounce the environmental and social effects of the extractive economy. They respond to various issues, such as contamination and its implications for health and quality of life – particularly among the poor – the expulsion of indigenous people and peasants from their land, and violence against local communities. In this way, a religious outlook is linked to the question of justice (see, for example, Wright 2011). There are others who combine a religious outlook with their work in human rights, as with various institutions dedicated to peace and justice.

This drive seems to be fueled by various factors. Among them Pope Francis’s recent teachings, which have further legitimated those already at work on this issue or involved with local groups. But we also see the fruits of the struggle of the many religious authorities and lay individuals who for years promoted these issues in their church communities. Many distinguished activists have their origins in ecclesiastical contexts, were seminarians or students of theology, or have participated directly in church institutions (in a situation like that which Berry describes in this volume, terming groups on the “periphery” as proximately religious). For example, the Peruvian politician Marco Arana was for many years a priest, with close ties to a civic group that confronted the mining industry in northern Peru, and he eventually drifted toward formal political engagement leading the “Tierra y Libertad – Frente Amplio” (Land and Freedom – Broad Front) party. At the same time, there are important church institutions that are involved in environmental issues – Brazil’s *Comisión Pastoral de la Tierra* (Pastoral Land Commission) particularly stands out. More recently, the Churches and Mining network has formed to attend specifically to problems originating in extractive mining.

At the same time, we should recognize changes taking place in the identity of other groups. If there is indeed persistent secularization in many civic activist circles, there is, on the other hand, greater respect for what we might call a spiritual stance and even attempts to incorporate religion into activist doctrine. There is increasing consensus that the current situation is incredibly serious, that it cannot be solved only through better public management or more advanced technology, and that radical changes in ethics and spirituality are essential.

Values and spiritualities

Environmental conflicts have been especially powerful in their ability to generate a huge myriad of reflections, debates, and writings on the relations between humans and their surroundings. In addition, they have required us to rethink public policies and ideas about development. In any of those fields, there are always various sensibilities and ways of understanding nature, which respond to differing determinations of value.

Indeed, forms of assessment, of determining value – be it of humans or nonhumans – are the privileged means to distinguish among distinct types of religious and spiritual perspectives. The prevailing stance is anthropocentric, where only human beings possess their own values and are the only agents capable of bestowing value. In the usage I adhere to in this chapter, this tendency corresponds to a certain ethical stance (understood as positions on what value is, how it is recognized and assigned, and what possesses it), and from which moral positions are derived. Therefore, there may be an extreme anthropocentrism, with a utilitarian view of Nature, from which various moralities could be derived, ranging from indifference to other living beings to compassion or benevolence toward them.

In effect, from an anthropocentric viewpoint, one can value, let us say, a forest, on the basis of an economic assessment (the money that can be obtained by selling wood), an aesthetic stance (the beauty of the landscape in the eyes of some), or even an ecological standpoint (the diversity of species recognized by an ecologist).

There exist varying tendencies within anthropocentrism. The prevailing ones conceive of the environment as merely a basket of resources that should be exploited, and there lies the source of many conflicts in the face of current extractivist activity. Others, however, propose a sustainable use of flora and fauna, following the recommendations of ecologists, and there may indeed be those who wish to protect certain sites due to their beauty. There are even those who defend environmental justice from an anthropocentric viewpoint, correctly grasping that there can be no good quality of life for humans if the environment in which they live is contaminated.

It is important to keep this diversity of meanings of anthropocentrism in mind since within it lie varying religious positions with distinct views on rights and justice (for example, Wright 2011). And their effectiveness in handling social and environmental emergencies varies widely. There are some anthropocentrisms that are more defensive and hermetic, and others that offer greater opportunities for dialogue with non-anthropocentric positions that, as we will see later, appear time and again in Latin American environmental conflicts.

With this in mind, we can understand how the so-called Aparecida Document produced by Latin American bishops in 2007 (see Kerber in this volume) is at odds with, for example, an anthropocentrism that fuels a reductionist neoliberalism. The document recognizes the importance of

Latin American biodiversity and the problems facing the continent, but the viewpoints are still anthropocentric ones. The Aparecida Document highlights civil and political rights in particular, and it is in this framework that it addresses environmental questions. It echoes, for example, Benedict XVI, considering environmental devastation a threat to “human dignity,” and it reinforces the classic idea of human dominion over creation.

The 2015 papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* offers more substantive advances. It recognizes environmental issues in their own right and grants them utmost importance, valorizing and legitimizing the topic not only in a theological sense but also with scientific and wide-ranging local testimony. It cannot go unnoticed that the encyclical cites, and engages with, a hugely diverse range of sources, confessional as well as secular, from scientific authorities as well as those directly suffering from local problems. But it is also clear that *Laudato Si'* addresses the issue with a clearly humanist gaze.

We see another step being taken in those Latin American countries with environmental justice movements (such as Brazil). This perspective reveals that the poor, as well as racial or indigenous minorities, are those who suffer the greatest effects of environmental exploitation (see, for example, Caruthers 2008). This perspective also emphasizes that environmental questions are an issue of justice, thus in a way redefining it. Approaches of this sort do not appear prioritized in the Aparecida resolutions.

On the other hand, there are positions that admit values belonging to the nonhuman that are intrinsic – and independent of the presence of a person to assign them. Those are biocentric perspectives, also plural, which include some of the most recent South American innovations such as the rights of Nature and what is known as *Buen Vivir*.

Rights of nature and *Buen Vivir*

Among the several possible ways of pushing past anthropocentrism, there are differing modes leading to the recognition of values belonging to the nonhuman, which have especially been practiced in Andean countries. Following independent paths and taking advantage of a cycle of profound political changes in the mid-2000s, some biocentric perspectives managed to gain a high level of visibility in political debates in Ecuador and Bolivia. This made it possible for the new Constitution in Ecuador (approved in 2008) to recognize the right of Nature or of the Pacha Mama.³ A similar process was attempted in Bolivia but did not result in changes in the new Constitution of 2009.⁴

Recognition in the Ecuadorian case was the result of cooperation among a wide range of individuals, including some indigenous activists and intellectuals, Ecuadorian and foreign academics, and activists from social and environmental organizations. The constitutional text recognizes the nonhuman as a subject and as such bestows rights upon it. In addition, it specifies that those subjects are Nature (establishing a dialogue with modern conceptions

of the environment) or the Pacha Mama (allowing for an encounter with Andean cosmovisions relating to the land), thus permitting an intercultural dialogue (Gudynas 2014). The shift in perspective toward a biocentrism is clear, since it is understood that the nonhuman has intrinsic value independent of its utility or value to people, and that such value is not to be found in individuals but rather in species or groups of species. As such, this position differs from the classic stance on animal rights. This perspective allows for rights that unfold in parallel with the rights of humans, not as an extension of human rights. Their defense in turn requires another type of specific justice, an ecological justice that goes beyond, for example, environmental justice.

These forms of recognition bring up complex challenges for public policy, particularly environmental policy, including challenges around how they will be handled in jurisprudence and the courts (addressed in Gudynas 2014), which cannot be analyzed here. But these forms of recognition still constitute an opportunity for addressing such issues from the position of other sensibilities and stances, including spiritualities where the sense of community also includes nonhuman living beings, with practices of gratitude and reciprocity with the environment.

The recognition of the rights of Nature is additionally a key component in the perspectives known as *Buen Vivir*. This idea is discussed in detail in Albro's chapter, and here I only wish to contribute a few reflections. In its original sense, this term encompasses various cosmovisions that, on the one hand, have in common a break with various ideas of development and other precepts of modernity, and on the other, defend alternatives from other ethical positions based on groupings of humans and nonhumans with multiple relationalities, which are not essentialist in that they depend on individual social, territorial, and ecological contexts.

In varying ways in Andean countries these positions increased in complexity throughout the 1990s. In Peru, they did not manage to take concrete form, whereas in Bolivia and Ecuador they took on a high level of political prominence as ideals that sought to orient political change. Furthermore, in Ecuador's new Constitution, they achieved great elaboration and were presented as a framework with which to contain and direct development.

Buen Vivir is a category in progress that represents a heterodox blend: it includes a number of components belonging to some indigenous peoples, such as the concept of Pacha Mama, and others that are the results of critiques taking place at the heart of modernity, such as the contributions of ecofeminism. It is, moreover, plural, as there are different visions anchored in different traditions, as with *sumak kawsay* of the Kichwa people of Ecuador, *suma qamaña* of some Aymara people of Bolivia, or other new biocentric versions of non-indigenous actors. In its original sense, it is not presented as a return to an indigenist past but rather as an option for future change.⁵

But beyond this plurality of different versions of *Buen Vivir*, all of them share certain aspects, such as a change in the assignation of values and the

recognition of nonhuman subjects. For this reason, the references to Pacha Mama do not imply a “sacred” Nature, at least not in the Western sense of the term, nor even an untamed environment. The Pacha Mama is a framework made up of both the human and nonhuman: people do not occupy it – they are a constitutive part of it. It is ecological and social at the same time. These associations are rooted in specific territories, which for Aymara communities even take on the status of *ayllus*.

Reference to Pacha Mama is in turn part of a complex cosmovision organized in other categories and where complementary and reciprocal relationalities take precedence over hierarchies and oppositions (for a more detailed discussion of Andean philosophy, see Estermann 1998). These sorts of interactions are addressed by Swanson in his chapter, who points out that in Kichwa communities the forest is a relative and the body is in communion with it (the “shared forest” in Swanson’s words). Thus, these are perspectives where the gap between society and nature disappears.

This brief overview of these innovations allows me to point out some possibilities and some limits. It is evident that recognition of the rights of Nature is marginal within both the Catholic and Protestant Churches (see chapter in this volume by Aasmundsen). As in the document by the bishops of Aparecida or the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, ethics of modernity and human centrality prevail; the conditions for admitting the rights of the nonhuman do not exist. If anthropocentric, *Laudato Si'* engages with a heterogeneous range of positions, and at times it appears to approach biocentrism. If it indeed accepts the idea of ecological limits, it nevertheless does not manage to escape from the field of modernity, insisting on a hierarchical relation to Nature, and remaining within the confines of the institutionality of modernity, marked, for example, by the state or the judiciary (see, for example, Rowlands 2015).

There are, without a doubt, efforts being made in that direction (see, for example, Szerazyński 2016), although to my view the difficulty is not to be found so much in the field of “rights,” since it is possible to expand the rights of humans toward some kind of safeguard of nonhuman life. Instead, it is possible that the greatest obstacles arise from having to admit that the nonhuman is a subject in some way.

This should not be surprising since these churches form part of modernity, and thus operate from the supposition that only humans are subjects and agents of value. This generates contradictions and tensions with forms of knowledge and sensibilities that are not tied to those restrictions, such as the rights of Nature, and differences with those other sensibilities endure. Thus, we face simultaneous divergences in various dimensions, both at the cultural and political bases of modernity and in its spiritualities. Something similar takes place with the category of *Buen Vivir*. Its original versions share a conceptual critique of various conventional positions, from ethics to ideas of progress, which immediately gives rise to severe tensions with conventional forms of knowledge across the ideological spectrum, be it on the right or on the left.

Battles on the margins of modernity

Concepts such as the rights of Nature and *Buen Vivir* unleashed a great deal of resistance, a wide variety of debates, and all sorts of contradiction. It is important to examine some of them, as they demonstrate some of the key questions up for debate, and the possible implications that these may possess for the relations between Christian churches and the environment.

The legitimizing of the rights of Nature in Ecuador and Bolivia imposed restrictions on the strategies of extractivist development; it is clear that activities such as large-scale mining or the petrolization of the Amazon that progressive governments encouraged violated these rights. In such circumstances, the administrations of Evo Morales in Bolivia or Rafael Correa in Ecuador decided to reformulate this concept so as to create a version that could be used while simultaneously maintaining the intensive exploitation of natural resources. Their alternative was to switch to focusing on the rights of Mother Earth or the Pacha Mama on a planetary scale, matched by a harsh critique of global capitalism.

This was promoted chiefly by Morales in negotiations over climate changes (particularly in 2007 and 2008), and he received extensive support from activists from any number of countries, who were especially excited by his questioning of capitalism. Nor can we omit the fact that this position resonates with the work of Christian churches on planetary environmental problems, especially climate change.

They backed a substantial change, which was to move from the original position – which conceived of the rights of Nature as local, depending on communities as specific territories – to one of planetary scale. At the same time, the Pacha Mama of each individual place in the Andes was replaced by a single biospheric entity. This change also allowed these governments to question capitalism, but on a global scale, and to insist that change would only be possible if capitalism were abandoned worldwide in all countries at the same time. But at the same time, these governments insisted that there was no other option but to continue being extractivist to survive, and therefore, the local social and environmental impacts had to be tolerated. Without a doubt, we have here a reformulation of some socialist positions that considered it impossible to generate and sustain revolutionary changes on a national level without a worldwide revolution. All of this allowed for the idea of the rights of Nature on a planetary scale to be associated with a moral mandate that reinforced the political intention of at some point toppling capitalism across the planet.

However, from the original Andean perspective, the rights of Nature or of the Pacha Mama are always local. They are anchored in specific territories and environments, in concrete communities, and therefore it does not make sense to refer to the right of planet Earth. The Morales administration's use of the concept implied a rupture with its indigenous essence; its ethical underpinnings outside of modernity were lost, and the discussion

was relocated within a type of modernization based on anthropocentrism. Therefore, despite sometimes using similar terminology, the ethical positions are very distinct.

And so, while Evo Morales was applauded in global summits, Bolivia saw the continuation of all sorts of business ventures with extreme social and environmental impacts, and resistance and conflict multiplied. Quickly, voices from indigenous organizations and popular movements chimed in to point out the breach of the rights of Nature, and massive demonstrations broke out rejecting specific development ventures. This makes clear that these discussions are not merely a question for environmentalists or lawyers, nor solely cause for academic meetings; rather, they are at the fore of national debates.

On the other hand, the governments of Ecuador and Bolivia defended state extractivism and rejected, as capitalist, extractivism spearheaded by transnational companies. If these indeed correspond to different strategies with difference balances of positive and negative effects, they are both anthropocentric and reproduce the same impacts. However, for many, especially in the Global North, the anti-capitalist rhetoric was sufficiently attractive to put aside local impacts in both countries.

All of this corresponds to Howe's question (in chapter 9): do "our moral priorities float above us in a collective atmosphere and climate or are they grounded in the soils and livelihoods of populations who live in the places where energy transitions occur?" The answer is that at least in the case of the rights of Nature, they are always rooted in specific sites and in human and nonhuman communities.

The emphasis on planetary scale is very important, but it often ends up serving different varieties of modernization. It is frequently more associated with "big conservation" than with everyday "little conservation" as characterized by Grandia (chapter eight, this volume). The former often depends on organizations that explore alterations to capitalism, for example venturing into the realm of the Green Economy or dismissing the role of ethics in conservation.

Furthermore, South American progressivism legitimized extractivism on another front: with the insistence that it was indispensable in order to be able to finance assistance programs for the poorest members of society. This is another substantial shift and must also be analyzed for its implications for Christian churches: administrations of Andean countries – but also Lula da Silva in Brazil, Néstor Kirchner, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela – defended extractivism from a framework of social justice. They asserted that reducing poverty required the continued exportation of natural resources, and therefore the costs of such undertakings must be accepted; those who criticized this approach, such as farmers, indigenous people, or environmentalists, were therefore not only standing in the way of economic growth but could also generate more poverty. The old juxtaposition of the 1970s between economic growth and conservation of

biodiversity was now being put forth once again as the opposition between social justice and ecological justice.

Currently, we have more precise information that demonstrates the limitations of these discourses. For example, it has been proven that there is no direct transfer linking revenue from the exportation of commodities to social assistance programs, and that to the contrary, such money has been put to many other uses, particularly to sustain the apparatus of the state. Instead, substantial reductions in poverty are owed, above all, to the formalization of employment and the expansion of social welfare programs. In turn, a more rigorous examination of national economies reveals that the contributions of extractivism have been limited and that in various countries it ends up being the government and society that indirectly subsidize it. (This cannot be analyzed here in detail, but see Gudynas 2015.) Beyond these problems, what must be underscored here is that extractivism continued to be associated with ideas of social justice that in reality are reduced to economics, and particularly to compensation with money. Social justice lost a number of its many dimensions, and emphasis remained on monthly economic aid. Widespread confusion between justice and aid arose.

It also became clear that extractivism was incompatible with the original ideas of *Buen Vivir*. If its original meaning were respected, oil extractivism in the Amazon would not be acceptable, for example, whether mediated by transnational companies (the conservative line) or state companies (the progressive line). Nor could harm to the Pacha Mama be addressed with any monetary compensation. The incompatibility with both conservative and liberal development plans is quite clear, but the situation grew more confusing for progressivisms, which – within governments and from their intellectual bases that include many academics and activists – began to generate new versions of *Buen Vivir* compatible with development. In Ecuador, for example, there was the proposed *Buen Vivir* republican biosocialism, while in Bolivia the term “integral development” was coined while the concept of the rights of Nature was watered down (this case is discussed in Gudynas 2013). All sorts of battles over the concept quickly broke out, over its true indigenous dimensions, and over its possible relations with different varieties of socialism. Many academics and activists from the Global North contributed to the creation, promotion, and defense of these ideas.

This process is without a doubt a response from locations within modernity to a set of ideas that acquired enormous potential and that were threatening the centrality of anthropocentric value and the belief in progress. Modernity is never static, and in its diversity, there are various processes of disciplining and reproduction at work looking to capture and re-direct substantive alternatives. While the original meanings of *Buen Vivir* indicate transitions that are simultaneously post-capitalist and post-socialist, reactions arose from across the political spectrum to nullify the radicalness of those alternatives and to convert it into an idea that would serve developmentalism. This occurred, and continues to occur, in the form of an intense

political debate, in which different indigenous, activist, and academic groups resist or denounce these attempts. But beyond this political expressiveness, what is at stake on a deeper level is the attempt to accept alternatives that would defend other forms of knowledge and sensibilities.

Many well-known figures with a religious sensibility and a political presence did not always recognize this. Freiston's contribution (Chapter 5, this volume) on the Brazilian Marina Silva, who left Catholicism and found her place in Pentecostalism, explores her attempts to create an environmental policy that would reduce the most severe environmental effects but that did not address the basis of ideas of development. In her past practices as the minister of environment, and in her current career as a political leader, she puts forth no defense of the intrinsic values of Nature, and it could be said that she instead aims for an ecologically correct modernization.

Many individuals, both Catholic and Protestant, agreed with the invocation of social justice and the critique of capitalism as necessary preliminaries for ecological justice or *Buen Vivir*. Thus, they maintained positions of commitment to the poor and compassion for their surroundings, but they did not advance toward a biocentric ethics. One such example are the recent positions taken by Leonardo Boff who, following a different path, similarly emphasizes planetary scale and whose "ethics" are in reality closer to a recognition of the interdependence of cultural traditions from which he proposes moral mandates.⁶ But when Boff uses the term *Mother Earth*, it does not have the same content as is recognized within Andean cosmovisions. At the same time, Boff prioritized membership in the Workers' Party in Brazil, and has not analyzed in detail the environmental and ethical contradictions of its development strategies. His proposals are well intentioned but modern, and this explains his difficulties engaging with cosmovisions such as *Buen Vivir*.

This is not an isolated problem. In my experience it is common to find Catholic or Protestant activists who consider that their first priority must be poverty, and who then use this idea to dismiss the rights of Nature or *Buen Vivir*.⁷ There are also situations in which practices from Christian churches are seen as part of the problem associated with environmental impacts (Aasmundsen's chapter reflects on these issues). This situation is possibly more rigid in some Pentecostal practices that do not participate in mobilizations or denunciations regarding environmental justice and seek to adapt to capitalist modernization, which contributes to the watering down of alternate cosmovisions.

Opposing these stances are those of figures who, also from a religious position, defend spiritualities that accept or incorporate other ethics and sensibilities (examples have been cited in other sections of this chapter). Therefore, those same battles that are fought on the grounds of the environment and development repeat in their own ways at the heart of Christian denominations and among their activists. Once again, we encounter the key question of whether Western churches, immersed as they are in modernity,

can overcome it to recognize other sensibilities and spiritualities, such as the rights of Nature or *Buen Vivir*.

Ontologies beyond modernity

In the debates and battle over the value of the environment and ideas of development, the realm of modernity plays a central role. Looking at environmental conflicts, it is possible to organize these debates into distinct categories. On the one hand, there are discussions that occur *within* a single tradition of thought, as with debates among those who defend different versions of capitalism, and among those who consider themselves socialists. Either of these corresponds to what will be called type 1 debates. On the other hand, type 2 debates reference the confrontation between distinct traditions, such as those that arise when capitalist programs are opposed by those that are defined as socialist.

In environmental conflicts in South America, this is quite clear. For example, in Peru, there are multiple type 1 debates in which differing versions of capitalist extractivism confront one another – from neoliberal positions defended by companies and some government ministers, to those belonging to a more benevolent capitalism that demand adequate taxation of companies. Similarly, within traditions that define themselves as socialist, there are disputes between various types, as occurs among some groups in Venezuela. Simultaneously, if on another level, type 2 debates unfold, which, continuing with South American examples, include those that juxtapose capitalist extractivism to socialist extractivism, as in Venezuela, for example, with its state-run companies. Christian churches, both explicitly and implicitly, participate in this arrangement. Some hold that the solution to environmental conflicts is to be reached via capitalist means that prioritize technocracy and good governance, and others that back a powerful state. Moreover, progressive attempts to resituate the rights of Nature as planetary rights constitute a type 2 debate.

The situation that has emerged in recent years is that in some local conflicts over the environment and development, arguments and sensibilities have arisen that correspond neither to type 1 nor type 2 debates. One of the most well-known examples is that of opposition to, for example, a mining venture because it would infringe upon the rights of jaguars or tapirs as subjects with agency, or because a mountain “is angry,” as a subject with the capacity for emotional expression. These are arguments that do not correspond to the conceptual groundwork of conservatives, liberals, or socialists, since they are located either partially or entirely outside of modernity. These are type 3 debates. They are characterized by exhibiting understandings and sensibilities belonging to what are usually called alternate cosmologies that in themselves question modernity in a distinct way (the differentiation among the three distinct types of debates is based on Gudynas 2016a). *Buen*

Vivir may be understood as a platform where positions promoting debates of this third type can be found.

Those figures and institutions immersed in modernity, such as governments, universities, companies, or churches, usually do not understand or grasp that, for example, a mountain could reject a mining project, and thus they set aside these positions as local myths or religiosities from the past. In turn, those who elevate these claims are conscious of this resistance and rejection, and therefore they themselves seek to “translate” their alternate cosmovisions into one that is comprehensible within modernity. They do so, for example, by converting the “anger” of the mountain into a calculation of the economic costs of environmental damage, or by pointing out the dangers of contamination. In this way, the “mountain” as a subject vanishes and is replaced by an ecosystem that in turn is measured by Cartesian means both for its biodiversity as well as with the metric of money. Via these mechanisms, typical of modernity, alternate cosmovisions become invisible.

Type 3 debates are important in this analysis because these claims are based on other forms of knowledge and sensibilities. Usually recognized as “cosmovisions” – the term employed in previous sections in this chapter – they are positions that have always existed, though in recent years they have been better recognized thanks to both improved analytical tools and to a new attitude of trying to understand them in and of themselves. They cannot be approached as other “cultures” since they are not restricted to the human and are indeed immersed in other “natures” (as Blaser 2009, would have it).

For this much broader level of analysis, the category that has been used in recent years is “ontology,” not in a philosophical sense but in an anthropological one (see, for example, Blaser 2009, 2014; de la Cadena 2014). Understood this way, in various places in South America an ontology belonging to modernity would dominate, as the inheritor of colonial legacies of forms of knowledge, with its society-nature dualism; it is attached to progress, is anthropocentric, defends science and Western technology, and considers itself part of a universal history. Finally, this ontology has shaped its own theologies and spiritualities.

In the context of modernity, it is understood that there are multiple cultures that interact with a single Nature, objectifiable through science. In the ontologies of some indigenous peoples, the situation is the opposite, as Viveiros de Castro (2002) points out, since the universal condition is that of subjects – human, nonhuman, and spiritual unities – while there is a diversity within what we might identify as Nature.

Type 3 debates make clear that these alternate understandings and sensibilities exist, and with them other spiritualities, even some that are unthinkable or intolerable for modernity. There is no ontology of the real, but rather multiple ontologies, a number of them hybridizations or reactions to modernity, and which generate politics, alternate forms of knowledge, and other spiritualities. *Buen Vivir* has become the concept to encompass some of these alternate ontologies.

These alternate ontologies rest on other spiritual sensibilities, other conceptions of the transcendental and the sacred. Within them there may be, for example, communities of human and nonhuman people – which may be animals, mountains, or spirits, each with its own agency (see, for example, Sarmiento 2015). In addition, these groupings may include human and non-human living beings in a specific territorial context, and thus the Western notion of “community” does not fit in a strict sense (see, for example, the detailed analysis in de la Cadena 2015 about earth-beings). It is important to point out that in cases where, for example, it is asserted that the mountain is opposed to a mining venture, this does not mean that it represents a god or that it is sacred, which is a widespread misunderstanding. What it expresses is that the mountain is itself a being.

In various chapters of this book, these alternate ontologies appear, and several examples have already been mentioned, such as the communities that are also forest, which is incorporated in their spirituality, explored by Swanson among the Kichwa people, or Grandia regarding the Maya of Guatemala. It could even be said that from these alternate ontologies, alternative theologies are generated. In order to understand and accept these other “worlds,” I appeal to the image of “ontological openings” (following de la Cadena 2014). It is a shift in position, accepting that modernity is only one possible ontology, understanding that it has limits and that there may be other arrangements beyond it, and developing another attitude toward these, one of respect, listening, learning, and dialogue.

Assuming stances like those reflected in the rights of Nature, Pacha Mama, or *Buen Vivir* necessarily requires ontological openings, accepting that our own cosmovision is not the only possible one. This is not a simple exercise of listening or academic analysis; instead, at least to my understanding, it is an urgent task that we cannot turn away from. The environmental crisis, generated by modernity, cannot be solved from within modernity itself. Assuming that there will be a technological fix, a green economy, or a benevolent modern politics that will save us from ecological collapse, is at this moment, to my mind, a naïve approach. What is more, the necessary changes inescapably have to do with modification in forms of assigning value, with overcoming the anthropocentrism of modernity, and with another spirituality in the face of Nature and the human.

Moreover, modernity as ontology has a distinctive feature: it presents itself as a condition that encompasses everything, without limits, where it is only possible to discuss different options at its core. It is an ontology that possesses a universalist ambition, and it annuls or obscures other possible ontologies. It is not that this is part of a plan; it is instead the consequence of its very essence, which causes it to operate as a brake or impediment for any substantive alternative.

There are multiple precedents for possible openings, tensions, and even confrontations with these alternate ontologies in the field of religion. One such precedent that stands out is Nicanor Sarmiento Tupayupanqui's

detailed analysis of Christian and Andean theologies. His multiple positioning as a Peruvian from the Cusco region, a Quechua speaker, and a Catholic priest and missionary allows him to encompass differences and similarities, encounters and divergences between the theologies of modern Christian ontology and the experiences and sensibilities of the Andes, particularly those of the Quechua and Aymara (typical of southern Peru and Bolivia) that express distinct hybridizations, attempts at breaking with modernity, and openings to alternate ontologies.

Even in expressions that reflect their greatest ecological commitment, dominant Christian theologies point to the moral mandate of human beings to care for nature inasmuch as it is creation. In other sections of this chapter, there are various examples that demonstrate this repetition of the basic premises of modernity under which human beings continue to be singular, the only subject of value, imagined as the shepherd responsible for all that surrounds them. However, for Andean ontologies, human beings are immersed in relations and interactions, ties, with the environment, with a nature that is not wild but rather is socialized and humanized. They are not superior beings nor are they distanced from the environment. And not only that, but their very definition as people depends on being able to remain enmeshed in that environment (Sarmiento Tupayupanqui 2016).

There are, nonetheless, religious stances that further reinforce modernity, as with emergent evangelicalism in the Andes. In my experience, in regions such as the south of Peru, evangelical movements penetrate communities by addressing pressing issues (notably alcoholism among men and drug addiction among the young). There is a drastic increase in breaks with traditional practices, such as the organization of collective work or conventions of reciprocal exchange (as is also pointed out in Sarmiento Tupayupanqui 2016). Thus, this religiosity operates by reinforcing modern ontology and closing out other possible ontologies.

An ontology like the modern one is not homogenous; it contains conflicts and tensions, some of which possess a greater potential for creating openings and for dialoging with other ontologies. For example, biocentric criticism and the deep ecology movement inspired by the Norwegian philosophy Arne Naess aims its critique at the very heart of modernity; various feminisms also represent a radical questioning that places them on the margins of modernity. This suggests that positions such as biocentrism can more easily be articulated through Andean ontologies that identify the category of the Pacha Mama with mixed groupings, both artificial and wild, of humans and nonhumans.

There is also a wide range of positions among indigenous peoples: we find all sorts of examples of tensions between the religious and spiritual and modernity, both positions that reproduce the latter as well as those opposed to it (see, for example, contributions in Olupona 2004). Furthermore, given current conditions, it is not possible to generalize one way or another, since within a single indigenous nationality, and even within a single community, we find all sorts of viewpoints.

Something similar occurs within Christian denominations, where there are more conservative standpoints that impede openings, and others, particularly those with a commitment to social justice, that allow movement toward the limits of modernity. *Laudato Si'* is an example of the latter, since despite its modern spirit, it serves those who might wish to progress a bit further. We must also keep in mind that there have been other attempts within Catholicism, beginning with Saint Francis of Assisi. The Canticum of the Sun, possibly composed in 1224, expresses an alternative sensibility toward the nonhuman. In these alternate histories, some smaller and more marginalized, we find ideas with the potential to take on new prominence in the twenty-first century as the basis for a theology that would permit ontological openings.

Finally, these alternate ontologies are sufficiently diverse and varied that it is not possible to once again fall into the essentialism and universality that mark modernity. For example, *Buen Vivir* is plural even within South America, as it is specific to geographical spaces and part of particular histories. It does not make sense to propose a universal or planetary *Buen Vivir*, since the ontologies, histories, and ecologies of other continents are quite different. Thus any such theologies of ontological openings are plural, diverse, and non-essentialist.

Theologies of developmentalism

In specific discussions of economics, development, or public policy, we see the appearance of a religiosity and spirituality with regard to how to interpret and manage the world. Ontological openings also serve to analyze our own modernity in another way. In this sense, we can draw attention to the existence of political theology in which the intensive appropriation of Nature is part of contemporary development and takes the form of a “religion,” as Rist points out (2008).

This state of affairs is evident in the associations between extractivism, social assistance, and myths of progress. One example will serve to illustrate this condition, which surrounds us but is not always identified. In Evo Morales’s administration in Bolivia the government organized a ceremony for the formal inauguration of a new oil deposit that would allow the country’s reserves of crude oil to triple (June 2015).⁸ At this event, President Evo Morales positioned himself on a podium, alongside the ducts and valves that transport the oil, surrounded by ministers and other government authorities, before a significant audience that included more government authorities, journalists, and the general public.

In the most important moment of the ceremony, President Morales lifted a small transparent flask showing the black crude oil inside, and joyously celebrated the oil deposit. The aesthetics of the scene, its motions and discourses, called to mind a Catholic mass: just as the priest lifts the Host and the chalice of wine and makes a call to prayer, the president lifted the

oil-filled flask to adore and celebrate it, with the support of the public. At another point, the president and other authorities stood at the foot of a huge pipeline, opened one of the valves, and the oil spilled out under the gaze of the onlookers. Morales dipped his hand into the crude oil and immediately raised it up, showed it to the audience, and began to place it on the heads of the authorities one by one. Smiling, they received this “oil blessing” with their heads lowered, just as the priest blesses his parish. In effect, the entire ceremony was filled with allusions to priests blessing their parishioners, overlapping with Catholic rites. It was as though they were celebrating that the blood of the earth would feed the body of the state.

But there are also elements that overlap with the Andean ritual of *ch'alla*, in which reverence is given to, and permission asked of, the Pacha Mama. In its original sense, *ch'alla* corresponded in part to an alternate ontology in which individuals were enmeshed in a broadened socionatural community, the *ayllu*. In the original Andean use, a *ch'alla* in the face of oil exploitation is impossible because the ecological and social debt generated is irreparable. Thus the government, with its modernizing stance – despite its indigenist discourse – reconfigures the ritual and its spirituality converting it into a folkloric event.

Christian churches have difficulties approaching these sorts of phenomena. It is not always acceptable to actively construct and reconstruct a religiosity that praises developmentalism and consumerism and that proposes a mandate of dominating Nature to eke out its every last resource. Put another way, the concrete practices of development or of governmental policies also generate spiritualities and theologies for understanding them. As this perspective cements faith in progress, questioning it from the point of view of the defense of Nature and a critique of development becomes heresy (see Gudynas 2016b).

We may be in the initial stages of being able to deconstruct this and other aspects of modernity as ontology. Contributions such as the idea of ontological openings are quite promising, but the prevailing political and economic analyses are still those that have been designed and put in place within modernity itself. This explains the difficulties in recognizing and understanding the third type of debates. Particularly when dealing with *Buen Vivir*, there is a long list of superficial critiques and analyses situated within modernity, from those that confuse *Buen Vivir* with welfare in a Western sense or even with Aristotle’s idea of the good life, to those who believe it to be a new indigenous age.

Ontologies that recuperate aspects from American indigenous communities always require us to recall that modernity was established on the basis of the colonizing of knowledge and power. Throughout colonization, a religiosity was imposed on indigenous peoples, requiring them to participate “as spectators” in European experiences that formed part of the “mental labyrinths of Europeans in this period” to be “saved,” a concept totally foreign to all of them, as Rivera Rodas’s detailed study makes clear (2016).

We must always keep this in mind, as it is intimately related to the appropriation of Nature; just as the Latin American environment was treated as “savage” and needed to be domesticated, indigenous peoples were categorized as “barbaric,” undifferentiated from their surroundings, and they had to be civilized or wiped out. Today, the sacrifice of natural spaces along with their peasant or indigenous communities, is taking place yet again, in other guises, to fuel economic growth. Thus rituals like those cited above become essential in reinforcing the spirituality celebrated by developmentalism.

Exploring ontological openings

Increasing environmental damage creates huge challenges for Latin America. On the one hand, direct effects of the massive appropriation of natural resources – and their exportation for globalization – persist and grow more pronounced. On the other, the region also is partly responsible for global environmental problems. But it also directly suffers their effects and has less ability to adapt. Moreover, all of this takes place at a dizzying pace, and political measures and public discussion are left in the dust.

The continent has also been a laboratory for all sorts of experiments in development strategies in recent decades, from extreme neoliberalism to the self-declared socialist revolutions of the 21st century. If the process of instrumentalization was different in each case, all of these cases shared the exploitation of Nature in order to sustain economic growth, a mercantilization of social life, and the control and repression of critical popular organizations. All of these manifestations have at their core the same set of anthropocentric forms of knowledge and an unbreakable faith in progress.

Put another way, all of the cultural and political varieties belonging to modernity have been tried. And beyond the obvious differences among them, the truth is that they have been insufficient for confronting the risks of ecological and social collapse. It does not make much sense to keep trying to find a type of modernity that might be able to resolve this predicament.

All of which has led to the exploration of new sorts of alternatives that might be able to go beyond modernity. Seen from this point of view, ontological openings play a key role. They allow advancement simultaneously in scope of knowledge and of sensibilities. The necessary changes are not possible if we rely yet again on rational or technological debates; sensibilities and spiritualities must instead be transformed.

Various attempts taking place within different openings are underway, particularly in South America. In my experience, the greatest innovations are to be found in Andean countries (Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru), and they are followed by progress in Argentina, Colombia, Chile, and Uruguay; the situation is much weaker in Paraguay and Venezuela, and particularly in Brazil. There, the current situation is the inheritor of circumstances in which many figures and civic organizations prioritized their partisan political allegiance, especially to the Workers’ Party, which weakened independent sites

of critical analysis and the search for alternatives. Partisan political allegiance further shored up modernity, and the debate was reduced to a quarrel between differing plans for modernization. However, in Andean countries, the debate grew more diverse, with the reemergence of independent voices in civil society, where the contribution of indigenous communities was decisive.

If Christian churches aspire to participate in these alternatives, they must begin to reflect on how to advance ontological openings in their terms, and on what their potential alternatives to modernity are, as they themselves are a product of the latter.

These are no doubt demanding tasks, and they face all manner of hurdles. Among them are the reactions of modernity itself, since, just as development is repackaged in new versions (as with the coopting of *Buen Vivir*), the same thing can take place with other spiritualities. Pluralism is an indispensable component of this process, as Albro and Berry note in the Introduction to this volume, encompassing as it does “attention to combinations of religious, but also secular, resources, where religious groups, activities and content contribute to the assemblage and significance of concepts, norms, rituals and rights.” But this pluralism cannot just be a liberal-style multiculturalism that avoids dialogue and change in exchange for tolerating coexistence with minorities. It will also be necessary to avoid simplifications, like those that occur when certain Andean terms, ideas, symbols, and rituals are taken up to generate a mercantiled consumerism; when the Pacha Mama is cited in self-improvement manuals; or when a *ch’alla* is practiced without understanding its meaning. These are all simplifications that strengthen a colonial form of knowledge that turns *Buen Vivir* into a commodity.

Sarmiento Tupayupanqui (2016) maintains that what he calls Andean “cosmovisions” cannot be denied or annulled because they express a “true religion” with its own theology. They must be respected as such and should be subject to interreligious dialogue. This is no small proposal, as it suggests ecumenical dialogue. References to the hybridization of the indigeneity run along similar lines, as Teidje points out in Chapter 10 of this volume.

Taking things one step further, practices of the cultural integration of religious messages must be rethought, as we are not facing different “cultures” but other ontologies, hybridizations, or debates with modernity. Theologies must allow for the opening up of ontologies, rather than closing them off, and it is there that other practices of dialogue and encounter may arise. In many cases, environmental conflicts become the ground where different perceptions and assessments of value spring forth and are thus of enormous importance.

If the Church is by nature missionary in its orientation, it must ask if in the 21st century this mandate does not also imply the mission of protecting Nature. It should consider whether it is enough to incorporate Nature as an object to be protected and managed responsibly (as with the holistic mission of “creation care” in the sense discussed by Aasmundsen here), or if it is necessary to recognize other nonhuman subjects in Nature. As moderns, for most of us exploring alternatives to modernity is not at all simple. But

the contribution of other cosmovisions becomes critical in this effort. The potentials of different types of “reverse missions” (as Berry puts it) are very important if not indispensable.

Let us recall that in the various versions of liberation theology there is a commitment to the poorest among us. We cannot forget that many of them, particularly among peasants and indigenous people, do not only suffer disproportionately more impacts on the environment, but they are also on the edges of modernity. They rebel against it or express other ontologies. Within those other cosmovisions, liberation and the good life do not just mean exiting poverty but also taking care of the environments in which these communities are rooted. It is necessary to consider, understand, and respect other earth-beings, and that is where the substantial change of a biocentric ethics lies.

Insomuch as these communities are human and nonhuman aggregates, with their own histories, rooted in specific landscapes, essentialist or universalist theologies cannot be considered. But we must recognize that all of them share, each in its own way, the understanding that any liberation implies moving from anthropocentrism toward biocentrism.

Notes

- 1 For South America, the Environmental Justice Atlas lists 544 environmental conflicts in various categories: <https://ejatlas.org/>. The Observatorio de Conflictos Mineros de América Latina (OCMAL: Observatory for Mining Conflicts in Latin America) lists more than 230 conflicts specifically focused on mining across the entire region: https://mapa.conflictosmineros.net/ocmal_db-v2/.
- 2 The event took place in Bucaramanga in 2013 with the participation of the head of the Industrialist Association of Colombia (Asociación de Industriales de Colombia, ANDI), the CEO of the Canadian mining company Eco Oro Minerals Corporation, and the head of its Colombian subsidiary (which has interests in the region), and from the state, the deputy of the environment and of land restitution, Güesguán Serpa (2013).
- 3 Constitución de la República del Ecuador, approved in 2008; English version at the Political Database of the Americas, Georgetown University, <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html>.
- 4 Constitución Política del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, approved in 2009; Spanish version at the Political Database of the Americas, Georgetown University, <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Bolivia/bolivia09.html>
- 5 Examples of initial debates appear in GTZ (2004), subsequent discussions are illustrated in Colque Condori et al. (2013), and a comparison between Bolivia and Ecuador appears in Schavelzon (2015) and also in the chapter by Albro in this volume.
- 6 Boff's positions are consistent over time: we can compare, for example, *La Madre Tierra, sujeto de dignidad y derechos*, Quito, ALAI, 29 October 2012, www.alainet.org/es/active/62616 and *Los derechos de la Madre Tierra y su dignidad*, Redes Cristianas, 23 November 2017, www.redescristianas.net/los-derechos-de-la-madre-tierra-y-su-dignidadleonardo-boff/
- 7 Personally, I have observed this situation with religious and lay figures who work in poor neighborhoods in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). What is more, these individuals maintain that the idea of the rights of nature is an

indigenous or peasant sensibility and that it does not make sense to promote it in cities. There is a contrast between liberation theologies with more intellectual and urban tendencies, which have difficulties in adopting contributions from indigenous cosmologies, and the promoters of Andean theologies that repeatedly take liberation theology as their inspiration and basis.

- 8 For more on this case, see, for example, “Bolivia triplica sus reservas de hidrocarburos líquidos,” *Correo del Sur*, Sucre, 19 June 2015. http://correodelsur.com/economia/20150619_bolivia-triplica-susreservas-de-hidrocarburos-liquidos.html.

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