

## **Abstract:**

### **The Eco-realist Context: [Re]Thinking the Faith in a Failing World**

*“Nobody ever told us what to do in case of failure,” writes Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, “least of all our religion.” Today, however, we face the real possibility of ecosystem failure. Unsurprisingly, the chorus of voices proclaiming “It’s not too late!” is undiminished by decades of failure—unmet goals, cynical pledges, and unfulfilled hopes for external saviors, whether political, technological or spiritual. Now, however, we must take seriously the challenge of eco-realism—that it is, in fact, too late to avoid crushing losses to humanity and the biosphere on a global scale; and that human social systems—economic, political and religious—are largely unsuited to lead us through them. If so, we now inhabit a context that is foreign to those in which our inherited theologies were nurtured. How have those theologies functioned amidst the looming threat of ecosystem failure? In a world where religious expectation is often contradicted by lived experience, is it possible to reimagine “gospel” within such a context? What kind of faith can speak to a world marked by decline and suffering? I will argue that the very thin tradition of Luther’s “theology of the cross,” as contextualized by Hall, has become vital to theological imagination in a world of runaway global crisis, compelling Christians to name and resist the elements of the “theologies of glory” which now dominate much of Western cultural thought and practice. This discussion will engage the works of Hall, Irving Greenberg, Sallie McFague, Wes Jackson and William Catton.*

### **John Elwood: The Eco-realist Context: [Re]Thinking the Faith in a Failing World**

We are here to discuss what I believe is a fundamentally new context for thinking about theology—the ecorealist context. In the few moments that we have together, I hope to do three things.

- First, I plan to make the case for unblinking realism in the face of the eco-optimism that still dominates most creation-care narratives;
- Second, I will consider some of the challenges to dominant social systems, including our religion, raised by the ecorealist context; and
- Finally, I will propose from within the Christian tradition a way forward, rooted in a cruciform theology, recontextualized from Martin Luther’s “theology of the cross” by the great Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall.

## **Ecorealism:**

Let’s begin with what a small but growing number of observers are calling *ecorealism*. With respect to the climate crisis, you’ve no doubt seen statements like this: “It is not too late to avoid the most serious and dangerous impacts. Our choices will determine what happens.... Together, we can save ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s Katharine Hayhoe, whom many of us deeply respect. Until very recently, this kind of eco-optimism was virtually obligatory in all environmental communications. However, the optimistic

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<sup>1</sup> Hayhoe, Katharine. *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist’s Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World*: Atria/One Signal Publishers, 2021; 245.

narratives generally share four problematic elements in common. First, the information is alarming enough to motivate concern and action, while the crisis itself is always, *always*, somewhere out in the future. There is always time to avert “the worst” danger. This is true even when it is admittedly too late, for someone other than ourselves.<sup>2</sup> *They* will suffer first, and *we* should now do something in response. In that sense, no amount of harm to *the other* prompts a more sobering perspective: It is still not time for *us* to come to terms with the arrival of *our* crisis.

Secondly, all that optimism comes with a set of preconditions. But those preconditions, when not met, are generally discarded or forgotten. The most recent ones have assumed a peak in carbon emissions in 2020, and annual decreases of more than 7 percent per year thereafter, for a nearly total transition to clean energy by mid-century.<sup>3</sup> But none of these have happened. Emissions are projected to hit an all-time record high in 2024, “with no clear peak in sight” according to the International Energy Agency.<sup>4</sup> And the massive emissions *reductions* by 2050? Some projections now foresee a 22 percent *increase* in annual emissions by mid-century.<sup>5</sup> Atmospheric carbon concentrations that scientists considered incompatible with human civilization less than two decades ago have increased by ten percent from that time, and continue to grow every year.<sup>6</sup> With 2 degrees Celsius of warming essentially baked into cumulative historical emissions<sup>7</sup> and 1.2 degrees already in the books, talk of keeping global warming under 2 degrees by 2100 begins to sound purely wishful.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Optimistic climate analyses do not, for example, argue that it is not too late to preserve human habitats on low-lying island nations, or the millions of Bangladeshis in the Ganges/Brahmaputra delta, or most amphibian populations.

<sup>3</sup> <https://time.com/5864692/climate-change-defining-moment/>. Summary of UN Environmental Programme report.

<sup>4</sup> Frangoul, Anmar. “CO2 Emissions Set to Hit Record Levels in 2023 and There’s ‘no Clear Peak in Sight,’ IEA Says.” CNBC, July 20, 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/20/co2-emissions-will-hit-record-levels-in-2023-iea-says.html>. Statista. “Global CO2 Emissions by Year 1940-2023.” Accessed October 4, 2024.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/276629/global-co2-emissions/>. CICERO. “Global Fossil CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions Are Projected to Continue to Rise in 2024.” Accessed October 3, 2024. Center for International Climate Research. <https://www.cicero.oslo.no/en/articles/undefined/en/articles/global-fossil-co-emissions-are-projected-to-continue-to-rise-in-2024>. Emissions did not top out in 2020. In 2021, global emissions rose another 4.8 percent,<sup>4</sup> a further one percent in both 2021 and 2022, and are projected to hit an all-time record high in 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Statista. “Projected CO2 Emissions Worldwide 2050.” Accessed October 4, 2024.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/263980/forecast-of-global-carbon-dioxide-emissions/>. See also “Outlook for Future Emissions - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA).” Accessed February 19, 2022. <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/energy-and-the-environment/outlook-for-future-emissions.php>.

<sup>6</sup> NOAA Global Monitoring Laboratory, [https://gml.noaa.gov/webdata/ccgg/trends/co2/co2\\_mm\\_mlo.txt](https://gml.noaa.gov/webdata/ccgg/trends/co2/co2_mm_mlo.txt). Accessed 10/04/2024..

<sup>7</sup> Mann, Michael E. *The Hockey Stick and the Climate Wars: Dispatches from the Front Lines*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 18-21, 249-250.

<sup>8</sup> Unmet preconditions: A phase-out of coal power plants? Atmospheric carbon-removal technologies? Carbon capture and sequestration? A carbon tax or market mechanism to internalize the social cost of carbon? None of these necessary conditions is anywhere near to reality at scale, and their respective deadlines have run out. Six necessary milestones to planetary safety framed by former UN climate czar Christiana Figueres *et al* in 2017 typify optimistic assessments and action plans: (1) No new coal plants approved worldwide; (2) EVs to capture 15 percent of the automobile market; (3) Emissions from aircraft travel to decrease 20 percent; (4) Net global deforestation to be reduced to zero; (5) Investment of \$1 trillion per year for climate action; and (6) Heavy industry to publish plans to halve emissions well before 2050. Figueres, Christiana, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, Gail Whiteman, Johan

But what does a 2-degree hotter world actually mean? The UN IPCC has highlighted these outcomes:

- Hundreds of millions of people will be thrown into poverty,
- Sea levels will rise by nearly an additional meter,
- 3 million tons of annual fisheries will be lost,
- The planet's coral reefs will be rendered virtually extinct,
- and we won't be able to prevent a massive die-off of insects, plants and vertebrate species—again, all of these within the current century.<sup>9</sup>

And those exclude less visible but yet more alarming dangers, or “tipping points.” Among the most likely are:

- abrupt thawing of Arctic permafrost, containing twice as much carbon as that which is already in the atmosphere;
- collapse of the Greenland ice sheet disrupting vital ocean currents and wreaking havoc on global weather systems; and
- the breakup of the West Antarctic ice sheet.<sup>10</sup>

Optimism, however, faces two even more daunting blind spots. First, when we hear “We can fix it!” we have to ask, who does “We” refer to? For starters, *global governance systems*: Some 200 national governments operating within the weakest international frameworks. This year, they are planning to produce 69% more fossil fuels than levels consistent with 2 degrees of warming this century.<sup>11</sup> Yet we are counting on them to somehow reverse course and accept sacrifices on behalf of the global common good.

The world's dominant *economic system* complicates matters further. The eco-theologian Sallie McFague argues that the economics of planetary survival rely upon three house rules: take only your share, clean up after yourself, and keep the house in good repair for others. Market capitalism, by contrast, relies upon one single rule fundamentally opposed to these: Take as much as you can successfully compete for.<sup>12</sup> It is small wonder that many among us feel confused and discouraged at appeals to “do our part”

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Rockström, Anthony Hopley, and Stefan Rahmstorf. “Three Years to Safeguard Our Climate.” *Nature* 546, no. 7660 (June 2017): 593–95. None of these came close to achievement within the related deadlines.

<sup>9</sup> Summary for Policymakers. <https://www.ipcc.ch/2018/10/08/summary-for-policymakers-of-ipcc-special-report-on-global-warming-of-1-5c-approved-by-governments/>

<sup>10</sup> [How Close are the Planet's Tipping Points?](#) New York Times. Accessed 10/04/2023. Slightly less predictable in timing than those listed are: a shift in the West African monsoon upon which hundreds of millions of lives depend; the loss of the Amazon rainforest; and the shutdown of the Atlantic marine circulation system, which has already begun to slow down

<sup>11</sup> Production Gap. “2023 Report.” Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://productiongap.org/2023report/>. And eight years after the signing of the Paris Climate Accords, no single member of the G20 wealthy nations has implemented policies consistent with the goals of that agreement. <https://www.climateaction.org/news/unfccc-climate-commitments-not-on-track-to-meet-paris-agreement-goals>. Accessed February 20, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> McFague, Sallie. *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*. Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2008, 56. Consider the contradictions. How do we even make sense of “our share” in a winner-take-all economy? What would happen if we actually had to clean up the atmosphere, land and waters after ourselves? And as the limitless-growth economy crowds out both the rest of creation and the hopes of those who will follow us, how can we speak of keeping the house in good working order for others?

in addressing the global crisis. The systemic powers of our social order are committed to the exact opposite.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, climate optimism generally ignores context: Climate change is only one of nine inter-related planetary boundaries—the safe limits for human pressure on the processes that sustain the earth as a home for humanity. Six of those nine boundaries have now been breached, of which climate change is only one.<sup>14</sup>

And the threat to those nine boundaries can only be understood in the context of “overshoot,” referring to the growth of any species—humanity, in this case—beyond the carrying capacity of its environment.<sup>15</sup> This graph traces human overshoot over the last 12,000 years. Human beings gradually succeeded in taking over small increments of the earth's life-supporting capacity to slowly grow our numbers. In the last few centuries, however, humanity increased the earth's carrying capacity—for humans—in a massive *but temporary* way: by drawing down ancient stores of carbon energy. And we quickly filled up the earth with more human uses, relying upon that *temporary* capacity. Entirely apart from carbon pollution, that situation was never sustainable, and would demand a difficult reckoning.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, climate optimism relies upon:

- Imagining consequences out into the future, or into the lives of some distant “others”;
- Ignoring the agreed-upon consequences of past and ongoing failures to act;
- Ignoring the systemic powers that control the bulk of human responses to the crisis;
- And finally, ignoring the breach of multiple planetary boundaries resulting from temporary human overshoot of nature's carrying capacity.

So, where does this leave us? I would argue that the first step toward responding to this grim reality is naming it. And the ecorealism would begin here: The future will in fact experience collapses,

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<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of the incapacity of market capitalism to address the climate crisis, see: Keller, Catherine. *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*. Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. Keller, Catherine. *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2021. Stengers, Isabelle, and Andrew Goffey. *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Critical Climate Change. Lüneburg, Germany: Open Humanities Press, 2015. Connolly, William E. *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. Victor, Peter A. *Escape from Overshoot: Economics for a Planet in Peril*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Stockholm Resilience Center, “Planetary Boundaries.”

<https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>. Breached planetary boundaries include contamination by synthetic and radioactive substances, the decline in biological diversity, changes in land use systems; the disruption of nutrient cycles with massive uses of nitrogen and phosphorus; and disturbances of freshwater cycles in rivers, lakes and groundwater—all in addition to climate change.

<sup>15</sup> Catton, William R. *Overshoot, the Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980. See also: Victor, Peter A. *Escape from Overshoot: Economics for a Planet in Peril*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, Wes. *Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture*. Berkeley: Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2010, 75-82.

catastrophes, and extinctions for which our faith in current efforts at activism, sustainability and technology is unfounded. It is neither pessimism nor doomism to admit this.”<sup>17</sup>

### Ecorealism and religion

But, is that it? Just admit the consequences of humanity’s massive overshoot, in fatalism or despair? I don’t think so. Whatever else is required, this admission demands that we critically interrogate the prevailing systems—governing, economic and religious—that have proven incapable of addressing the crisis. That’s what has been missing from “we-can-fix-it” optimism. For the rest of this session, we’ll focus on that third system—our religious tradition.

There are moments in time when the human context is so dramatically upended that dogmas that once seemed beyond questioning are suddenly contestable. For our tradition, we might point to events like the Babylonian exile, or the Hellenization of the Near East, the Constantinian takeover of the Jesus-way, or pandemics such as the Black Death. The Nazi Holocaust of the Jews was almost certainly one such moment—unprecedented horror demanding new theological imagination. Rabbi Irving Greenberg, a historian of the Holocaust, captured this reality with a simple working principle: “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.”<sup>18</sup> For him, the context for theology had been radically altered, and theology had to change with it.

I believe we must say much the same for the eco realist present. For those of us whose faith traditions have been forged in the triumphant Euro-American culture and power, we must ask whether our gospel remains intelligible in a world of inevitable failure, in contrast to the default context of unending progress. As the Douglas John Hall said, “Nobody ever told us what to do in case of failure, least of all our religion.”<sup>19</sup>

So, what does this new moment of inevitable consequences demand of us in the way of theological imagination? I would suggest four crucial steps demanded by our context. First, we must face the reality of the Christian role in the ecological crisis. In survey after survey, we find that our fellow Christians are the least likely to take the ecosystem crisis seriously or to acknowledge it at all.<sup>20</sup> “Creation-care”

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<sup>17</sup> Bliss, Lowell. *An Eco-Realistic New Future*. <https://www.edenvigil.org/eco-realism-papers/2024/3/5/paper-1-an-eco-realistic-new-future-the-y-axis>, Accessed 10/06/2024.

<sup>18</sup> Greenberg, Irving, *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire*; in Morgan, Michael L., ed. *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 315.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, Douglas John. *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976, 229.

<sup>20</sup> Clements, John M., Chenyang Xiao, and Aaron M. McCright. “An Examination of the ‘Greening of Christianity’ Thesis Among Americans, 1993–2010.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 2 (2014): 373–91, finding no evidence of “greening” of Christianity; Arbuckle, Matthew B., and David M. Konisky. “The Role of Religion in Environmental Attitudes.” *Social Science Quarterly* 96, no. 5 (2015): 1244–63, finding that members of Judeo-Christian traditions are less concerned about environmental protection than their nonreligious peers, and that religiosity somewhat intensifies these relationships for evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and mainline Protestants; Konisky, David. “The Greening of Christianity? A Study of Environmental Attitudes Over Time.” SSRN Scholarly Paper. Rochester, NY, November 14, 2017, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3092262>, finding that Christian environmental attitudes have regressed over recent decades; Smith, N., and A. Leiserowitz. “American Evangelicals and Global Warming.” *Global Environmental Change* 23, no. 5 (October 1, 2013): 1009–17.

workers and clergy know this all too well. In facing this fact, we must not leap forward to imagined solutions, before engaging in some real *curiosity*. Why are we so much more apathetic or resistant than those who have no religious affiliation? It's not that we don't know our Bibles: agnostics don't either.<sup>21</sup> It's not that we are politically conservative; all kinds of people are conservative. The first step, then, is curiosity. Honest, clear-eyed, *risky* curiosity. What is it about us that has nurtured disregard for the earth?

Secondly, we must face the danger to our faith when expectancy and experience are no longer simply in conflict, but fundamentally contradict each other. Hall and many others argue that one of the chief functions of religion is to feed the human need to hope; to keep expectancy alive. But Hall notes that there is a danger in all religion, when such hope simply loses touch with earthly lived experience: Then, religions often turn their eyes to secondary worlds—better worlds where hope is possible, but which no longer touch upon the world in which we actually live. Under such conditions, religion becomes unbelievable to the most honest and earthbound among us. Worse still, argues Hall, it carries off from concern for the earth those who might otherwise play a redemptive role in the real earthly crisis.<sup>22</sup>

Third, we must face the potential danger from *within* our faith to a world in crisis. Historians know the connection between times of rapid climatic change and intense social upheaval, linked with increased human migration and competition for ever scarcer resources.<sup>23</sup> In such times, our tradition has proven vulnerable to recruitment into the forces of brutality and sectarian hostility amidst widespread suffering.<sup>24</sup>

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.04.001>, finding that evangelicals accept the reality of global warming and its human causes at far lower rates than the general public; Funk, Cary. "Religion and Views on Climate and Energy Issues" *Pew Research Center Science & Society* (blog), October 22, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2015/10/22/religion-and-views-on-climate-and-energy-issues/>, finding that white evangelicals are the least likely grouping to accept human causes of climate change; "Believers, Sympathizers, and Skeptics: Why Americans Are Conflicted about Climate Change, Environmental Policy, and Science." (2014) Accessed December 12, 2022. <https://www.prri.org/research/believers-sympathizers-skeptics-americans-conflicted-climate-change-environmental-policy-science/>, finding that White evangelicals express the lowest concern regarding climate change, followed by White mainline Protestants; and PRRI | At the intersection of religion, values, and public life. "The Faith Factor in Climate Change: How Religion Impacts American Attitudes on Climate and Environmental Policy | PRRI," October 4, 2023. <https://www.prri.org/research/the-faith-factor-in-climate-change-how-religion-impacts-american-attitudes-on-climate-and-environmental-policy/>, finding that from 2014 to 2023, the percentage of white evangelicals who accept that climate change is caused by human activity has fallen from a one-time low of 14% to last-place 8% at present.

<sup>21</sup> Popular creation-care advocates tend to offer at least one common solution to Christian disregard for the environment: Christians need to learn their Bibles. As one example among many, Katharine Hayhoe, the most effective American Christian climate science communicator, crystallized this common perspective: "I really believe that if we took the Bible seriously, if we actually knew what it said . . . that we would be at the front of the line demanding climate action because it is all through the Bible. BTS Center: Collective Honesty and Complicated Hope webinar; <https://vimeo.com/949594112/3343965abe>; accessed 5/29/24.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness*, 109-110.

<sup>23</sup> Catton, *Overshoot*, 208.

<sup>24</sup> For the impact of historical climate shocks on religious faith, see: Jenkins, Philip. *Climate, Catastrophe, and Faith: How Changes in Climate Drive Religious Upheaval*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. For the role of religion amidst the Maunder Minimum crisis of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, see also: Parker, Geoffrey. *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. For the role of the



And fourth, we have to recognize the *triumphalist* elements that persist or dominate within our tradition. Jurgen Moltmann and Hall have written extensively on the unequal struggle between what Martin Luther called the “theology of the cross” and the “theology of glory.”<sup>25</sup> I can only touch briefly on the role of the theology of glory within the Church today. Hall prefers to call it simply “triumphalism,” which, he writes:

“... refers to the tendency in all strongly-held worldviews, whether religious or secular, to present themselves as full and complete accounts of reality, leaving little if any room for debate or difference of opinion.... Such a tendency is triumphalistic in the sense that it triumphs—at least in its own self-estimate—over all ignorance, uncertainty, doubt, and incompleteness, as well, of course, as over every other point of view.”<sup>26</sup>

Why the focus on religious triumphalism? For starters, a faith that offers comforting expectations of a victorious and happy future risks becoming unintelligible in a world of failure and suffering. Second, it must now pretend that we are still living in a world that has vanished over the last century. The graying remnants of a heavily Christian Western culture are giving way to more pluralist generations.<sup>27</sup> Thirdly, triumphalist religion tends to suppress this-worldly solidarity.<sup>28</sup> In the eyes of a world of suffering, it may

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Church in many crises involving the Jewish communities of European Christendom, see also: Carroll, James. *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> See for Moltmann: Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974. See for Hall: Hall, Douglas John. *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976. Hall, Douglas John. *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. Hall, Douglas John. *What Christianity Is Not: An Exercise in “Negative” Theology*. Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Hall, Douglas John. *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003, 17.

<sup>27</sup> See: Center, Pew Research. “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050.” *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), April 2, 2015. While Christianity is declining in the demographics of North America, its percentage of the global population is projected to remain flat through 2050 at 31.4%, while Islam is expected to grow rapidly to 29.7%. In the United States, Christians will decline from more than three-quarters of the population in 2010 to two-thirds in 2050.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>. See also: Kee, Howard Clark, ed. *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*. New York: Macmillan, 1991, 731-733. See also: Center, Pew Research. “1. How U.S. Religious Composition Has Changed in Recent Decades.” *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), September 13, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>. See also: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>.

<sup>28</sup> Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) conducts extensive research into public opinions on a variety of social issues, segmented by religious affiliation and practice, race, and other factors. By all measures, White evangelicals consistently score the lowest in regard to matters of public concern including climate and ecological destruction: <https://www.prri.org/research/believers-sympathizers-skeptics-americans-conflicted-climate-change-environmental-policy-science/>, Christian nationalism: <https://www.prri.org/press-release/survey-two-thirds-of-white-evangelicals-most-republicans-sympathetic-to-christian-nationalism/>, structural racism: <https://www.prri.org/research/creating-more-inclusive-public-spaces-structural-racism-confederate-memorials-and-building-for-the-future/>, and immigration: <https://www.prri.org/spotlight/evangelicals-and-immigration-a-sea-change-in-the-making/>.

appear that cross has become symbolic—not of fellow-suffering solidarity, but of abandonment and escape from hardship.

### A Way Forward

So, what alternative does the Christian have to offer in these times? Many creation-care voices propose solutions *by addition*, expanding our religious narratives to make room for environmental concern. Hall, however, takes a different approach: He offers a series of *apophatic* or negative principles for us to grapple with. It would be more comfortable *and less controversial* to state only the affirmations; but in so doing, we would leave untouched elements of our theology that already hamper our engagement with a world of unavoidable trauma. In brief, Hall asks Christians to prioritize:

- Divine solidarity with suffering—**not**—triumph over evil.
- Willingness to bear the cross of suffering—**not**—expectation of victory.
- Christ, the weakness of God—**not**—Christ, the Omnipotent Lord.
- Openness to challenge and criticism—**not**—conversionist promotionalism.
- Welcoming curiosity and dialogue—**not**—asserting exceptionalism and authority.
- Theological modesty and humility—**not**—claims to ultimacy.
- Focus on this world—**not**—on a secondary world.
- Solidarity with the creation—**not**—rising above it.
- Focus on Christ immanent—**not**—on Christ transcendent.
- Acceptance of earthly belonging—**not**—human mastery.
- Embracing common ground—**not**—exclusive and exceptional.
- Following Christ into the darkness—**not**—seeking God to banish the darkness.
- The cross as compassion and solidarity—**not**—rescue from finitude.<sup>29</sup>

I’m afraid this list leaves us with plenty to wrestle with. And I don’t presume that any of us will embrace it all. But the crucial point is not so much agreement, but the willingness to try and reimagine our tradition in view of a radically changing context. If Hall is right, if “our faith, as practiced in North America never told us what to do in case of failure,” then the onset of failure confronts us with an inescapable new context for thinking—or rethinking—our faith.

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<sup>29</sup> The apophatic or negative propositions are drawn from the following sources: Hall, Douglas John. *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976. Hall, Douglas John. *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. Hall, Douglas John. *What Christianity Is Not: An Exercise in “Negative” Theology*. Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013. The Christian Century. “Cross and Context,” October 13, 2010. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-08/cross-and-context>.