Religious Recognition   **Open Access**

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Recognition and Ecological Theology

Abstract: This article explores the possibilities offered by theories of recognition and identity politics for a better understanding of religious – in this case, Christian – environmentalism. Insights related to recognition are gleaned from literature in ecological theology. Themes for further research and possibilities for practical adaptation are explored. It is argued that theories of recognition help to understand the dynamics related to processes where a certain group asks for more recognition of nature. Identity questions and developments in environmentalism are clarified by an understanding of what happens when partial recognition is granted. The role of mutuality as a basis for recognition is widened by Arto Laitinen's proposal for recognition as "adequate regard" for something, i.e. for an ecosystem. The complex relations between humans and non-human nature are explored through such themes as reciprocity and the question of "voices" of nature. Creaturely difference and the role of seeing a "face" in nature are discussed in relation to recognition. The significance of place and environmental conditions for recognition are probed. Special attention is given to Andrew Dobson's application of Nancy Frazer's theory of transformative recognition to environmental matters, which offers new ways of understanding the role of non-human nature in politics, ethics and discussions on justice.

Keywords: environment, religion and nature, adequate regard, animal rights, justice

Introduction

Theories of recognition deal with the central importance that recognition has for people (and possibly for non-human nature). These theories, which have been developed by such philosophers as Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth and Nancy Frazer, have both normative and psychological aspects. People are seeking recognition for themselves and their causes, often resulting in what Hegel called "a struggle for recognition". Thus, the concept of "identity politics" is closely related to these issues. The normative dimension is seen in the fact that when somebody (or something) is recognized as "something", such as having full human rights, this has implications for action. It also confirms both the validity of the characteristic that is recognized, such as sentience, and the object of recognition that has this characteristic. Psychologically, recognition has been seen as a basic human need, which is elementary also for child development.[1]

Most discussion on recognition has focused on transactions between humans. However, recognition happens also in relation to more abstract notions, such as in the case of countries recognizing each other. Certain scholars of recognition, most prominently Arto Laitinen, have explored the ways in which recognition happens between humans and any value objects, including animals and other parts of non-

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[1] For useful introductions, see Iser, "Recognition"; Heyes, "Identity Politics". For religion and recognition, see Saarinen, *Recognition*.

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human nature[2]. The application of theories of recognition to environmental matters is currently in process, as will be discussed below.

Theories of recognition have sparked a lively discussion in both academic and public discourses. Even while many aspects of various theories have been debated, it has emerged as evident that theories of recognition touch upon very important issues. These theories have been applied to numerous disciplines and fields of inquiry, but, up until now, not to ecological theology.

Ecological theology (or, ecotheology) explores the relations of humans, non-human nature and God, and in its practical forms works to modify human-environment relations into a desired direction.[3] As an academic discipline, ecological theology is part of the larger field of study on religion and nature (or, religion and ecology).[4] Like environmental ethics, ecological theology has a kind of double history. These disciplines deal with ancient questions, since the relations between humans, their beliefs and their environmental behavior have been discussed for thousands of years. However, as academic disciplines and practical movements these fields have grown and flourished since the late 1960s.[5]

The relation of theories of recognition and these two fields, environmental ethics and ecological theology, has two dimensions. There is significant recognition-related content in these two fields, but most often it is not discussed in the terms of theories of recognition. Especially in ecological theology I have not found actual discussion about theories of recognition. The closest explicit discussions deal with justice issues, as will be shown below. The recent work on notions of transformative recognition (which will be explained below) by scholars who are active in environmental politics and environmental justice theories will most probably attract more attention in the wider field of environmental ethics also, and I argue in this article that these theories are useful for those who are interested in religious environmentalism.

In this article, I ask the following research questions:

– Do theories of recognition (and identity politics) shed light on issues in ecological theology and Christian environmentalism? If so, in which ways?
– In literature on ecological theology, are there explicit or implicit uses of these recognition-related issues?
– As a result of this analysis, what kind of questions for further research and possibilities for further practical adaptation do emerge?

My hypothesis is that this analysis helps to understand several developments and dimensions of (religious) environmentalism. While I focus on Christian environmentalism and theology, I presume that many of my observations can be applied to environmentalism in general and to other forms of religious environmentalism. The range of these observations extends from sociological insights to systematic and practical theology.

Since this is the first study on the theme, it bears a certain introductory character. I hope to spark and enable further research by giving an overview of the theme.[6]

The structure of the article is as follows: First, I analyze the ways in which theories of recognition and identity politics can be applied towards an understanding of certain dynamics in (religious) environmentalism. I will then discuss the question of mutuality as the basis of recognition and Laitinen's

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2 I will not engage here in a wide analysis of terminology: terms related to "nature" and "environment" are notoriously difficult to define in a precise manner. Cf. Verhey, *Nature*. I will use these terms here to refer to either the whole complex of ecosystems on this planet or, in some contexts, to especially the non-human parts of them.

3 For a useful introduction, see Conradie, *Christianity*. For the various terms, see Pihkala, *Joseph Sittler*, Chapter 1.

4 For study on religion and nature, see Taylor [ed.], *Encyclopedia*.

5 For a history of environmental ethics, see Nash, *Rights*; for historical perspectives on ecotheological theology, see Pihkala, *Joseph Sittler*.

6 My main area of expertise is ecological theology and study of Christian environmentalism: for recent works in English, see Pihkala, "Rediscovery", "Pastoral", "Ecotheology". As part of my work in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki, I have studied theories of recognition in connection with the Centre of Excellence which focuses on them. One of the aims of a separate research project on ecumenical recognition (2012–2016) has been to explore the connections between ecological theology and recognition. This is my first publication in English on the theme, in which I develop further some notions which I have discussed in my Finnish work (Pihkala, "Ihmistä").

proposal of applying theories of recognition into environmental issues through the notion of "adequate regard". After discussing the few thinkers who have applied Laitinen's theory to the theme of recognition and nature, I further elaborate on the themes of nature as having a "face", creaturely difference, and the significance of the re-prefix in recognition. The themes of place, the environmental basis of recognition, and reciprocity all point towards the complex relations and interconnections between humans and their environment. Related questions are the role of representatives of nature and nature as having a "voice" (or voices). Finally, before conclusions, I analyze the connections between justice, transformative recognition, and ecological theology, drawing from pioneering works on these themes.

Recognition, Identity Politics, and (Religious) Environmentalism

Based on reading the literature on theories of recognition and identity politics, I argue that these theories can help to understand certain developments in environmentalism and religious environmentalism. Various environmental activists can be seen to form identity groups which struggle for the recognition of their cause.[7] In environmentalism, a major change started to happen in the 1960s, when the cause became gradually much more popular and well-known. Many have situated the beginning of environmentalism into these times, but I join with those scholars who emphasize that environmentalism has long roots. Historian Joachim Radkau writes of "environmentalism before the environmental movement" and I have studied "ecotheology before the ecotheological movement".[8]

When the environmental movement became more organized, it became easier to approach it by studies in different disciplines, including the use of frameworks related to identity politics and recognition. While it is now evident that many people, including Christians, sought recognition for environmental values and causes much earlier than the 1960s and 1970s, the environmental groups emerged as a growing political and churchly force since those times.

Certain theories of recognition reveal a process with several phases related to an appeal for recognition. First, somebody, usually a group, issues a demand or a plea for recognition of a certain authority. Then the authority engages in a phase and process where its members discuss whether recognition can be granted. In this process, foundational documents and core values, and the interpretation of these, are in key and determinative position. As a result of this phase, the authority makes an offer to the group which asked for recognition. This offer often includes various elements, such as certain conditions for the possible recognition. Then the group itself processes this offer and makes up its mind about whether or not it feels to have received enough recognition.[9]

A similar kind of process seems to take place whenever a church body is confronted with a demand for recognition of certain environmental values, as Risto Saarinen originally observed.[10] In the process, the church body seeks to discover whether or not the Bible and tradition would allow a greater weight for environmental causes. Usually the result has been affirmative, although in various forms. The most common Christian response has been an emphasis on restricted responsibility, "stewardship" (or even an enlightened form of "dominion"), which points to the need to be more responsible towards the environment, but at the same time stresses the rights of humans to use nature wisely. As a theological and Biblical basis, the command to "till and keep" (Gen.2:15) has been emphasized as the key to stewardship, and usually in order to explain what is actually meant by dominion (Gen.1:26).[11]

In terms of theories of recognition, it can be pointed out that this emphasis on stewardship is an offer, with certain qualifications and restrictions, which is made to the group that asked for recognition. In various countries, there have been various forms of Christian environmentalism, but usually, at the least, a vague

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7 Heyes, "Identity Politics"; Ignatow, *Transnational*.

8 Radkau, *Age of Ecology;* Pihkala, "Rediscovery", *Joseph Sittler*.

9 Saarinen, "Anerkennungstheorien".

10 Saarinen, "Ecumenical".

11 For Biblical interpretation in this regard, see Horrell & Hunt & Southgate, "Appeals", 219–233; Conradie, *Christianity*, 69–83.

movement or group of "green Christians" has been active in places where actual changes have happened.[12] When these groups have received some response from their larger church bodies, they have then had to engage in a process where they have had to defend the value of outcomes. In this sense Christian and religious environmental groups are similar to other groups engaged in identity politics and in a struggle for recognition, such as proponents of advancing the rights of women.

Questions of identity make the process more complicated, as has been noted in research on identity politics (and recognition). When a group succeeds in gaining some recognition, it usually has to re-negotiate its identity, which has so far been based on a certain situation and a certain struggle. This is a difficult task also for the leaders of the group, who may not actually wish to change the traditional identity of the group. A shared opposition has often been a popular way to bring people together, but what to do when just such a presenting motivation starts to fade? Often the result of such a process is that the group splits. Some people accept the recognition that has been gained, while others, for various reasons, claim to desire further recognition for themselves and their cause. It often happens that the group loses some members – those who are satisfied – and the new identity of the group seems to be more counter-cultural in the new situation.

This kind of development has happened in many countries in relation to environmentalism. Historians often point out that a major result of environmental organizations and political parties was that other political parties had to start to include some environmental reflections in their agendas, in order to avoid losing relevance when the general public became more positive towards environmentalism. Thus, it can be said that environmental groups partly succeeded in their struggle for recognition, but as a result they often ended up in a crisis, where a new identity had to be formed. For example in Finland, this resulted in the splitting of the Green Party in the 1980s, when the more progressive or radical Greens left the Party and emphasized that nature needed more recognition than what had been granted, or what even the Green Party desired any longer.[13]

In Christian churches and theology, a partly similar development has taken place in many countries. A "stewardship" agenda has been accepted and environmental concerns have become at least some portion of the work of the churches, but, at the same time, more or less vague identity groups have continued to act in order to gain more recognition for environmental causes in their churches. Many have championed more extensive rights of nature by advocating a framework of the "intrinsic value of nature", which in Christian theology is usually, in the end, a theocentric value. Others have even more radical agendas, which have usually led them to establish new groups. A rather famous example is the Creation Spirituality movement led by such figures as the former Roman Catholic Priest Matthew Fox, who lost his position in the church and parts of the movement were further radicalized.[14]

Another challenge to the identity of environmental groups, including religious environmentalism, is related to a certain fundamental character of environmental concerns, as Radkau has observed.[15] Groups are more easily constructed and upheld around a certain issue and in a form which enables a certain set of people to stay together. However, environmental concerns are related to so many different issues that at some point it becomes difficult to stay focused on any specific issue and, consequently, the group struggles to make a real impact. Co-operation with other groups and the state is practically necessary, but this poses challenges for the identity of the group.

For example in Finland, the largest religious body by far, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland, has during the last decades developed rather extensive environmental regulations and recommendations. The environmental work of the church takes place on an institutional level and includes negotiations and workshops with decision-makers and environmental organizations.[16] This is on one hand effective, but

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12 For the US, see Kearns, "Saving"; for Finland, see Pesonen, *Vihertyvä*.

13 For Finland, see Haila, "Ympäristöherätys"; Määttä, "Vihreä". Cf. the global observations by Radkau, *Age of Ecology*.

14 For the Creation Spirituality movement, see Kearns, "Saving"; for theological analysis of it, see Deane-Drummond, *Ecotheology*, 37–43. For the changes brought by ecotheological movements, see Nash, "Christianity".

15 Radkau, *Age of Ecology*.

16 See http://evl.fi/ymparisto (accessed 15.7.2016) and Sipiläinen, "Environmental".

often results in a form of activity which is somewhat distant from the lives of ordinary church members. This then leads sometimes to lack of interest and in other cases, among more environmentally-active Christians, to a desire to have a grassroots organization with a stronger identity and a clearer sense of belonging. Environmentalism, like many other causes, seems to be caught in a certain dilemma of balancing strong group identity and effectiveness.

Mutuality, "Adequate Regard", and Creaturely Difference

I will now move on to analyze further the ways in which nature is recognized or given "adequate regard". Theorists of recognition have often emphasized the need for mutuality as basis for recognition: both parties should be able to recognize and to receive recognition. Thus, recognition of nature could only happen through representatives of nature. In environmental ethics, this theme has been discussed especially since Christopher Stone's current classic article "Should Trees Have a Standing?", which included discussion of "custodians" of nature.[17] The classical Christian interpretation of this is reflected in the term "stewardship".

However, scholar of recognition Arto Laitinen has prominently challenged this prevailing understanding of mutuality as the only possible condition of recognition. Laitinen argues that any bearers of normative features can be recognized in the sense of giving them "adequate regard". Thus, in this scheme, animals and ecosystems can be included in the sphere of recognition. In addition, animals, especially those reflecting human-like qualities, are a special case, since they share many similar abilities with humans and can be argued to perform recognition, at least in some cases and in a limited manner (cf. a pet dog or a chimpanzee).[18]

Laitinen's framework of adequate regard has been applied by Ludwig Siep and Risto Saarinen, who both apply, albeit briefly, recognition and nature. Siep points out that nature is a special case, since parts of it, especially those involving animals, approach the concept of personhood, even though they remain different from humans. He speaks of an "asymmetrical" relationship and focuses on history of ideas.[19]

Saarinen has noted that certain environmental thought-systems give a kind of "face" to aspects of nature and speak of profound encounters with them. He also mentions that a general form of nature-appreciation is possible even without such an activity and points to the continuing significance of Albert Schweitzer's (1875–1965) thinking about "reverence for life". Saarinen ends his brief reflections by discussing the importance of the concepts of boundaries and finitude for environmental preservation and reverence of nature. Love and respect for limits are interrelated, and death is a crucial factor related to natural existence.[20] Saarinen thus provides introductory insights into further application of theories of recognition to environmental issues, also in relation to Axel Honneth's theories of the psychological dimension of recognition, but Saarinen does not discuss this extensively.

The notion of nature having a kind of "face", a point of contact, is fascinating in relation to recognition and nature. Many prominent environmentalists, such as Jane Goodall and Aldo Leopold, have told of life-changing experiences when they have established eye contact with certain animals.[21] A representative of a larger group acts as a key to engagement with the whole group. It seems that just as an encounter with a person from a minority group which seeks for recognition can lead to a fuller understanding and recognition of that group, a similar thing can happen with animals. It also seems that animals can function as representatives of larger ecosystems, nature in this sense.

Some theorists of recognition have drawn attention to the re-prefix. It seems to help recognition if a person notices in the other something similar with himself or something already known, thus re-cognizing something. The interplay of similarity and difference is one of the widely discussed themes in theories of recognition, and it is in many ways related to the theme of nature. Others are always recognized as

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17 Nash, *Rights*, 128–130.

18 Laitinen, "On the Scope"; Iser, "Recognition"; Laitinen & Kortetmäki, "On the Natural".

19 Siep, *Anerkennung*, 47–53; Saarinen, "Ecumenical".

20 Saarinen, *Oppi*, 190–191.

21 For Leopold, see Nash, *Rights*, 64-65; for Goodall, see Taylor, *Dark*, Chapter 2.

something: as a person, a living being etc. It has been pointed out that even in inter-human recognition, misrecognition is bound to happen: humans use themselves as measures for recognizing others, which leads to a limited understanding of the otherness of the other and the characteristics of the other.[22] If this happens among the same species, it most evidently happens even more between different species.

In animal ethics (and animal theology), the question of similarity and difference between humans and other animals is a crucial one. A major focus in the work of proponents of animal rights and animal well-being has been the need to avoid overly strong anthropocentrism, which means a view where humans would hold as their right to use animals in ways which cause pain or diminish their flourishing. Often the value and rights of animals have been grounded in certain similarities with humans: animals also experience pain and suffer, they have feelings and they would like to flourish. However, the question of what animals want and need is sometimes complicated by the human perspective: some thinkers have argued that humans should be careful in order to not to think too strongly that animals want human-like things. For example, some people think that pet dogs want similar living conditions with humans, while others think that they would need more "natural" conditions. The situation is complicated by the fact that humans and many animals have a long history in common, and the behavior of both species has been changed during the process.[23]

A leading thinker in animal theology, David Clough, devotes a chapter on "creaturely difference" in his insightful study on systematic theology and animals. Clough posits that it is both a joy and a challenge to recognize creaturely difference, and an ongoing process.[24] Using theories of recognition (which Clough does not discuss), it could be said that animals often suffer from misrecognition and malrecognition, and are in need of increased recognition. This heightened recognition is bound to be partly misrecognition, but that is understandable, given the amount of differences between actors. What is most important is the ongoing desire to do more justice to the "other" and to be ready to critically examine one's own conceptions.

What Siep discussed as an "asymmetrical relationship" between humans and nature has been approached in a creative way in ecological theology by scholar and activist H. Paul Santmire. Drawing from his studies under the eminent theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965), who spoke about relationships with living beings, Santmire further applied the thinking of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965). Buber famously wrote about "I-Thou" and "I-It"-relationships, but Santmire adds a middle category: an I-Ens-relation with another living being.[25] This terminology offers one possible way to speak about relationships between humans and non-human nature, and the certain recognition that is included.

Place, the Environmental Basis of Recognition, and Reciprocity

Returning once more to the notion of giving a kind of "face" to nature, it should be pointed out that this idea can, in a way, also be applied to non-living beings, ecosystems or natural surroundings. The discussion on place, which has become a key concept in many proposals in environmental ethics, is in practice closely connected with this issue. The idea is that a place is a meaningful part of a wider space, a kind of "face", with which a person or a group has a personal relationship. In environmental education, it is thought that people can learn to care for the wider environment by first becoming attached or attracted to a certain place and taking care of it.[26] The growing amount of literature on "theology of place" is thus significant for ecological theology, and also because works on the subject usually include explicit treatment of ecological questions.[27]

The dimension of place and ecosystems has recently gained attention by some scholars of recognition. People's identities are constructed in relationship with other persons, but also with and within places.

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22 Saarinen, "Identiteettipolitiikka", 22, pointing to Thomas Bedorf's work.
23 For an introduction to animal ethics, see Gruen, *Ethics*.
24 Clough, *On Animals*, Chapter 3, esp. 76.
25 Santmire, *Nature*, 61–73. He published his first writings on the theme already in the 1960s.
26 For an overview, see Smith, "Place-Based".
27 See Northcott, *Place*; Bergmann, *Religion*; Bartholomew, *Where*.

Laitinen and Kortetmäki emphasize in their recent article that even inter-human recognition is interconnected with environmental conditions. For example, if humans cause social instability because of environmental damage, the circumstances for inter-human recognition suffer also.[28]

Furthermore, if and when the nature-relationships of people are an integral part of their identities, the recognition of these people in practice means recognition of these nature-relationships. An example is the ways in which indigenous peoples seek recognition for themselves, for their traditional lifestyle and at the same time for their natural environment and human-nature relations.[29] I will return to this theme below in relation to Andrew Dobson's proposals.

There is a certain kind of fascinating reciprocity between humans and places (or, environment in this sense) which complicates the question of possible mutuality between humans and the environment which they recognize. In a way, places respond to the ways in which they are treated. Places send a very practical message if the ecosystem is damaged: things are not as they were before. Animals disappear, plants wither, rivers become smelly and lifeless and so on. And if the place, i.e. the local ecosystem, flourishes, that too sends a message. Naturally this is not similar to the communication between humans in general, but still it is a kind of communication which many people do notice.

The question of whether nature could in some way raise its own voice and call for recognition is a complex and difficult one. Most thinkers have denied such a possibility, but more radical environmental thinkers have explored it. More complexity arises because humans are physical creatures and thus very much part of nature, regardless of differing worldviews about the essence of humans, the existence of souls and so on. One possibility of exploring the call of recognition by nature is in the argument that nature "speaks" through humans who champion its interests. The range of such interpretations extends from naturalistic options to beliefs in a Gaia-style holistic entity, which operates through various means. Research on various forms of "nature religion" is relevant for analysis of these kind of views.[30]

In ecological theology, the voice and subjectivity of nature has been prominently proposed for example in the Earth Bible project, which has studied the Bible with an eye for human-nature interaction. The project has been guided by hermeneutical "eco-justice principles" and one of them claims: "Earth is a subject capable of rising its voice in celebration and against injustice".[31] The project has been influential, but its proposals and methods have also received criticism, which has sometimes focused on this very idea of Earth as a subject having a voice.[32] It should be mentioned that in more radical forms of ecotheology and religious environmentalism, the same notion has been explored in many ways.

American theologian Joseph Sittler (1904–1987), one of the most significant pioneers in religious environmentalism (and Christian ecotheology),[33] discussed the reciprocity between humans and other nature already from the start of his ecotheological writing in the early 1950s. In an early essay, he wrote that God gave humans and the rest of nature the ability "to respond to each other in love".[34] In his late work, including some of his most significant writings, he developed this notion further. Sittler emphasized that "cognition is sensitized by re-cognition and urged into the perception of hitherto unregarded relations" and applied this to environmental responsibility.[35]

In his main written work, *Essays on Nature and Grace*, Sittler continued to develop this idea. At this point he had already became acquainted with philosopher Paul Ricoeur's thought and they both taught

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28 Laitinen & Kortetmäki, "On the Natural".

29 For general information about indigenous people and the environment, see Johansen, *Indigenous*; see also Laitinen & Kortetmäki, "On the Natural".

30 See Taylor, *Dark*.

31 Habel (ed.), *Readings*, 24, 38–53.

32 For a critical analysis from the point of view of Biblical studies and theology, see Conradie, *Christianity*, 69–75; Horrell & Hunt & Southgate, "Appeals", 226–228.

33 Pihkala, *Joseph Sittler*; Sittler, *Evocations*.

34 "God the creator has not only placed man in the fair garden of earth, but has invested both man and his other creation, earth, with the gift to respond to each other in love", Sittler, "Grace", 3.

35 Sittler, "Presence and Acts", 133.

at Chicago's Hyde Park at the time. It is unclear whether Sittler knew of Ricoeur's thought on recognition, but Sittler cites Ricouer several times and implicitly uses ideas related to recognition, as seen already above.

Sittler uses Lake Michigan as an example of how environments respond to human actions. If humans behave justly towards a place or an environment, "according to its given ecological structure as a place for multiple forms of life … then in a blunt and verifiable way we are "justified" by grace even in our relation to the things of nature".[36] And if not, then the environment displays "condemnation" through its suffering.[37] Seemingly in order to respond in advance to criticism from other Lutherans, Sittler adds that this is not a statement directed to the traditional use of terminology of "justification by grace" in relation to human salvation by God's action.[38]

Sittler's thought thus offers possibilities for further integration of recognition and ecological theology. This is even more so, since his major theological emphasis was on the "ecological self", the ways in which subjectivity is constructed by numerous relations with others and the natural world.[39] Much later, theological ethicist Willis Jenkins delineated "ecological subjectivity" as one of the three main positions and necessary ingredients in environmental ethics and ecological theology.[40]

This theme invites an exploratory thought on the role of nature in relation to the psychological importance of recognition. Axel Honneth's idea of three "spheres" of recognition has been much discussed. Honneth points out that people need love, respect and esteem. Family, work life and hobbies are all important, and a human being usually needs recognition at least in two of these.[41] Regarding nature and environmentalism, it is clear that some people desire recognition and respect as "good environmentalists" in the sphere of environmental people. Others may desire recognition and esteem for their voluntary environmental work, which is a kind of hobby for them. But what about the feelings generated by natural surroundings? People feel peace and a certain acceptance in nature (for example in the woods), perhaps especially if they feel that they have done something good for the environment. Could this be approached from the point of view of recognition and is there not a certain kind of mutuality involved?

In Christian theology, these ideas are made more complex by the notion of God's work seen through nature. It can be posited that a person's feelings of acceptance in nature, a kind of recognition, is, at the end, the work of God. This theme is connected to two large and difficult theological themes: natural theology (and theology of nature) and justification. At this point of our essay, it is not possible to dwell more deeply upon them.[42]

Justice, Transformative Recognition, and Ecological Theology

A major theme related to recognition and environment is justice. A pioneering work in applying theories of recognition into a theory of justice was David Schlosberg's *Defining Environmental Justice*, which separates environmental justice and ecological justice. Environmental justice refers to inter-human justice as regards the environment, such as justice in relation to how different human groups have to experience pollution. The latter, ecological justice, is the exhibiting of justice towards nature and closely related to what is discussed here as the recognition of nature.

Schlosberg notices how many environmental justice movements integrate both issues, which provides further links to identity politics and recognition. Many movements and groups seek recognition both for themselves, in the traditional sense of recognition theories, and towards the environment. Overall,

36 Sittler, *Essays*, 121.
37 "The opposite of justification is condemnation … then a repudiated grace that "justifies" becomes the silent agent of condemnation", Sittler, *Essays*, 122.
38 Sittler, *Essays*, 134.
39 Pihkala, *Joseph Sittler*, esp. Chapters 6–7.
40 Jenkins, *Ecologies*.
41 For summarizing reflections on Honneth, see Iser, "Recognition".
42 For reflections on justification and recognition, see Saarinen, *Recognition*; "Identiteettipolitiikka".

Schlosberg argues that non-human nature should be granted more recognition: its value and rights should be taken into account.[43]

Schlosberg's work has been started to be discussed in environmental ethics[44] and in Christian ethics.[45] Laitinen and Kortetmäki apply Schlosberg's thought when they further develop their ideas of the connections between the environment and recognition. They discuss climate change and point out that the situation raises important but difficult questions about ecological justice. In an age of diminishing resources, justice would require those resources to be shared more with non-human species.[46] Kortetmäki has also written about the relation of deep ecology and "broad ecological justice", discussing theories of recognition in connection to these.[47]

Andrew Dobson, a major developer of green political thought, wants to expand Schlosberg's approach, which he sees as "affirmative": it affirms the value or rights of others. In a creative manner, Dobson discusses Nancy Frazer's theories of transformative recognition and analyzes Bruno Latour's and Jane Bennett's proposals in this light. Transformative recognition changes the criteria of recognition in the process, leading to unexpected results and requiring more openness. Latour, a widely-known writer, has proposed that humans should understand subjectivity in a wider sense to include non-human nature. Bennett, in her *Vibrant Matter*, draws from the latest results in physics and argues that the old ways of seeing things and persons are not adequate, since the act and process of being means to be radically in connection with other things.[48]

Dobson analyzes these positions in light of theories of recognition and sees them as "strongly affirmative", as taking a step further than Schlosberg, but not yet being fully transformative. He himself sketches a more transformative proposal, drawing from John Dewey's ideas of how many avenues of politics "coalesce around problems".[49] Dobson argues that in a process of recognition between humans and non-human nature, humans can be surprised that they have similar characteristics with non-humans – and not the other way around, as is usually thought. During a process of transformative recognition, humans learn to see themselves in a new light. The criteria change also in the sense of what is counted as a voice and who or what can participate in politics. Drawing from various authors, Dobson continues the discussion of how the voice of nature can be heard, dealing with both audible voices and other activity, such as whales stranded on a beach, as a "voice".[50]

Ecotheologian Santmire in his very latest work has dealt with the question of nature's voices, emphasizing that biblical speech about such voices is not to be taken merely metaphorically.[51] This has earlier been discussed in biblical theology in relation to nature's praise of God, which is a rather common theme in the Old Testament.[52] An influential pioneer of Christian ecological thinking, the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) – who was a major inspiration to the aforementioned Sittler – made early remarks about the issue when he wrote in his poem "As Kingfishers catch fire" that:

> Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
> Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
> Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
> Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*[53]

43 Schlosberg, *Defining*.

44 Hourdequin, *Environmental*; for environmental education and justice issues, including some discussion on religions, see Haluza-DeLay, "Educating".

45 Jenkins, *Future*.

46 Laitinen and Kortetmäki, "On the Natural".

47 Kortetmäki, "Is Broad".

48 Dobson, *Listening*, 140–169.

49 Ibid., 159–169.

50 Ibid.

51 This is the topic of Santmire's forthcoming article in *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*, edited by Jim Martin-Schramm and Lisa Dahill, Wipf and Stock Press, late 2016.

52 Fretheim, *God*, Chapter 8.

53 Hopkins, *Poems*, 90, italics in original; for Sittler and Hopkins, see Pihkala, *Joseph Sittler*, Chapter 6.

I argue that the recognition-related insights of Schlosberg, Frazer and Dobson (thus including Latour and Bennett) can provide further resources to ecological theology and Christian environmental ethics, in order to understand and promote the ways in which non-human nature and justice are connected. In addition, these two fields can in their turn provide some material for scholars interested in recognition. There can be seen instances in writings on ecological theology which manifest a process of transformative recognition and I will discuss a few of these.

The first example is the use of the term "creaturely theology", which is a result of a process where a new understanding of what it means to be human and animal has been reached.[54] The second example is found in the work of prominent Christian ethicist Willis Jenkins, who has written high-quality works on environmental themes. Jenkins deals with "eco-justice", a theme and a (vague) movement which emphasizes the interconnections of many justice issues, including social, economic, environmental and ecological dimensions (the latter two referring to Schlosberg's terms). Christians have actually been historically in the forefront of raising questions of environmental justice and in building eco-justice movements, as Schlosberg also notices.[55] Jenkins points out that as a result of eco-justice activity, both (1) the views of the relations between humans and the environment and (2) the views of human personhood have changed.[56] Jenkins does not use the framework of transformative recognition, but it could be evoked here. Perhaps it could be applied also to Sittler's aforementioned ideas of "cognition being sensitized by recognition" and the resulting new awareness of the relationality of human personhood.

Conclusions

On the basis of the analysis above, I argue that theories of recognition are helpful for those who wish to understand (religious) environmentalism better, either from a scholarly or a practical view point.

It was shown that theories of recognition and identity politics help to understand the dynamics related to processes where recognition is sought for nature. These theories help to differentiate the recognition that "environmentalists" seek for themselves and the recognition that is sought for nature, even when these two dimensions are interconnected. An understanding about this difference may provide practical tools to help in processes related to conservation, resulting in psychologically wise language and methods.

Regarding the body, the authority from which recognition is sought, these theories help to understand the similarity between various processes of recognition. For example, discussions in churches about recognition of sexual minorities and about recognition of environmental values reflect certain common dynamics, such as the role of Biblical interpretation.

Further, it was argued, that helps to illuminate the dynamics of identity in environmental groups, such as groups in Christian environmentalism. Since the identity of a group may be tied to the issue at hand, the receiving of recognition may ironically be a threat to the identity of the group. This is important to notice when the history and current status of (Christian) environmentalism is studied. After partial recognition has been granted, the environmental group becomes partly dissolved into the wider (church) body, which now is engaged in environmentalism at some level.[57] As a result, the environmental group or its (former) leaders may become radicalized, since they would desire more extensive recognition for the rights of nature. Radicalization may then easily lead to marginalization. Furthermore, this marginalization may be strengthened by the prevalence of psychological defenses in the current era of climate change. Certain

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54 Deane-Drummond & Clough (eds.), *Creaturely*.

55 For eco-justice movements, see Gibson (ed.), *Eco-Justice*; Hessel, "Eco-Justice"; Schlosberg, *Defining*; Jenkins, *Future*, Chapter 5.

56 Jenkins, *Future*, 204.

57 This has implications also for sociological studies of Christian environmentalism. For example, if there is currently not a strong environmental group related to a certain church, this may be because such a group has been active earlier and received certain results, after which its identity and membership has been divided and partly dissolved. I think that certain elements of this kind of phenomena can be seen in churches whose some members were active in environmental issues already decades ago, such as The (Lutheran) Church of Sweden, The (Lutheran) Church of Finland and The (Anglican) Church of England, but this would require further study.

psychologists and other scholars have argued that people are increasingly anxious about environmental conditions and thus seek psychological means to avoid too much anxiety.[58] When an authority partially recognizes the value of nature and the need for environmental responsibility, this can be used as a sign that things are now better and as a partial excuse for lack of further action. To caricaturize somewhat, people may be tempted to view the environmental group as stubborn radicals, who are not satisfied with anything and who do not need to be listened to anymore.

Although mutuality has been seen as a central feature in theories of recognition, Arto Laitinen's proposal that recognition also includes a possible dimension of giving "adequate regard" was found important and useful as regards non-human nature. The adaptations of Laitinen's thought as regards the environment by two thinkers, Ludwig Siep and Risto Saarinen, was analyzed.

Siep's concept of an "asymmetrical relationship" between humans and non-human nature included the possibility of attributing certain aspects of mutuality between humans and (at least highly-developed) animals. Ecotheologian Santmire's older and somewhat similar proposal of "I-Ens-relations" between humans and other living beings was also discussed. Saarinen's description of the ways in which certain environmental thought systems attribute a "face" to some aspects of nature was carried further into treatment of animal rights, creaturely difference and recognition. Misrecognition and malrecognition, which are common features in inter-human recognition, were argued to happen even more probably between humans and other species. The role of the re-prefix, which some theorists of recognition have emphasized, was explored in relation to recognition of animals through seeing something familiar in them.

The significance of place and environmental conditions for recognition were discussed. It was argued that "theology of place" should be analyzed in connection to ecological theology and recognition, for places are also kind of "faces" through which the wider environment is encountered and possibly recognized as having value. Teea Kortetmäki's pioneering research on environmental ethics and recognition was also discussed.

Even while in ecological theology the voice of nature has usually been seen to be expressed through representatives, "stewards", the question of nature as possibly having its own voice(s) was explored especially in the context of reciprocity and interconnectedness. Certain examples from ecological theology were discussed. The Earth Bible Project included an emphasis of regarding Earth has having its own voice. Pioneering ecotheologian Joseph Sittler discussed reciprocity and even recognition briefly in the early 1970s. Short remarks were made about whether it would be possible to interpret certain people as receiving recognition by their natural environments in a sense of the psychological dimensions of recognition as delineated by such theorists as Axel Honneth. It was noted that theologically this evokes the theme of God's work through nature and thus the old theological themes of natural theology and theology of nature.

As a final major theme, justice and notions of transformative recognition were discussed in relation to ecological theology and religious environmentalism. It was noted that justice issues and especially "eco-justice" movements have been a prominent part of Christian environmentalism, but explicit discussion on recognition in that literature is still minimal. It was argued that theories of recognition and especially transformative recognition bring new light and conceptual clarity to justice issues.

Special attention was given to Andrew Dobson's application of Nancy Frazer's theory of transformative recognition into environmental matters. It was argued that these theories, which draw also from David Schlosberg, Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, offer new and useful ways to understand the role of non-human nature in politics, ethics and discussions on justice. In writings on Christian environmental ethics, the work of Willis Jenkins was found to include discussion on Schlosberg, but the notion of transformative recognition helps to understand certain processes which Jenkins describes. These theories also help to extend the understanding of what has often been discussed in environmental ethics and theology in terms of ecological subjectivity, interconnectedness and relational ontology.

Numerous themes for further research and practical adaptions emerge from this study. I mention only a few examples of the possibilities:
– An analysis of a certain historical process of recognizing nature within a church body by using theories

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58 See Weintrobe (ed.), *Engaging.*

of recognition and identity politics as frameworks; and the development of practical guidelines for such processes by using the knowledge provided by studies in recognition.

– Further theoretical work on recognition processes between humans and non-human animals by integrating literature on animal theology, animal ethics and recognition

– A study on the recognition of a tribe of indigenous people by a church body by using Dobson's framework of transformative recognition as happening between "bundles" of persons, other beings, things and relations

– A theological study on the voice(s) of nature by using the theoretical frameworks introduced here and adding thus also to biblical studies on the theme of nature's voice

– The adaptation of these theoretical frameworks into a practice-oriented Christian eco-justice ethic.

As stated in the beginning, in this article I have focused on Christian environmentalism, and thus my examples of suggested further studies and applications are also written in this sense. However, I repeat my claim that these notions can be applied to environmentalism and, more broadly, religious environmentalism. Theories of recognition offer inspiring possibilities, only a few of which have been suggested here.

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