Opinion
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People watch drones creating a 3D display outside the United Nations Headquarters calling at

People watch drones creating a 3D display outside the United Nations Headquarters calling attention to the Amazon rainforest and climate change in New York City Sept. 15. (OSV News/Reuters/Eduardo Munoz)



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No single term can capture the complexity and magnitude of a universal crisis the likes of global climate change. Phrases like "climate emergency" and "climate catastrophe" convey some sense of the distinctive urgency of the crisis. Concepts like "ecological grief" have appeared in both clinical and popular literature to describe the mental health effects that living in such an environmentally precarious era has wrought across generations. These are all useful terms and ideas that help describe the circumstances in which we find ourselves today.

While these concepts provide us with resources to narrate what is happening to "our common home," as Pope Francis would put it, they fall short of describing how we got here. As the Season of Creation continues and we head toward both its conclusion and release of the pope's forthcoming apostolic exhortation on the environment (largely seen as a follow up to his 2015 encyclical letter "Laudato Si', on Care of Our Common Home," I find myself reflecting on some of the conditions and factors that have brought us to this point.

Related: Pope Francis' new environmental exhortation to be released on Oct. 4

This is why I have been thinking about the concept of "ecophobia" recently.

While the term has been in use since at least the late 1980s (with credit for its first major use in print often given to George F. Will's 1988 op-ed in the Chicago Sun-Times titled "The Politics of Ecophobia"), it has been adopted and expanded by scholars in recent decades.

Education scholar David Sobel's 1999 book, *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*, emphasizes the importance of children learning about and experiencing the more-than-human world. The literary theorist and environmental studies scholar Simon C. Estok's 1999 *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* remains the most expansive study of the idea to date.

Early in his book, Estok describes ecophobia as "a uniquely human psychological condition that prompts antipathy toward nature." He adds, "The ecophobia condition exists on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment."



A climate activist wearing a protective mask protests June 8 while smoke and haze caused by wildfires in Canada pass through New York City. (OSV News/Reuters/Amr Alfiky)

Ecophobia is just one way to express both the overt hostility and the subtle indifference the human species has deployed against the nonhuman world. Disregard, disdain, contempt and even fear of that which is not us and beyond our immediate control in creation have resulted in increasing anthropocentrism over the centuries. We humans have convinced ourselves that nonhuman creation is merely the backdrop to the singularly important matters that pertain to our human lives and ambitions. And this has resulted in tragedy for the whole of creation.

There is overwhelming consensus among the scientific community that the shifts in global climate patterns have, at least in significant part, an anthropogenic origin. Human beings have disproportionately affected the rest of the ecosystems in which we reside, and ever since the industrial revolution, beginning in the 18th century, this negative impact on the more-than-human world has dramatically increased.

But this fact of history does not clearly illuminate *why* the human species has behaved in this way and had such devastating impacts on the rest of creation. I would argue that the term ecophobia gives us at least one lens through which to view our past and present behavior. And the more I reflect on this antipathy toward the more-than-human world, especially considering the Catholic Church's teachings on "care for our common home" in *Laudato Si'*, the more I believe that there is an element of spirituality at work here, too.

Acknowledging the relationship between religion and ecology is not new. In 1967 the historian Lynn White Jr. published what has become one of the most famous articles on the question.

"The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" argued that religion in general and Christianity in particular deserve some blame for our distorted anthropocentric thinking and destructive behavior. Put simply, he contends that in Western cultures, our imaginations, worldviews and sense of ourselves are shaped by religious imagination. Even if one doesn't identify with Christianity (or any other religious tradition), by virtue of socialization and widespread cultural assumptions and references, our outlooks have been formed in a human-centered manner, juxtaposing the nonhuman world to us in adversarial or instrumental terms.

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Although White's article has received a fair amount of critical engagement over the years (on the article's reception, see Elspeth Whitney's 2015 essay "Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' After 50 Years"), I believe that he made at least one important point. Religion and religious imagination do inform our way of thinking about ourselves, the rest of creation and our place within the broader cosmos — for better and for ill.

Although the term ecophobia is admittedly multivalent, suggesting a range of possible applications and interpretations, I want to focus on how inadequate eco spiritualities have and continue to feed a kind of ecophobia among Christians, resulting in indifference toward the more-than-human world.

Despite Pope Francis' clear rejection of the so-called "dominion model of creation" in *Laudato Si*' (no. 67), many Christians still insist that humankind is above and against the rest of creation, that nonhuman creation exists for our use and abuse and that there is no such thing as ecological sin (*Laudato Si*' no. 8). What informs this sense of self-righteousness, sovereignty and domination?

In part, this view is shaped by a conviction that the transcendent pertains to human persons alone. Spirituality is about us and God, and nothing else. It does not recognize the inherent goodness and value of nonhuman creation, nor does this kind of spirituality acknowledge the radical interdependence of all creatures, his view disregards the basic fact that we humans cannot survive without the direct support of millions of other creatures, from small microbes to massive trees.

If we view our faith tradition as speaking a truth only about human persons without considering the broader family of creation, then we may start to see nonhuman creation as an inconvenience or an oppositional force when it is not serving our instrumental needs. This is the birth of ecophobia. The root word (phobia) speaks of "fear" in the most literal sense, but as we know from other contexts, the concept carries a sense of antagonism, hatred, mistrust and dismissal. It's why violence against members of the LGBTQ+ community can rightly be said to arise from

homophobia or transphobia. Fear or anxiety in this sense does not always result in cowering or retreat but is often expressed as violence and abuse. When we relate to the rest of creation in similarly harmful ways, we may be exhibiting the anxiety of ecophobia.

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For some, ecophobia manifests as one motivating factor among others leading to ecological devastation for the sake of human enrichment or comfort (think deforestation, mountain-top removal mining, overfishing, etc.). For others, the anxiety that ecophobia elicits can become so overwhelming that we shut down in the face of such a massive and structural evil as global climate change. This latter condition is what Pope Francis calls indifference.

We are in this environmental catastrophic mess in large part due to the indifference and apathy of those, especially in the comfort of the Global North, who refuse to see the world as it actually is. This is why Pope Francis has called all the baptized to "ecological conversion." He wrote in *Laudato Si*':

> It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an “ecological conversion”, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.

As we eagerly await the new apostolic exhortation and continue to mark the remaining days of the Season of Creation, let us challenge ourselves to embrace ecological conversion by renewing our Christian spirituality to avoid ecophobia and the indifference, harm and violence against the rest of creation that follows.