

Simon Appolloni

Convergent Knowing: Christianity and Science in Conversation with a Suffering Creation

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If the Christian tradition wants to contribute to a more just and sustainable world in the twenty-first century, how must it change? This book argues that Christian communities will need to make a dramatic shift toward 'convergent knowing', paying serious attention not only to the traditions of the faith but also to the liberation of all creatures, scientific worldviews, and environmental degradation.

The author, Simon Appolloni, teaches environmental studies at the University of Toronto and demonstrates a deep engagement with Christian and philosophical thought about environmental issues. His foundational sources are four Catholic thinkers who each powerfully demonstrate his ideal of convergent knowing: the ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, the social psychologist Diarmuid O'Murchu and the cultural historian Thomas Berry.

The first part of the book offers a brief biography of each of these thinkers and a nuanced summary of their work. While some distinctions are made, the emphasis is on common themes in each author's epistemology, ethics and use of science. These are careful and efficient accounts of four important thinkers, offering an introduction to anyone not familiar with their work and insightful connections to those who know some or all of their work well.

The most substantial contribution of this book comes in the second part, in which Appolloni builds a 'communal conversation' between these four thinkers and a variety of interlocutors, devoting a chapter each to liberation, science, faith and epistemology. These chapters emphasise the theme of convergence, finding ways that multiple forms of knowing can come productively together. There is a wealth of insight here, and each chapter concludes in one way or another that it is possible to overcome the conventional thinking that has led to environmental and social crises by more deeply emphasising relationships between ideas, between communities, and between the human and other-than-human world.

This book has a great deal to offer to those who study the intersection of science, religion and ethics. Appolloni argues that these three endeavours must meaningfully converge for any to be equipped to respond to the challenges of the contemporary world. For example, in the chapter on science, he clarifies that the four theologians he is working with pay particular attention to 'post-normal' science, rejecting research distinguished from other forms of knowing with mechanistic methods or claims to objective rationality. Appolloni advocates Thomas Berry's understanding of science as 'ultimately mythic in nature' (p. 125). This helps to justify the chapter on liberation's rejection of criticisms based on the naturalist fallacy, arguing that a genuine dialogue requires movement from descriptions of the world to normative claims. Then in the chapter on epistemology, this leads to an engaging suggestion that religion and science should be understood as symbiotic, without clear methodological or topical boundaries.

The book also engages in an extended reflection on how to balance a moral commitment to the flourishing of the entire creation while attending to the particularities of injustice and oppression in human communities. Appolloni has no simple answer to this challenge, but argues that his method does not require such an answer. To the contrary, the thinkers he has studied model a 'messy' ethics, working toward 'a radically new ethics marked by a process that is complicated, difficult to work with, and lacking in precision' (p. 138). This lack of precision reflects the theme of dialogical relationship once again: the needs of the local and the global, the human and the nonhuman, must be in an ongoing conversation. In such a conversation, various perspectives converge without the expectation

of simple coherence. That this conversation will be ‘messy’ is, for Appolloni, an important and laudable feature of convergent knowing.

These arguments for religion in conversation with a ‘post-normal’ science that helps to produce ‘a radically new’ ethics (p. 138) leads to Appolloni’s culminating argument about the future of Christianity. He argues for ‘a post-normal theology’ (p. 273), based upon convergent and evolving knowledge rather than tradition, helping Christian communities to find meaningful relevance in the complexities of the contemporary world. Appolloni builds a strong case that the four thinkers he is working with converge around such a perspective, and his own constructive argument on behalf of this approach is well-made.

This is a thoughtfully constructed, comprehensively researched and challenging book. I personally disagree with it on a variety of issues: I am more suspicious of attempts to link scientific and humanistic perspectives without substantial attention to the power dynamics between them; I prefer for pragmatic environmentalism to focus more on genuine conflicts and tensions between values and goals; and I would argue that Christian communities have much to offer when they converse with their own traditions as much as they converse with other contemporary forms of knowing. But I mention these disagreements so that I can pay this book a sincere complement: Appolloni takes perspectives like mine seriously and treats them with respect in building his case. I can think of no more appreciative thing to say about a scholarly text than that I disagree with it but find that it has seriously dealt with my main objections.

My strongest critique of this book concerns the scope of the argument, which seems to me overstated. Appolloni has self-consciously chosen to work with four Catholic thinkers, a sensible choice and one that he defends well. However, he frequently uses their thinking to make claims about the future of ‘Christianity’ as a whole, which is less sensitive than it might be to Protestant and Orthodox readers who almost certainly believe their traditions have much to contribute to that future. If, when explaining his choice to focus on four Catholic thinkers, Appolloni had also more clearly have located and focused his argument on Catholic communities, his case would have been stronger. It would also, in my judgment, have made a better invitation to ‘convergent knowing’ with other traditions of Christianity and other religious and moral traditions.

Nevertheless, this is a book that will contribute perspective and insight to anyone interested in the intersection between Christianity and environmental issues, between religion and science, or between theology and ethics. *Convergent Knowing* is worth reading, discussing and arguing with.

KEVIN J. O’BRIEN
Pacific Lutheran University