I am happy to talk about the specifics of the ethnographic study that I conducted in Zimbabwe in the 1990s, as well as the ways in which both the political and the economic crisis have unfolded since 2000 and 2001, which I document. But what I wanted to do more broadly is just to talk about some of the general issues and problems that I think are related, and that tie in very much with several of the themes that we have looked at before. I shall address conflict—which is one thing that in fact we have not really addressed thus far in much detail. And I think that is partly—if I can be provocative—because we are switching now from normative models to some actually existing histories, and of course models of how the world should be, or how humans should act, do not always get borne out in practice.

I want to begin with what is perhaps the most important question: is ecology—the ecological crisis or the environmental movement—giving to what I want to call (problematically) “traditional religions”—in the global South and the non-Western world—a language of universalism that allows them to become consonant with Christianity? In other words, does environmentalism, does the language of ecology, provide animist tribal traditions with a kind of new legitimacy in the light of what we imagine to be the ecological crisis? And I think a follow-on question from that is: does this necessitate or suggest the erasure of the colonial encounter as we scurry on to the increasingly small patch of land evoked by some participants, in the face of a real or imagined flood? Everything’s “green” now, and tribal peoples have always been green and have always refused to accept the logic that had been imposed upon them by colonial era missionaries and states. What I want to emphasize here is the existence of a system of what I am calling, in a very weak sense, “eco-theologies,” quite separate from what we have discussed thus far, and a system, moreover, which the colonial Evangelicals and other Protestants I have studied had a serious problem with. For white colonials in Africa it was a problem because Africans believed that there was a spiritual or divine essence in the rocks, in the trees, in the water, in the fetishes: this...
was a serious problem and this is part of the reason why I wanted to pose to Elizabeth a question about the role that Orthodox Christianities might have assigned to these material things. It is not unique to Protestant traditions; if you look at the history of Catholic missionaries in seventeenth-century Congo, the Capuchins went to the Congolese kingdom and were quite concerned with the existence of fetish objects, with the misattribution of divine power. “Power” is a keyword: there is a politics here, and it is a politics that we have not talked about. For me colonialism is a chapter in the history of iconoclasms, it is about who has the power to name the divine and the presence of the divine.

These traditional religions are systems of eco-theologies that are not and have never been anthropocentric (in the vein of the “perspectivism” argued by Eduardo in his Amazonians studies, where he shows that boundaries between human beings and jaguars are not at all clear). The idea of the human as an individual with a “bounded” self is quite important in the Christian history, whereas these are a group of tribal “eco-theologians” who are not anthropocentric in the manner discussed so far. Probably, it is not a question of whether it is or is not anthropocentric, it simply never occurred to a traditionalist in Zimbabwe that this was a relevant question. Of course, humans were not at the centre of anything, not even as representatives of some kind of divine force.

I think the function of the anthropology is always to question the normative models with which we are dealing and that is what I am trying to do here, to play devil’s advocate. One interesting detail is the fact that not all people have beliefs in creation, in the sense that not all societies have creation myths. So, in the way that anthropologists would describe it, it is not a question of being created or not created and there are at least some Amazonian people for whom this is the case. In Southern Africa there is a rich tradition of creation myths but there are areas of the world in which again creation is not the issue.

What I want to do to conclude is to focus on the economy. I have been struck in my work in Southern Africa by the frequency with which a certain story of the colonial encounter appears. Desmond Tutu tells this story: “When the white man came to Africa—so the story goes—he held the Bible in his hand and Africans held the land. The white men said to Africans: ‘Let us bow our heads in prayer.’ When the Africans raised their heads the white men had the land and the Africans had the Bible.” So this is an exchange of sorts, Bible as gift or Bible as theft, and the fact that it is the archbishop of Cape Town saying this (one of my favorite churchmen), raises some very difficult issues about conflicting passions within the subject. One of the first things colonial missionaries always did when establishing themselves in Southern Africa was reorganizing the space, reorganizing the environment into what they envisioned to be a proper order, creating order out of chaos. And also rationalizing the use of the land—in Southern Africa, in many parts of Latin America, South America, and in North America—often meant: “Look, these Indians, these Africans, they’re not doing anything