

REVIEW ESSAY: ON THE STATE OF THE DEBATE IN ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY

Christianity and ecology: seeking the well-being of earth and humans.

Edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether
(Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000)

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ABSTRACT

This review essay assesses the state of the debate on a Christian Ecological Theology with specific reference to the important volume of essays *Christianity and ecology: seeking the well-being of earth and humans* edited by Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Ruether (2000). It also reflects on the future agenda for an ecological theology, drawing on literature from other contexts around the world.

An abundant wealth of literature on Christianity and ecology has been published over the last three decades. A recent bibliography listed more than 3800 titles (see Conradie 1998). This corpus of literature now forms a rich mosaic of perspectives on the environment from a variety of perspectives, persuasions, continents, countries and bioregions. In the last decade several important edited volumes have attempted to capture the state of the debate. These include *Liberating life: contemporary approaches to ecological theology* (edited by Birch, Eakin & McDaniel, 1990), *Covenant for a new creation* (edited by Robb & Casebolt, 1991), *Christianity and ecology* (edited by Elizabeth Breuilly and Martin Palmer, 1992), *After nature's revolt. Eco-justice and theology* (edited by Dieter Hessel, 1992), *Ecotheology. Voices from South and North* (edited by David Hallman, 1994), *Preserving the creation: Environmental theology and ethics* (edited by Irwin & Pellegrino, 1994), *Theology for earth community: A field guide* (edited by Dieter Hessel, 1996) — to mention only a few.

This volume of 30 essays, 11 responses, a selected bibliography and a topical index, covering no less than 768 pages, is clearly the most comprehensive of such edited volumes in the field of Christianity and ecology. One

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may be tempted to add that it is also the most important publication in the field of ecological theology thus far. This may well be true as far as English language publications from the North American context are concerned. The interesting notes on the 42 contributors indicate that most of these are American or Canadian citizens while others, including John Chryssavgis, Marthinus Daneel, Heup Young Kim, Kwok Pui-lan, and Peter Lee have lived for long periods of time in the USA. Martin Robra (from the World Council of Churches) forms one exception. There is no doubt that North American scholars have led the field of ecological theology over the last few decades. In fact, this may be an appropriate form of contextual theology given the environmental impact of the US economy. Nevertheless, the many significant contributions to ecological theology that have emerged from Australia, Germany, India, the Netherlands, the Philippines, South Africa and the UK should not be underestimated. Perhaps more important than such (mostly) first world publications is the unpublished, unwritten and sometimes unarticulated ecological wisdom that have been accumulated in impoverished local communities in Africa, Asia (especially India), Latin America, the Pacific islands and also in North America itself. These insights have steadily become available to a wider audience through various publications. The volume of essays by women from Africa, Asia and Latin America, entitled *Women healing earth* (edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether, 1996) offers an important contribution in this regard.

This volume of essays forms part of a series on *Religions of the World and Ecology* with Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim as the series editors. This is the product of a number of conferences that took place from 1996 to 1998 under the auspices of the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions. This series of publications builds on an earlier volume of essays from a multi-religious perspective, entitled *Worldviews and ecology*, also edited by Tucker and Grim (1996).

The stimulus behind this series of conferences is the recognition that the environmental crisis is not simply the result of economic, political and social factors. As Tucker and Grim explain in their series' foreword:

It is also a moral and spiritual crisis which, in order to be addressed, will require broader philosophical and religious understandings of ourselves as creatures of nature, embedded in life cycles and dependent on ecosystems. Religions, thus, need to be re-examined in light of the current environmental crisis. This is because religions help to shape our attitudes toward nature in both conscious and unconscious ways. Religions provide basic interpretive stories of who we are, what nature is, where we have come from, and where we are going. This comprises a worldview of a society (xvi).

Christianity has often been accused of providing religious legitimacy to an environmentally destructive economic order. In response, the essays in this volume assess the contribution that Christian theology can make to seek the well-being of earth and humans (as indicated in the sub-title). It would be impossible to provide a summary or an assessment of such a large number of essays here. Suffice it to say that these essays are written by leading scholars in the field, that they cover a remarkable range of topics, and that together they do form the most comprehensive assessment of the state of the debate on ecological theology within the Christian context that is available yet.

With reference to the various contributions in this volume, I would like to offer a few brief comments on the state of the debate in ecological theology:

- With the exception of the excellent contributions of Hiebert (on Genesis 2), Rossing (on Revelation) and also DeWitt (on otherkind), there is relatively little evidence in this volume of the wealth of Biblical scholarship that has emerged on the (ambiguous) ecological wisdom in the Biblical roots of Christianity. The envisaged five-volume series on “The Earth Bible” edited by a team of Australian scholars under Norman Habel and published by Sheffield Academic Press, represents the most important initiative to document the results of such recent Biblical scholarship.
- The volume includes a number of leading essays in the field of systematic theology, including essays on creation theology (by Elizabeth Johnson), Christology (by Sallie McFague), pneumatology (by Mark Wallace) and eschatology/apocalypticism (by Catherine Keller). These essays do not only assess the state of the current debate but also offer creative and constructive proposals for future discussion. Nevertheless, far more detailed and thorough work still has to be done in the field of an ecological systematic theology. Perhaps a series of full-length constructive studies in ecological theology is required that would cover each of the classic Christian doctrines, including the trinity, creation, providence, humanity, sin, the person and work of Christ, the person and work of the Spirit, election, salvation, the church, the sacraments, and Christian hope. Such a series of studies would perhaps be more fruitful if it is done within the more specific context of Catholic, evangelical, feminist, liberation, Lutheran, Orthodox, Pentecostal, or reformed theology. In my view, the contributions of Jürgen Moltmann in Germany on an ecological doctrine of the trinity, creation, Christology, the Spirit and eschatology remain the most comprehensive explication of an ecological systematic theology thus far. In England, Colin Gunton has also published a number of studies on the

doctrines of the trinity, creation and Christ. In the Netherlands, Bram van de Beek has published a number of studies in systematic theology where ecological considerations are taken into account critically.

- Paul Santmire's *The travail of nature* (1985) remains the best available overview of the history of Christian theology from the perspective of ecological theology. Although several other historical studies have attempted to retrieve the always ambiguous ecological wisdom from the life and work of Augustine, Bonaventure, Calvin Franciscus, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhardt, Schleiermacher, Thomas, Wesley and others (not to mention several twentieth century theologians), more detailed work clearly has to be done in this field. Ecological wisdom may also be retrieved from the spiritualities of the desert fathers, Celtic Christianity and Benedictine monasticism. A wealth of literature has also emerged on ecological wisdom in Orthodox Christianity, especially from scholars of Greek origin (see the illuminating essay by Chryssavgis in this volume and the edited volumes by Limouris 1990, Belopopsky & Oikonomou 1996 and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople 1992).
- Ecological theology may be understood, together with liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, womanist theology and various indigenous theologies, as a next wave of contextual theology. There are also numerous linkages between these forms of contextual theology. In this volume of essays there are excellent essays on ecofeminism (by Rosemary Ruether), environmental racism (by Vernice Miller-Travis), African theology (by Marthinus Daneel) and Chinese culture (Peter Lee with a response by Heup Young Kim). It is somewhat surprising, given the North American context, that there are no essays in this volume dealing explicitly with liberation theology, indigenous native American theology (one misses the name of George Tinker?) or womanist theology. Such contributions have to be supplemented by the wealth of other publications dealing with issues of environmental justice, that have emerged from around the world.
- The volume includes a number of excellent essays in the field of ethical theory, covering themes such as natural law (by James Nash), virtue theory (Louke van Wensveen with a response from Steve Bouma-Prediger) and environmental rights (Daniel Cowdin, one misses the name of Holmes Rolston?). Several other essays deal with the need for an appropriate vision of ecological well-being. Further reflection is required on an ethics of responsibility, drawing especially on the contributions of a range of German scholars, including Max Weber, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hans Jonas, Hans Eduard Tödt and Wolfgang Huber.

- The volume includes a number of thorough essays on specific environmental concerns, including technology (by Ian Barbour), population and consumption (by Daniel Maguire and by James Martin-Schramm), climate change (by David Hallman), policy making (William French), and the global economy (by John Cobb). In addition, the essay by Martinus Daneel also deals with the predicament of deforestation in an African context. There are obviously a large number of other environmental issues that require ethical reflection and to which Christian scholars have contributed. These include issues around animal rights, biodiversity, the legacy of development, food production, genetic engineering, land usage, nuclear energy, human sexuality, wildlife, etc., etc. It would clearly be impossible to do justice to each of these issues in a single volume. I would like to emphasise three important Christian contributions to specific ethical issues, i.e. 1) the work of the World Council of Churches on issues of sustainability (also reflected in the essays of Hallman, Rasmussen and Robra), 2) the current debates in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches on the global economy and environmental degradation as confessional issues for reformed churches (see especially the many contributions by Ulrich Duchrow) and 3) the work of Andrew Linzey and associates on animal rights, especially in the UK.
- Ecological concerns have become integrated in several aspects of a Christian spirituality and praxis. Important contributions have been published on ecology and the liturgy, Christian proclamation, the sacraments, Christian formation and education, pastoral care, Christian witness and mission, an individual Christian lifestyle, communal existence, mystic experience etc., etc. In this volume of essays there are helpful contributions on the church's mission (e.g. by Rasmussen), environmental projects (e.g. by Daneel), the Eucharist (an important theme in Daneel's essay), and education (Patricia Mische). There remains a need for educational material in all these spheres in order to transform the ministry and praxis of Christian communities in terms of an ecological ethos.
- Paul Knitter's essay reflects on the possibility that ecological concerns may provide an opportunity of finding common ground between the world's religious traditions. This builds on the important contributions by Hans Küng on the need for a global ethos and on the more recent project towards an Earth Charter. In terms of the larger project of the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions on *Religions of the World and Ecology*, this inter-religious dialogue is clearly

very important. It could therefore have been interesting if the organisers of the conference had allowed some concluding reflections by observers from other religious traditions on the intra-Christian debates contained in this volume.

- Rosemary Ruether's concluding essay suggests that Christian ecological theologies fall into two different types, which she describes as the *covenantal* and the *sacramental* types. The covenantal type is popular among Protestant Christians and draws inspiration from the Bible and the covenantal tradition to emphasise a commitment for right relationships within the earth community. The sacramental type is popular among Catholic Christians and draws on both the Bible and on patristic and medieval mysticism to speak to the heart, to inspire a vision of the sacred and to express an ecstatic experience of communion within the earth community. This typology is reminiscent of David Tracy's distinction between prophetic and mystic manifestations of religions. It will certainly make an important contribution to the debate on an appropriate typology of ecological theologies (see the typologies proposed by James Gustafson 1994, John Haught 1994, Michael Northcott 1996, Max Oelschlaeger 1994, Parker & Richards 1996 and Scott 1998).

CONCLUSION

It should be clear that these comments on the state of the debate in ecological theology do not belittle in any way the enormous contribution that the essays in this volume have made to the field of study. We are all indebted to the dedicated work that Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Ruether have done over several decades. Nevertheless, there is a lot more that has to be done. The remaining agenda of an ecological theology can only be approached adequately if we refrain from repetitive imperatives and if we draw on the experiences and insights from different contexts around the world.

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