



**Hans-Günter Heimbrock and Jörg Persch (eds):** *Eco-Theology: Essays in Honor of Sigurd Bergmann*. Paderborn: Brill – Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2021, 311 pp.

This volume is a book of friends, a *liber amicorum* as the authors themselves express it, to honour their friend and colleague Professor Sigurd Bergmann on his sixty-fifth birthday. Professor Bergmann was born in Germany, where he began his academic studies. In 1980 he graduated in theology from Uppsala, receiving his doctorate from the University of Lund in 1995. For twenty years, between 1999 and 2019, he was Professor of Religious Studies in theology, ethics, and the philosophy of religion at the Department of Archaeology and Religious Studies at the University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway.

It is as a *liber amicorum* that the book should be read. It consists of fourteen chapters or essays, as the subheading of the title states, with authors from Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland, the UK, Montenegro, South Africa, and Indonesia, with the largest component five essays from Norway. According to the editors the book has two intentions: first, to highlight important issues and engage with scholarly analyses; second, to focus on the religious dimension of nature, the environment, and climate change, reflecting Professor Bergmann's lifelong academic work within critical thinking, responsible eth-

ics, and the ingenious spirituality of the earth as a protected habitat. The chapters cover topics such as eco-theology (namely, aesthetics), moral philosophy, theology, the history of religion, the philosophy of education, the history of literature, political theory, and economics, and are divided into five sections with the keywords crisis, nature, spirit, politics, and praxis. As is often the case with text compositions by various authors, the essays show a great variety in context and standard, with some very informative, and others less consistent. It stands out that among the authors there is only one woman, the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, Antje Jackelén.

All the contributions were written during the Covid-19 pandemic, with various lockdown restrictions in all the authors' countries. This casts a shadow on some of the essays, with extensive reflections on the current situation with less optimistic outcomes. When these essays were written, Donald Trump was still president of the US, giving little hope at a global level of a climate change and environmentally friendly policy. In the first essay, the Professor Emeritus in Theological Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion at Åbo Akademi University, Tage Kurtén, emphasizes one of Bergmann's critiques of the important features of modernity dealt with in Suvielise Nurmi's research. Nurmi scrutinizes the individual's position as moral legislator from the notion of moral agency. Kurtén acknowledges that Nurmi has made

several important and critical observations, but he would like to see more consistency in her formulation of an ethical theory that adopts an ecological relational moral agency. This, Nurmi writes, should be one that cares about the ecological virtuousness of the moral agent, which Kurtén maintains is insufficiently radical.

In the first third of the volume the word 'radical' is mentioned in various contexts. Given Bergmann's lifelong achievements within the field of eco-theology, it is surprising that there are not more forcible formulations of theories and solutions in the volume. Because it is a *liber amicorum*, there is less new eco-theology analysis and content, and rather more reflections on and dialogue with Bergmann's work. As eco-theology is a small but growing discipline, the use of theories by (eco-)theologians tends to revolve. A favourite among the theologians quoted in the volume is the Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at the University of Tübingen, Jürgen Moltmann.

A refreshing exception to the spiritual dimension of environmental studies that goes beyond the Jewish and Christian religious traditions is Jon Skarpeid's chapter on the Hindu Declaration on Climate Change (2015), which was written for the Paris Climate Agreement. The initiative for the declaration was from the Oxford Centre of Hindu Studies in collaboration with the Hindu American Foundation, and the multifaith and inter-

religious movements GreenFaith and OurVoices. While the chapter reminds the reader that Hinduism is not practised uniformly, and that eco- or green theology is not exclusively Christian but can also be found in other religions, there is a danger that the chapter maintains a deep-rooted apprehension of eco-theology or ecological movements in non-Jewish-Christian traditions. The academic discipline of religion and nature/environment/ecology is not always directly applicable to non-Christian traditions, and its outcome does not necessarily reflect the big picture in general and the grassroot movements of other religious traditions in particular. Environmental movements and rituals are easily overlooked, often requiring ethnographic fieldwork to be distinguished.

The last part of the book, 'Praxis', includes a chapter by Jan-Olav Henriksen and contains an example of hope, namely the interreligious Hope Cathedral in Norway. In the city of Fredrikstad the Lutheran diocese has taken the initiative of building a cathedral whose construction material will be the plentiful plastic waste from the ocean. Reflecting on the meaning of building a cathedral, Henriksen notes that it stretches over several generations but is also a response to a particular situation. Human practices and actions can be understood as responses to challenges, problems, needs, and difficulties, but also involve hope. A cathedral unites people; it connects heaven and earth; it manifests

the relationship between God and the world: but it can also represent human repentance and acknowledgment of our abuse of the natural world when it is built from plastic waste. Henriksen concludes that whatever meaning a cathedral is given, no meaning or sign functions unless it is used by someone for that purpose.

The volume's last chapter, by Hans-Günter Heimbrock, reflects on practical theology. During the last two centuries, religion, culture, and life have been almost exclusively perceived as social phenomena within this theological field. Heimbrock asks how practical theology can benefit from dealing with the phenomenological approach to the sensual perception of the reality of nature, and how it can acquire an understanding of nature following 'lived experience' in the environment. Heimbrock answers these questions with a threefold task, consisting of several objectives of practical theological research, the special dimension of religious practice, and methodology.

The first task deals with how the study of religiously related experiences of nature exemplify how to benefit from phenomenologically oriented practical theology to gain a new understanding of natural phenomena. Using a qualitative empirical approach, it leads theology to question whether the traditional distinction between 'culture' and 'nature' has ever worked.

Concerning the second task, language, time, and body are di-

mensions of any religious practice. Heimbrock notes that for half a century German protestant practical theology in particular lacked the relevance of architectural surroundings in worship, focusing instead on its verbal content. The 'special turn' known in cultural studies was also picked up by theology. This provided a considerable shift from the older focus on 'time' as the dominant axis to the topological axis. Likewise, it aimed at a shift from taking social activity from a restricted perspective to merely human inter-subjective interaction. This enables a new understanding of how meaning making evolves and develops, not only through cultural but also natural processes. Space is inseparable from human experience based on bodily existence, mediated and produced to a great extent by individual decisions and actions.

Heimbrock's third task for answering his questions is methodology. A movement within theology has followed science in redescribing practical theology as 'Life Science'. The content of this new formula is to elaborate on a new understanding of what the focus of practical theology should be. According to Heimbrock the focus should be on praxis, because practical theology's task is to describe and reflect on religious praxis.

By asking questions relevant for our time, as Heimbrock did, and answering them by challenging and finding space for the answers within the existing academic theological tradition, the authors continue to

follow the path paved by Professor Bergmann within eco-theology.

Apart from occasional and repeated printing errors and strangely divided words like 'ev-erything' and the German '*geschich-tlichen*' and '*si-chtbar*', the book's structure is straightforward. Although its writing was overshadowed by lockdown and Covid-19 restrictions, the volume is timely. As the Stockholm+50-conference is to be organized in the summer of 2022 to mark fifty years since the first United Nations conference on the human environment, an intensified and varied lobbying movement can be anticipated. A volume that gives eco-theology a voice will be valuable.

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