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Book Review

Panu Pihkala, *Early Ecotheology and Joseph Sittler* (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2017), 306pp., €44.90 (pbk), ISBN: 978-3-643-90837-7.

Perhaps religion can provide us with answers to the question of how to engage with the environment in a better way. With climate change, rapid decrease of biodiversity and the global spread of pollution, some have argued that there has been a general turn toward a spiritual awakening. The current volume illustrates this trend, and Panu Pihkala has done an excellent job in bringing to light the early intellectual history of ecotheology in that context.

This is Pihkala's first book, and it builds on his PhD dissertation from the University of Helsinki, supervised by Risto Saarinen. He is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the Faculty of Theology at the same university. As an active member of the Finnish ecumenical and environmental movements, Pihkala is also known as the chairperson of the Finnish section of the international Christian conservation organization A Rocha.[1] This may explain the urgent sentiment and a sense of personal motivation and concern for environment in the text, which makes this book an engaging read.

There is a common assumption (with which I also concur) that ecotheology—that is a theology inspired by ecology—was a brainchild of the 1960s. This was a period in which environmentalists would blame the anthropocentrism of the Christian gospel for ecological ills, and as a result turn to secularism or toward non-Christian religion. In response, theologians would develop ecotheologies to renew Church life and to attract and reconnect with disaffected environmental activists. It is therefore refreshing to read Pihkala's account of how this renewal in the 1960s was built on an older set of theological reflections calling for Christian responsibility towards nature.

More specifically, Pihkala focuses on the intellectual debate in ecumenical Anglo-Saxon literature in the time period between 1910 and 1954, and even more specifically on the work of the American Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler (1904–1987). Sittler, Pihkala argues, was a pioneer in ecotheology. As one of North America's most well-known theologians in the ecumenical movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, Sittler integrated ecotheology with ecumenism.

In the first chapters of the book, Pihkala walks the reader through different forms of early twentieth-century British and American Lutheran theologies on human relationships with nature, and he situates the work of Sittler in this context. Most

1. See http://www.arocha.org/en/a-rocha-finland/.

surprising to me, perhaps, was the role Scandinavian theology played as a source of inspiration for Sittler and his religious companions. Equally interesting is Pihkala's argument that Paul Tillich (1886–1965) was one of the principal theologians to develop ecotheology in the early twentieth century.

Pihkala's study culminates in an analysis of Sittler's ecumenical *A Theology for Earth* (1954), a text that spells out a better human relationship to God and nature. 'God the creator has not only placed man in the fair garden of earth, but has invested both man and his other creation, earth, with the gift to respond to each other in love!' is a key quote from Sittler that Pihkala uses as evidence of his ecotheology (p. 211). Though Sittler's text is widely recognized today as a classic, one of Pihkala's interesting findings is that the text did not attract much attention at the time of its publication. The exception was at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, which invited Sittler to join them as a faculty member after hearing an early version of the text—'God, Man, Nature'—as a lecture.

One problem with Pihkala's analysis is that he uses the word 'ecotheology' anachronistically, which at times feels forced on theological considerations that hardly took into account the science of ecology. Indeed, after reading this book, it is still unclear if Sittler ever read any ecological texts or engaged with ecologists, though he late in life claimed to have been inspired by (but never cited) the American ecologist Aldo Leopold. As Pihkala's methodology and mode of analysis is situated in the history of ideas, one is also left to wonder if the theologians he writes about ever physically or socially engaged with the environment they praised. What is evident is that Sittler and the group of theologians that inspired him brought to surface a deeper theological discussion that has lasted for centuries on how humans should or should not engage with God's creation.

It is refreshing to read Pihkala's detailed and well-researched account of Sittler's thinking and the theologians who inspired him. He is offering a novel interpretation written in an engaging language. *Early Ecotheology and Joseph Sittler* is an important contribution to the history of ecotheology that is well worth the read.

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