

Editorial

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This volume of *Ecotheology* offers reflections on the interaction of religion and environment in a European context.

On the threshold of a new journal, to be administrated henceforth from the USA, it is a pleasure to present contributions by scholars from different countries in Europe. The context of these texts is found in a workshop on the theme of 'Religion and Environment in Europe', which took place at the Theological Philosophical College of the Benedikt-beuern Monastery in southern Germany, 3-5 June 2005. Set against a magnificent Alpine backdrop and geographically situated on the borders between Germany, Austria and Italy, the environment was suggestive of both the plurality of cultural perspectives represented by the international academic collaboration, and the reality of the embeddedness of our cultures within the natural environment.

Twenty-four scholars from ten countries attended and participated in the workshop, which was funded and administrated by the European Science Foundation (ESF). This workshop offered a first opportunity to gather some of the seventy-four scholars from eleven countries who had earlier participated in the formulation of an application to the European Union on the theme of 'Environment, Citizenship and Religion'. Themes for discussions were *Globalization and Sustainability*, *Environmental Justice*, *Space and Aesthetics*, *Religious Identities in Context*, *Worldview*, *Ethics and Theology*, and *Gender and Nature*. Besides the thematic discussions and the keynote addresses, which are published in this volume, surveys of regional developments in Africa, Asia, Russia and the USA were also presented, and the participants of the workshop decided to establish a long-term structure for further cooperation in Europe. An executive committee was mandated to prepare such a structure and to plan for an open international conference, which is to be convened in Bamberg,

Germany, in May 2007. The name for this cooperation will be 'The European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment'.¹

The formulation of the themes and perspectives in this workshop is highly relevant in the context of the establishment of a new European research policy, where the EU's commission for research on the one side would like to develop a stronger 'integration' of research milieus and areas in Europe, while the recently established 'European Research Council' might offer an explosive potential for the renewal of transdisciplinary research activities, even in our field, although its practices of realization still do not offer any signs of hope for such a creative transformation. Therefore, it might even be more meaningful to deepen and distribute the reflections about religious driving forces in environmental contexts of all kinds.

Three reasons can be given for the expanding relevance of the field:

1) The study of religion, nature and culture is not a marginal but a central field for humanities and environmental science for several reasons such as:

- the significance of the concept of 'nature/ physis' in the European cultural history and Western identity through the ages,
- the interreligious and ecumenical dimension of its potential in a pluralistic context,
- the challenge to integrate descriptive and normative research on problems of highly socially relevant topics in Europe and other continents,
- the need for a transformed inter- and transdisciplinary vision of science where problems concerning the interactions between human beings and our natural and built environments should be given higher priority both in the EU and the future European Research Council.

2) The field of the study of interactions of religion, nature and culture does not only allow Religious Studies and Theology to contribute to interdisciplinary and socially formulated investigations, but it changes the identity of the established discipline itself, and thereby it changes the self-understanding of humanities in a common field of academic reflection, which is no longer divided into empirical and hermeneutical cultures. The field of religion, nature and culture could be regarded as a

1. A scientific report from the workshop is available at: http://www.esf.org/esf_genericpage.php?language=0§ion=2&domain=4&genericpage=2168. For information about the Forum, see: <http://www.hf.ntnu.no/relnateur/>.

microcosm of science in general, where different phenomena can be studied in physical, cultural historical and subjective dimensions.

3) A strong need for the cooperation of scholars on a European level can be diagnosed, which would promote the development of this urgent thematic field. Such a European cooperation would contribute to the international mobilization process; it would deliver constructive insights to the decision-making bodies in European and national areas as well as to religious denominations and social movements. An improved understanding of sustainability and environmental and intra- and intergenerational justice issues would constitute a particularly valuable contribution to a highly explosive discourse. Justice can no longer be dealt with simply as a problem of intra-generational resource distribution, but needs to be reconsidered in a wider sense with regard to the complexity of problems that challenge us as we turn to face 'our common future'.

This special volume publishes keynote addresses presented at the workshop in Benediktbeuern. These offer a broad range of perspectives, providing an insight into the complexity and depth of the discourse that this journal has for many years sought to promote and develop.

Two questions are at the core of Nina Witoszek's contribution: a) Is the vision of sustainable development not just ethically justified and economically viable – but captivating enough to clean poisoned wells and restore the structures of the mind? b) Is the current religious revival in non-European countries a possible ally – or adversary – of positive globalization?

Her argument is that among the greatest obstacles to the endeavour of sustainable development is human attraction to stories of excess, profusion, and decadence – a sense of ending or shock. People are compelled by the myths of transgression, irreverence, and the hedonist greatness and glory. By contrast they are not drawn to the penitential story of renewable resources and equal distribution. Economic reason and democratic *Geist* have either devalued or suppressed human desire for transcendence or muddled values. Those who attempt to renew the environmental narrative through the romance with Eastern spirituality or via the anti-globalization protest are often either unwitting allies of neoliberal order or lack any coherent plan or vision of the future. The much-flaunted 'postmodern' mindset is of little use, since it has celebrated the lack of assurance and conviction, and thus launched a quixotic project of founding social and cultural values on the lack of foundations themselves. Witoszek's suggestion is that the search for solid ground should start not just from reclaiming the commons, but also in the first

instance from the re-establishment of the humanist project, which has been lost by Western civilization.

Hans Diefenbacher contributes from the standpoint of a scholarly economist, especially from the perspective of ecological economics. His contribution begins with two central questions in the ongoing discussion of the future of economic theory: How should we apply the concept of justice in our economic models? How are we to connect economic theory and ecology?

Diefenbacher makes evident the well-known deficit of human and social values within the prevailing neoliberal economic model and its failure to reflect the natural dimension. A lot of examples and empirical evidence support such an analysis, such as Amartya Sen's reflections about development, economy and values among the poor and rich, which reveal neglected aspects of human well-being (cf. 'Development as Freedom', 1999). Scientific evidence of accelerating species extinction and the accumulating data on global warming and its increasingly evident consequences, support Diefenbacher's contention that a paradigm shift towards an ecologically inclusive economic model is required. 'Since around 1975, economists have known that time is running out, which necessitates giving priority to the discussion of how to achieve ecological justice', Diefenbacher states. While the contemporary neoliberal economy defers and ignores social and ecological costs, problems of injustice increase. If we do not want to let future generations 'pay', we need to find 'intelligent limits' to economic growth. According to Diefenbacher, three challenges are at the core of such a reorientation of economists. How could we increase the use of renewable energy resources? How could we re-distribute the costs of technical developments? What could the concept of *environmental space* contribute to the transformation of economic theory? Summarizing, Diefenbacher proposes to develop the concept of ecological justice as a guiding principle for global governance, through which we could perceive and integrate the sustainable limits to economic growth in a constructive manner. In such a perspective, economics itself becomes fully dependant on other academic disciplines, due to its inability as an isolated discipline to produce a prognosis for more than five years, and due to its inability to integrate human ethics and worldviews as well as environmental considerations. Self-critical insights about the limits of economics itself and its transdisciplinary cooperation, in this way, could become important tools for a life-affirming economic theory to come.

Celia Deane-Drummond argues that there are theological reasons for being concerned about the economy and justice and resisting the dominance of the global market economy, based on its idolization by Western

cultures, and on the preference for the poor and excluded embedded in the teaching of Jesus. The central Christian belief in the incarnation of Christ demonstrates God's affirmation of material existence. Deane-Drummond also considers helpful the different aspects of justice in the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, for environmental discourse tends to focus narrowly on distributive justice. It is also worth noting that while agents of justice can be restricted to the present human community, this does not apply to recipients of justice. She challenges the idea that cost benefit analyses provide a valid means of assessing environmental decision-making. Deane-Drummond concludes that whilst prudence or practical wisdom includes careful deliberation, it also requires due critical consideration of the values embedded in both the market economy and attitudes to the environment. In addition she raises the issue of how new models of the economy might be developed, although she suggests that communitarian approaches need to be supplemented by national and international considerations of the global market. She then considers the environmental justice movement as a case study, offering a more intermediate practical strategy towards more idealistic ecologically sustainable economies. While the most promising writer in the liberal tradition is John Rawls, his approach throws up a number of difficulties that need to be addressed, not least its failure to address global economics. Interim reformist measures are only likely to be satisfying in the short term for emergency purposes, for they leave the basic model of the economy intact. Deane-Drummond finally argues that the movement towards concern for future generations and non-human species is more likely to be politically achieved in a democratic society through constitutional changes.

Rachel Muers argues that there is a connection between the gendering of thought about nature and the gendering of ethical discourse in relation to future generations. Ecofeminist thinkers have successfully identified and challenged the 'anthropocentric' tendency to define nature as inert, passive, voiceless, an object of exploitation, and so forth, and have shown that this is linked with gender dualities. It has also been shown that thinking about nature in maternal terms need not reinforce such dualities. Talk about 'mother nature', especially when supported by important recent feminist philosophical work on maternal subjectivity, can enable the reciprocal but asymmetrical relation and the permeable boundaries between humanity and the non-human, and between 'nature' and 'culture', to be thought. Muers suggests that this set of philosophical moves can also be valuable in thinking about the relationship of a present society to future generations, such that future generations are not imagined as over against 'us' or as objects for 'our' manipulation, any more than they are imagined as over against the natural environ-

ment within which they exist. To this end, she suggests that theology could usefully reappropriate and rethink some traditional images of the social body as 'maternal'.

My own contribution maps out a new agenda for the study of the spatial dimension of interactions between religion, nature and culture. In spite of many constructive developments, the distinctions between bodies, environment, place and space, and the integration of the four still falls short of a satisfying exploration. In an ecological key, the challenge is to reflect the embodied human and his/her being-in-between-environment-and-space as an indissoluble process. Different concepts of space and place are presented in order to inspire a deeper trialectic mining of space, place, surroundings and environments in Religious Studies, Theology and Environmental Science. Within the framework of my programmatic concept of 'Aesth/Ethics', I discuss the approaches of philosophers Gernot Böhme, Otto Bollnow and Theodor W. Adorno and anthropologist Tim Ingold and their theories about atmosphere, aesthetic justice of the heterogeneous and building, dwelling and housing in order to create fruitful arenas for the study the spatial embeddedness of religion. 'Aesthetic justice' means in such a sense that the *perception* of my human and non-human neighbour's suffering is at the core rather than the consistency of a moral theory with its applied practice. In a normative ecotheology, I emphasize especially the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as a systematic tool to interpret Christian believer's experiences in and with Creation. Finally, three central questions of the workshop's theme are reformulated in the light of this reflection: What is religion? What is environment? What is Europe?

Anders Melin's contribution, finally, widens the European geography by reflecting on the dialogue between Christians and Buddhists. How can this dialogue contribute to environmental philosophy?

The keynote addresses and prepared papers of the workshop tapped a multiplicity of local and regional field contexts in Europe, the complexity of problem formulations founded upon the notions of nature and environment, the constructive plurality of methods and theories and the sociocultural and political relevance of such studies. All these combined to offer strong evidence of the need for a long-term and deepening collaboration, requiring the development of a network of scholars as well as stable research groups.

The broad range of approaches clearly substantiated that problems in the interaction of religion and environment are at stake in religious institutions, processes and traditions as well as in so called 'secular', institutionally and traditionally unbound social and cultural processes. The understanding of our Western concepts and practices of nature and

technology can only take place in the frame of the interpretation of 'the Sacred', as Bronislaw Szerszynski has shown.²

The emergence of green and ecojustice social movements, environmental politics, the ongoing evolution of economic modes of production and consumption and the ambiguity within discourses on sustainability ethics show that environmentalism is comparable to a child that only recently learned to walk. Ecospiritualities of different kinds seem to be the invisible backbone of the growth of this child. The on-going challenge for a European collaboration is to create a secure framework for academic cooperation to channel this powerful energy, to promote unity within the diversity of European contexts and to explore the local and global implications of a new emerging earth religion. The commitment of the participating scholars at this workshop to such a vision has been obvious.

Whilst the recently founded Society for the Study of Religion and Nature, based in Florida, still struggles to constitute itself as a truly international and transnationally balanced forum, it seems even more important to develop regional and continental activities, which can empower each other reciprocally in the future. While the Florida-based society has chosen from its inception to offer an open structure for the participation of scholars from all countries – even if this is juridically structured in accordance with a political culture only familiar to scholars in the USA – the European way of organizing a collaboration might choose a more transcultural path, where differences of European milieus in its Northern, Eastern, Southern and Central parts are cultivated in a polycentric mode of integration, even if this needs a strong mobilization of communicative energies. It might also develop into a cooperation in which the active construction of transdisciplinary and translocal research groups on specific topics might be its driving force along with a rhythm of open biannual international conferences. Metaphorically speaking, current signs are showing a green light in European research politics for environmental studies including religious and spiritual dimensions. What this means in concrete decision making and power sharing processes however still needs to be tested.

In any event, problems in human interactions with natural and built environments will not leave us soon or smoothly. As long as our concepts and practices of nature and technical interaction with it are embedded in ongoing transformations of the Sacred, the relevance of the perspectives represented in this volume and the long history of the journal, *Ecotheology*, will remain freshly relevant, highly explosive and an essential component of the quest for deeper solutions to our common problems.

2. Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005).