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Editorial

Celia Deane-Drummond

University of Chester
Department of Theology and Religious Studies,
Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ

This issue of *Ecotheology* breaks new ground for the journal by publishing a position paper, followed by responses from an international group of scholars. The position paper also exceeds the normal word limit for an article, but this should not be taken as setting a precedent for other articles to be received for publication. In this particular case, however, I believed that it was worth making an exception of the word limit, as the following discussion only made sense in the light of the full article, rather than a truncated version of it.

This issue, therefore, begins with the publication of this significant paper by Ernst Conradie, which sets out a series of challenging theses for all aspiring ecotheologians, even while admitting that he is writing from his particular South African context. Some highlights of this paper include his discussion of the need for earthkeeping praxis, ethics and spirituality, where ethics is understood as much in terms of ethos as a particular way of thinking philosophically about the value of the earth. He also reviews the theological rationale for a specific Christian approach to earthkeeping, including styles of theology that are apologetic, sacramental or eschatological in emphasis. More importantly, perhaps, he lays out an agenda for how theological reflection might develop in the future in the light of his experience as both a practitioner of earthkeeping and from the perspective of specific theological premises. In the first place, he argues that we need much fuller discussion of how the transcendence of God might be understood. He also suggests that we need to find ways of avoiding anthropological dualism with the natural world, while retaining some distinctions. For eschatology there can be tendencies towards either an escapist view of the future, detaching from the earth, or ones that are merely grounded in this-worldly values. The latter raises the issue of the relationship between creation and redemption and how these themes might be integrated. There are also problems once an

option is taken to focus on either Christology or Pneumatology, so a larger question becomes how to relate these two themes together. He concludes that the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of stressing immanence, this worldliness and bodiliness, detaching itself from more traditional Christian doctrines that express transcendence, the divinity of Christ, the human soul, and so on. This is controversial, as many ecotheologians have based their career on what they see as correcting a tendency in the opposite direction, namely a detachment of Christian theology from the earth. Finally, and particularly relevant for the future of this journal, he raises the issue of how Christian earthkeeping practices relate to other earthkeeping practices arising from other discourses in other contexts and drawing on alternative convictions.

Ernst Conradie has boldly thrown out the gauntlet for others to respond, and they have made extensive comments on his paper in the following discussion document. These discussion papers, including comments from Sigurd Bergmann, Robert Borrong, Steve Bouma-Prediger, myself, Denis Edwards, William Everett, David Field, Samson Gitau, Jesse Mugambi and Peter Scott illustrate the lively debates that arise out of this paper. Ernst Conradie also presents a rejoinder to these comments, but in itself this discussion invites the reader to take part and also join in the conversation. It is my hope that this will stimulate other articles for *Ecotheology,* and perhaps other book projects.

The article by Elizabeth Theokritoff, writing from an Orthodox perspective, is perhaps a good example of the kind of ecotheology that Ernst Conradie is recommending. It offers a well argued response to the view that understanding humans as in a distinctive role, as priests of creation, somehow devalues the non-human creation and the praise that non-humans offer to God. She suggests that the language of priesthood needs to be seen as one image amongst many, and more important, perhaps, priesthood is situated as integral to a cosmic liturgy in which all creatures play a part. Priesthood, therefore, is a priesthood of creation, and as such creation needs priestly mediation because the praise from both humanity and creatures awaits final consummation, namely the transfiguration of all creation in Christ. Her paper offers an important corrective to labels of anthropocentrism that are sometimes directed towards the notion of priesthood. Conradie has indicated that we need to bring back a stronger notion of God's transcendence and human difference from non-humans. The Orthodox view has the advantage of being embedded in a cosmological liturgy that softens its hierarchical approach, but those theologians committed to more contextual theologies may still need more convincing.

Barry Leal's paper focuses more specifically on biblical theology, exploring the notion of wilderness in some detail. He believes that the traditional Western attitudes to wilderness have been far from conducive to environmental responsibility, highlighting dominance, rather than respect and collaboration. He also raises some political reasons for this trend and argues for the importance of an adequate understanding of what wilderness means in the Christian tradition, using primary sources in the biblical record. He believes that we need to face up to those negative strands in the biblical account towards wilderness that are evident from the texts, and see where such negative attitudes are grounded in the particular context of the writing of that period. He identifies negative attitudes in the Pentateuch, in particular, in several of the Prophets, in Job and the New Testament. He offers ways of considering how this negativity might be addressed in contemporary discussions in ecotheology. His paper is an important corrective to any assumptions that wilderness is a good that emerges from the scriptures, and by tracing the sources of these negative attitudes, offers one way of interpreting the persistence of such attitudes today.

Michael Northcott's paper is also devoted to the theme of wilderness, but it is grounded more specifically in a practical discussion about the attempts by nature conservation bodies to restore wilderness to some parts of the Scottish Highlands. It is a good example; perhaps, of the counter movement in contemporary society against the negative attitudes towards the wilderness that Leal has identified in his paper. Yet Northcott argues that the restoration projects are far from ideal, since they will inevitably fail to achieve the levels of biodiversity obtained before the first Clearances took place. He also argues that wilderness restoration too often amounts to a romantic fetishisation of wild nature, including other practices such as wilderness therapy. He also, interestingly, highlights the biblical account of wilderness restoration, where such restoration is inclusive of adequate treatment of the poor. He suggests, and I think correctly, that the contemporary philosophical discussion of wilderness has tended to ignore the plight of indigenous peoples. The land reform project of the Scottish Parliament is more inclusive of the needs of both people and land, and therefore, he suggests, comes closer to the biblical vision of restoration. It is also important to point out that the negative attitude towards the wilderness in the biblical record refers to those aspects of the wilderness that are seen as inhospitable for life. When Northcott refers to wilderness restoration in the biblical account he is more accurately referring to that notion of wilderness that is more common among contemporary scholars, namely a place where

the land itself can flourish and support life in all its biodiversity. The two papers discussed in this volume help to highlight the difference, but also the common ground between ancient and modern interpretations of wilderness, and the significance for developing an adequate interpretation of environmental responsibility.

Overall, while the papers in this collection are diverse, they all show in important ways the benefits of both practical discourse using particular case studies, but also more theoretical considerations from a particular theological vantage point. It is my hope that this issue will raise new and important areas for discussion among scholars from a wide variety of perspectives.