

# Halvard JOHANNESSEN

## Learning to Care: Theology and the Ecological Crisis

This article was begun upon as the Johannesburg Summit 2002 – the World Summit on Sustainable Development, was finishing off. The Summit brought together tens of thousands of participants, including heads of states and governments, national delegates and leaders from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and businesses, to focus the world's attention on poverty and ecological challenges. And ecological challenges are indeed making themselves known. Four out of five of the warmest years ever recorded were in the 1990s, and 1998 was the warmest year globally since records began in 1861. Average global sea levels have increased by between 0.1 and 0.2 metres over the last 100 years, while snow cover in the Northern hemisphere has declined since the late 1960s by around 10%. And the weather will continue to change. Hurricanes are likely to be more intense in some parts of the world, due to more rainfall and more intense winds.

Although there are more signs of an ecological crisis, there is at the same time a growing awareness of it, which also comes along with a growing will to change. The Kyoto Treaty on Global Warming is one example. But at the World Summit, German Chancellor Gerhard SCHRÖDER summed up the general situation in the following words: "Climate change is no longer a sceptical prognosis, but a bitter reality." Historians and others have asked themselves: why are we facing this ecological crisis?

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## I. Key Problem – Christian Theology?

In 1967 the historian Lynn WHITE delivered some severe claims about the Christian tradition in his article *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis* (Science 1967, 1303-1307). WHITE argued that the very roots of the ecological crisis lie in the Christian tradition. There are especially three main features of mainstream Western theology, which can be seen as sources for the modern, destructive view of nature.

White's first point is that theology has separated humankind from the rest of creation, and put humans on top of the hierarchy. The second point is that a similar separation can also be found between humanity and God, and the third claim is that theology has given the West an instrumental conception of nature. Because of the authoritative position that Christian theology has enjoyed in Western history, these three main ideas have shaped the Western mind towards a dangerous conception of nature. To put it simple, today's ecological disasters is the final outcome of these Christian ideas.

Is Christianity really the most important source of the ecological crisis? The answer seems ambivalent. On the one side, the Bible tells us that man shall rule the earth and its creatures. The theological tradition has produced ideas about nature which clearly have been too concentrated on the human condition, and especially on the relationship between the isolated individual and God. Theology has in many ways forgotten about the relationship with nature (and the relationship among people as well).

On the other hand, this is not the whole story. There are indications that WHITE's three claims about Christianity are not so novel features of Christianity after all. First of all, the gaps that separate the individual from the world and from God, are important features of modern philosophy. This and other dangerous ideas in Christianity, ecologically speaking, first appeared in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At this time the mechanistic view of the nature developed with full force with thinkers like MERSENNE and DESCARTES. But it emerged in philosophy, and more importantly, in a philosophy that had lost its ties with theology. For the first time Europe now looked upon nature as a machine, and seemingly abandoned by God it could for the first time serve only human purposes. These purposes were fulfilled through modern science and technology, which used nature as an instrument to gain their goals. Most of the international politics, economics and industry of today, fully represents this view either explicitly or implicitly.

Some of the theological ideas that WHITE criticised were developed mainly after this mechanistic philosophy and science had developed and, more importantly, after theology had been influenced by these developments.

One cannot criticise this theological view of the nature without at the same time criticising modernity's view of nature, of which theology is but one marginal aspect.

## II. Answering the Challenge: the Birth of Eco-theologies

Theologians could not remain indifferent after 1967. Even if his historical claims were too one-sided, WHITE had caught contemporary theology unprepared – almost no contemporary theologian had a focus on ecology. The ensuing debate triggered a lot of theological work in the years that followed, and the term 'ecological theology' soon appeared.

There had been some predecessors, whom Teilhard DE CHARDIN was one of the modern pioneers of, calling for a change in the Christian concept of nature already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But in the last thirty years we have for the first time ever seen a theology deeply devoted to modern ecological problems, and among these various 'eco-theologies' I will mention three important contributions.

The first among these "green theologies" has been inspired by so-called covenant theology, which is a common element of traditional theology. Process theology is another important contributor. It has inclinations towards both deep ecology and process philosophy, and often seems to be less orthodox than the first one. The third and last theological movement which have proved fruitful in connection to ecology, is feminist theology.

### 1. Covenant Theology

Covenant theology is closely linked with the name of the Reformed pastor and scholar Paul SANTMIRE. In his work *Brother Earth: Nature, God and Ecology in Time of Crisis* (1970), he argues that theological ethics has a too narrow definition. It only concerns humanity, while there is a need for an ethics of nature. His starting point is the Kingdom of God, and he considers nature a member of the "divine society". All peaceful societies need rules to live by and regulations for their interactions. If we do not have some kind of a covenant between humankind and nature, we will not be able to live peacefully with the nature.

The large-scale flooding of cities like Dresden and Prague in the summer of 2002 helps to illustrate SANTMIRE's point: we do not live according to the covenant; therefore we are not at peace with nature. In the Kingdom of God we have to recognise the rules we have to live by; sustainable development and reductions of pollution, consumption and of the living standards of the West.



## 2. Process Theology

A main figure of process theology is John COBB. Process theology is above all characterised by its emphasis of relations: no one and nothing lives by themselves, not even God! Relations are fundamental for all kinds of life, and therefore we have to protect and nourish our relations. Applied to ecology, this means that we have to care for our relationship with nature. Here is the link to so-called deep-ecology, which stresses the fundamental oneness of all things. If everything really is one through the web of relations, then even the smallest particles gain value from the mere fact that they exist. We must also act according to this value.

This brings us to another point of process theology, namely the dynamic character of creation. There is a possibility in everything to develop and realise itself. This is not only a feature of human beings, but of all existent things down to the smallest proton. In other words, we should look after nature to safeguard its ability to develop according to its own lines.

### 3. Feminist Theology

Feminist theology is a third branch of modern theology that has proved fruitful in connection to ecology. An important contribution is Sally McFAGUE's book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (1987). A common feature of this kind of theology is the claim that male dominance is connected to many destructive elements in our culture, the ecological crisis being one of them. There is a special relation between women and nature, since they both are, and have been for ages, exposed to male oppression.

Experiences of oneness between women and nature call for a special feminist concern with nature. Through experiences of and in nature we realise our dependence on it, which in turn reveals an ethical demand to care for nature. Even if this is a feminist perspective of nature, it does not concern only women. Feminist theologians think that men can learn from women to search for and discover similar experiences, and this aspect gives feminist ecological theology a universal appeal.

### III. Ecological Theology before Modernity

In addition to these new currents in theology, I will point out that the Christian tradition is often overlooked in the quest for a theology of nature. There are some "historical roots" to be discovered not only "for the ecological crisis", but also for an ecological theology. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, John SCOTUS ERIUGENA created a Christian philosophy of nature, far from our ecological situation and very different from WHITE's account of Christianity. In some aspects he could be considered a 1200-year-old forerunner of deep-ecology.

In his main work *De Divisione Naturæ* he says that nature is not a world apart from humanity and God. 'Nature' denotes the whole Reality, the totality of everything, both visible and invisible, both worlds, humanity and God. God has not only created nature, but God is created in nature, too. God is not hidden, as in another world, some kind of the world's second floor. Quite the contrary, God is revealed through animals, mountains, plants – being the essence of creation. Creation is in fact a multitude of theophanies (appearances of God). Not in the sense that a tree is God, or

that a stone is God, because the oneness of God overflows both particular things and the visible world as a whole.

Christ functions as the mediator of creation, it is through Him that creation flows from God into every particular being. And at the end of the times, the whole creation will flow back again the same way, through Christ into the oneness of God. It must be pointed out that this Christian philosophy of nature can serve as a reminder today, as a correction of modernity's use and misuse of nature. How much value does nature have in itself, if every bird and flower participates in the divine, showing us God?

Another important point is that the existence of this medieval Christian view of nature proves that an ecological theology does not necessarily emerge only when crisis demands it. This was not developed because the situation enforced it, as is largely the case of the eco-theologies of today. Therefore it can be said that at least some ecological elements reside in Christianity – naturally, so to speak.

#### **IV. Taking Action**

Christians are of course facing the task of saving the environment together with people who have all kinds of religious concerns. The situation of today is characterised by certain positive changes, which hopefully will continue to develop. But if the scientific prognoses are right, our climate will be very different in the next ten to twenty years. But most commentators say it is not too late to do anything about it, and we all need to work together to reduce the damage. The environmental issue transcends traditional boundaries, it is a fight in which women and men, non-believers and believers, old and young, are called to act together.

But what particular lessons can the green theologies, new and old, teach us in this struggle? Are there not some missing links between theory and practical application? The bottom line must be that we have to act together with all kinds of people, to save the environment. Simple things are often the most important, because they make a change in everyday life: turning off lights when you leave a room; turning off televisions, videos, stereos and computers when they are not in use (they can use between 10-60% of the power they use when on); letting your clothes dry naturally rather than using a tumble drier; using energy saving light-bulbs; travelling by train or bus instead of a car; cutting down on meat in favour of vegetables; giving your votes to politicians with ecological concerns; arranging "green services" in your church, etc. The possibilities are almost infinite, and as long everyone is at least doing something, there is hope.

Caring for nature starts in the heart, as does every kind of love. And in my opinion, here lies the main privilege of eco-theologies: eco-theologies alone can open our eyes to the divine beauty of nature; they show us the holiness of nature and thus the infinite value of nature. Only eco-theologies can show us these kinds of perspectives or reasons. And the religious aspect of these reasons makes them personal; they are able to strike the hearts as well as the minds. And as such eco-theologies can teach us to care in a unique way. They can change our hearts, so that we suddenly find ourselves caring for nature – in other words: taking action. As a concern for nature stems from the heart, so does liturgy. Being an obvious practical application of eco-theology, caring for the environment can start with a prayer from the heart, to the heart, so that the rest of us may follow:

We thank you, merciful God,  
for the beauty of the earth and the sea,  
for mountains, plains and rivers,  
for the singing of the birds and the grace of flowers.  
We thank you for all good gifts,  
and pray that they may be preserved for those who come after us.  
Let our thankfulness for your rich creation grow, joyfully.  
Let us taste the meal you have prepared in the world to come.  
We pray that we all may inherit the treasures of the holy,  
and that we may live in your heavenly city,  
in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord,  
who lives and governs with you in the oneness of the Holy Spirit,  
for ever one God, in a world without end.  
Amen <sup>1</sup>

Suggested Reading

COPELSTON F. SI, *Augustine to Bonaventure*. In *A History of Philosophy*. Maryland, 1962.

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KRISTIANSEN R. E., *Økoteologi*. Frederiksberg, 1993.

POPKIN R. H., *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*. Netherlands, 1960.

[www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

<sup>1</sup> *En verden uten ende*. 1991. part 1, 67.



### **Halvard JOHANNESSEN: A gondoskodás föladat: Ökológiai krízis és teológiai megközelítések**

Lynn WHITE Az ökológiai krízis történeti gyökerei című kritikai tanulmányában (1967) kijelentette, hogy a környezeti válság gyökerei a keresztény hagyományba nyúlnak vissza, s ezzel jókora próba elé állította a teológusokat, ha meg akarták válaszolni eme kétélű kérdést. Az effajta "zöld teológia" első változatát még az úgynevezett szövetségi teológia ihlette. Ennek kiindulópontja Isten országa, miközben hangsúlyozza, hogy az "isteni társadalomnak" részese a természet is; illetve, hogy szükségünk van egyfajta szövetségre az ember és a természet között, a békés együttélés érdekében. A folyamatteológia szintén fontos előzmény a teremtés összefüggéseinek és dinamikus jellegének hangsúlyozása révén. Ökológiai alkalmazásában ugyanis kiderül: minden létező számára adott a haladás és az önmegvalósítás lehetősége – éppen ezért kellene vigyáznunk a természetre, hogy megőrizzük annak fejlődőképességét. A harmadik előzmény a feminista teológia azon meglátásával, hogy a férfiuralom összefügg kultúránk számos romboló elemével, köztük az ökológiai válsággal.



### **Halvard JOHANNESSEN: Uczenie się jak dbać: Teologiczne podejścia do kryzysu ekologicznego**

Krytyczny artykuł Lynn WHITE "Historyczne korzenie naszego kryzysu ekologicznego" (1967), twierdzący, że korzenie kryzysu ekologicznego leżą w tradycji chrześcijańskiej, były wyzwaniem dla teologów, by odpowiedzieć na to ambiwalentne pytanie. Pierwszy z tych "zielonych teologów" był zainspirowany tzw. teologią przymierza, mającą początek w Królestwie Boga, podkreślającym, że przyroda jest również członkiem "boskiego społeczeństwa", a my potrzebujemy jakiegoś rodzaju przymierza pomiędzy rodzajem ludzkim a naturą, by być w stanie żyć z nią w zgodzie. Teologia procesu to kolejny ważny wkład, ukazujący związki i dynamiczny charakter stworzenia. Zastosowana w ekologii, ukazuje istniejącą we wszystkim możliwość jej rozwoju i samorealizacji, a my powinniśmy opiekować się przyrodą, by zapewnić jej ten rozwój. Trzecią jest teologia feministyczna ze swoim twierdzeniem, że męska dominacja jest związana z wieloma destruktywnymi elementami naszej kultury, a kryzys ekologiczny jest jednym z nich.

**Halvard JOHANNESSEN: Učit se péči:**



**Teologické přístupy k ekologické krizi**

Kritický článek Lynn WHITEA, *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis* (1967), ve kterém autor prohlašuje za kořeny ekologické krize křesťanskou tradici, byl velkou výzvou teologům, kteří se z různých hledisek snažili s touto ambivalentní otázkou vyrovnat. První z těchto „zelených teologů“ byli inspirováni teologií smlouvy, která vychází ze skutečnosti Božího království a zdůrazňuje, že také příroda je členem „boží společnosti“. Tudiž abychom mohli žít v mírovém vztahu k přírodě, potřebujeme nějaký druh smlouvy mezi přírodou a lidstvem. Dalším důležitým příspěvkem byla procesuální teologie se svým důrazem na vztahovost a na dynamický charakter stvoření. Vztazeno na ekologii, ve všem je možnost k rozvoji a seberealizaci a my tedy máme o přírodu pečovat, abychom tak ochránili její možnost k vlastnímu rozvoji. Konečně feministická teologie vystupuje s tvrzením, že mužská nadvláda je spojena s mnoha destruktivními prvky v naší kultuře a ekologická krize je jedním z nich.

**Halvard JOHANNESSEN: Lernen Verantwortung zu übernehmen:**



**eine theologische Annäherung an die Öko-Krise**

Der kritische Artikel „The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis“ (1967) von Lynn WHITE stellt die These auf, dass die Wurzeln der Öko-Krise in der Christlichen Tradition liegen und dass die Herausforderung für die Theologie darin liegt diese zwiespältige Frage zu beantworten. Die ersten dieser „grünen Theologien“ wurden durch die sog. „covenant theology“ geprägt. Der Ausgangspunkt hierbei war das Reich Gottes, wobei betont wurde, dass die Natur auch ein Teil der „göttlichen Gemeinschaft“ ist, und wir eine Art Vereinbarung zwischen Mensch und Natur brauchen, die es uns ermöglicht in Einklang mit ihr zu leben. Grossen Einfluss hat auch die „process theology“, die besonders die Beziehungen und die dynamische Art der Schöpfung heraushebt. Auf die Ökologie bezogen heisst das, dass es immer und überall möglich ist sich weiter zu entwickeln und zu verwirklichen. Deshalb sollten wir auf die Natur Acht geben um ihre Fähigkeit sich weiter zu entwickeln zu sichern. Als dritte theologische Richtung ist die „feminist theology“ zu nennen. In ihr wird behauptet, dass die Dominanz des Mannes mit vielen zerstörerischen Elementen unserer Kultur verbunden ist, wobei die Öko-Krise ein Beispiel dafür ist.