

## *Trees van Montfoort*

### **Green theology: The (in)visibility of the non-human world**

Last year I published a book on eco-theology: *Groene theologie* ('Green theology').<sup>1</sup> It got the prize for the best Dutch theological book of the year 2019:

The jury, reviewers from the Dutch daily papers *Trouw* and *Nederlands Dagblad*, calls it **"a hyper-urgent and necessary book"**. It challenges "a far-reaching Christian theological reflection on the relationship between God, creation, nature and man." According to the jury, this book also shows that ecology has everything to do with theology.<sup>2</sup>

The book introduces and designs an eco-theology for the Churches in the Netherlands and Flanders, both Catholic and Protestant. This article is about the main arguments of the book and something of its reception. I argued why a new worldview is necessary in the context of the ecological crisis, reread the Bible from an eco(-feminist) point of view (on Creation, God, and animals, Salvation of the earth). I also discussed the traditional apprehension of and even downright resistance against any form of connecting God and nature, and examined the possibilities of four eco-feminist theologians for the Dutch-speaking countries.

#### **Theology in times of ecological crisis**

My main argument is that ecological theology is not a subdiscipline of theology but a rediscovery of theology as such. Theology, in general, is too much focused on God and human beings – or just on human beings – making the rest of the world invisible. Since the end of the Middle Ages, men have become the centre of the world, that is to say, some human beings: male, white, etcetera. Therefore, I use the word "men". With the rise of humanism,

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<sup>1</sup> Trees van Montfoort, *Groene theologie* (Skandalon: Middelburg 2019). An English translation is in preparation.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nachtvandetheologie.nl/>, 20 November 2019.

the scope narrowed from God and the whole world to men and their societies. Philosophers like Kant and Hegel reinforced existing hierarchical dualisms between humans and nature, spirit and matter, humanities and science. The whole non-human world was made an object to explore and to exploit. This way of thinking is at the root of the ecological crisis. Too much of the ecological activities of the Churches in the Netherlands take for granted this frame of men exploiting the world with technology in search of profit, what Pope Francis calls “the techno-economic paradigm.” The only thing that eco-theology seems to offer is some additional motivation to be careful with the resources because they are not endless. I, on the other hand, maintain that theology should be more than an inspiration for ecological practices like solar panels and more than ethics or anthropology. Theology should envision the whole world again. Cosmology should be part of theology again in order to say something new from its own sources about the ecological crisis.

### **Bible and dogma**

The Bible is a book from a patriarchal society that needs a lot of interpretation to be beneficial for women. An ecological reading of the Bible is to some extent much easier because the Bible is much more inclusive about nature than modernity. The Bible could, therefore, function as a mirror for modern people by showing a different worldview: the role of human beings in relation to the earth is, first of all, to be aware that one is a creature among other creatures. It came as a surprise to me that texts about God creating often represent God with female characteristics, as a Spirit, giving birth or as Lady Wisdom. In the New Testament, Jesus is even portrayed as the incarnation of Wisdom. Texts on Christ as creator have a lot of resemblances with hymns of Sofia, Wisdom, a fact that is either completely overlooked or downplayed in a lot of commentaries. Christ and Wisdom are represented as being with God before the creation, as the firstborns of creation, the image of God, executor of God’s works... In short: as fully God and fully part of the world. This Wisdom Christology may not be new at all in feminist theology,<sup>3</sup> but it is certainly new for most of my readers. An eco-feminist approach to Christology is important because much of eco-theology with a Protestant or Evangelical bend focuses on the male power of God and Christ. “Christ is the Lord of the whole world,” “God

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (Darton, Longman and Todd: London, 2008) and Celia Deane-Drummond, “Sophia: The Feminine Face of God as a Metaphor for an Ecotheology,” in: *Feminist Theology* 6/16 (Sep/1997), 11-31.

owns the world”... The *logos* of the New Testament is translated as “Word” or “Son,” thus associating Christ with a male omnipotent creator who creates out of nothing by commanding from the outside. I found that the Bible pictures God cooperating with the earth (Gen 1:24: “God said ‘Let the earth bring forth’”). God is either just male or female and both immanent and transcendent. Christ as the incarnation of Wisdom and savior of the world becomes an important topic, which is also the key for an eco-feminist Christian theology. I propose a re-evaluation of the dogma of the two natures of Christ as a deconstruction of the hierarchical dualisms of God and the earth, spirit and matter, male and female. The incredible dogma splits open in the diversity of creation.

The Bible and this dogma can help us to make the non-human world visible again in theology and to depict nature neither as something hostile nor as a background for the history of God and man, but as the very world of which we are a part and on which we depend, as all cultures seem to acknowledge except the modern Western one.

### **Resistance against eco-theology**

Many of my readers respond well to what I write about the Bible. The chapter on the Bible broadens their horizon, being a real eye-opener for some. Surprisingly, these reactions come from liberal Christians as well as Evangelicals and Orthodox Protestants and Catholics. Only the admirers of Karl Barth are not amused, which is hardly surprising, because they tend to associate a positive approach of nature with paganism and even with national socialist ideology. There is still a great fear in some parts of the Protestants Churches of connecting God and the earth too closely. They contrapose nature and history as if nature is static and captivating and history is about God liberating human beings from nature. This is based on 19<sup>th</sup>-century biblical theology that saw the religion of Israel as anti-nature.<sup>4</sup>

### **Eco-feminism**

In the fourth chapter of my book, I explicitly treat eco-feminism and show how the insights of eco-feminist theologians worldwide can enrich the theology in the context of the Netherlands. I argued that every eco-theology needs to be feminist theology as well as to avoid some pitfalls of eco-theology. The first pitfall is – I already mentioned it – that the traditional image of God does

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<sup>4</sup> Kune Biezeveld, *Als scherven spreken: Over God in het leven van alledag* (Meinema: Zoetermeer 2008).

not change, God continues to be a male ruler and the scheme of domination is left unquestioned. The second pitfall is that the image of mankind does not change. The question has to be asked: which human beings are included and which are excluded? Who are human beings in the great scheme of things? How does a human being relate to the place where she happens to live? The third pitfall is that eco-theology emphasizes the splendor of the evolving cosmos, leaving aside suffering and evil in all its manifestations.

I selected three eco-feminist theologians: Ivone Gebara (Catholic, Latin American), Catherine Keller (Protestant, North American), and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Orthodox, European).<sup>5</sup> Later I added Sallie McFague, one of the founding mothers of eco-feminist theology. My selection criteria were that they are engaged with the Christian tradition but in very different ways, and that they are systematic theologians. A common thread in all of them is a panentheistic view and an emphasis on relatedness. Panentheistic is neither theistic nor pantheistic, neither God as a being outside of the world nor God as interchangeable with the world, but God in everything and different from everything. Panentheism means immanence and transcendence.

### **Gebara, Keller and Theokritoff**

Brazilian Ivone Gebara teaches the perspective of poor women and a type of anthropology in which human dignity does not compete with God or the earth but is embedded in both. In her epistemology, she shows that ecological and gender perspectives are needed to understand the world and to unmask the leading “religion” of the market economy.

To give an example, she gave me a key to unlock Psalm 8, a hymn so often used to legitimize domination of man over nature, because it says “thou hast made him little less than God, and [...] hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands.”<sup>6</sup> In the context of the Western man subduing the earth, women, and the non-Western world, these words of the Psalm have proved to be devastating, whereas the question in the Psalm is: “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” It poses humans (or men?) between heaven and the

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<sup>5</sup> The most important works for my research were: Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1999), Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Routledge: London 2003), and Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: New York 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Quotations from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV).

animals, and hears the power of God in the voices of little children. Humans are embedded in the glory of God that is “in all the earth” and reveals itself in full power in the powerless. This interpretation makes full use of the contradictions and empty spaces in the Psalm.

This kind of reading a text is derived from Catherine Keller, the second of my three eco-feminist theologians. Her book *Face of the Deep* offered a new, creative method of theology. She probes all kinds of texts – biblical, theological, and novels – to deconstruct the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (‘creation out of nothing’). She unravels how the doctrine came into being, and maps the consequences for women and the creation. Under the surface, she detects the undertows and gaps in the texts for constructive theology. Creation as a process is not just a concept but also a method for theologizing. When she perceives that differences are unfolding on the surface of the deep, she is following Deleuze. Keller rejects the concept of salvation history and uses postmodern philosophy and metaphors derived from science, for instance, God as a “strange attractor”. It is hardly surprising that most of my readers have great difficulties in understanding the theology of Keller, due to her postmodern method and her idiosyncratic writing. I could not make it easier. Although Keller makes hard reading, her method is extremely insightful and fruitful, also for the inter-church dialogue.

The third eco-feminist theologian is Elizabeth Theokritoff, who is British and a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. Although Eastern Orthodox Churches have the image of being stagnant, conservative, and patriarchal, they have kept alive a theology that is not as discolored by the Enlightenment as Western theology. Their theology is definitely less anthropocentric. Theokritoff derives a non-dualist worldview from the Church Fathers. God is not a being but Being itself, like in premodern western theology. The leading concept is not salvation history but God’s being in the world, Christ, and liturgy. There is no competition between God and the world as we find so often in Protestant theology. God and the world are also quite different, unlike in the theologies of Gebara and Keller. The old practice of asceticism is read as positive self-restriction, necessary in our context of ecological crisis. Because asceticism is related to liturgy, as an expression of God’s glory in the world, it is not world-denying.

### **The Dutch context**

Celebrating and self-restriction are good partners, also in the Dutch context. I hope I have made that convincing with the example of my own practice, which I described in the last chapter: a church service on sustainability in

Boxtel, in the south of the Netherlands. As members of the church, we brought vegetables and fruits from the gardens in the neighborhood, mourned about pollution, climate change and the disappearance of animals and plants, confessed our sins, joined in the praise of all creatures, heard about God letting the earth bring forth, and shared the figs and grapes of the church garden. And by doing all of this we shared hope.

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