

Beyond Ecotheology

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The time has come to move beyond ecotheology. Not because its concern to take up concern for ecological questions within theology was inappropriate — it was crucial and inescapable. Nor because the ecological challenges it has addressed have been overcome or now seem less important — they are clearly of greater magnitude and more urgent than ever. The time has come to move beyond ecotheology because it is no longer appropriate — if it ever were — for any theologian to fail to take account of ecological concerns in their work. The term 'ecotheology' contains a logic that allows some theologians to do theology with attentiveness to ecological issues while others legitimately proceed with non-ecotheological theologies that fail to attend to ecological concerns. Ecological concern among theologians can no longer be appropriately delegated to a group of enthusiasts who happen to be warmly inclined to green issues: the challenge is much more important than that. Theologians should therefore cease to identify themselves or others as ecotheologians, on the grounds that they thereby authorize others to ignore environmental concerns. We must move beyond ecotheology because its project is too important to leave to ecotheologians.

At particular points in time the labelling of particular emphases in theology can be a useful way of highlighting the importance of particular new concerns. 'Ecotheology' has been successful in naming the significance of theological engagement with ecology, in bringing new energy to this area of theological enquiry, in contributing to the development of a critical mass of research that ensures ecology cannot be ignored in theological discussion, in labelling a fuzzy-edged literature that

is focussed on these concerns, and in identifying potential conversation partners with common research interests. It is crucial that the benefits of these achievements are not lost when the term is set aside. At some point, however, the benefits of this naming of the project are outweighed by the risks of self-marginalization: if research and teaching at the interface between theology and ecology is walled off in particular journals, books, courses, centres, and so on, then there is the risk of becoming detached from other areas of theological enquiry and being ignored by them. Other approaches to theology have had to make their own choices about the continuing significance of the naming of their own particular perspectives and methodologies; irrespective of the merits of those choices, those who have claimed identity as ecotheologians now have the choice to lay aside this term in order to make clear that ecological awareness is now a non-negotiable requirement of all theological projects.

We should note that identifying a subdiscipline of ecotheology might also have had problematic consequences for the nature of the work carried out under this umbrella. Do the standards of truth, evidence, argument or negotiation with the theological tradition in ecotheology differ from those applicable to theology more generally? If so, we might enquire in what ways this is the case and in what ways this difference might have created an obstacle for the reception of ecotheology in among theologians more generally. If we consider that standards should not be different, we might reflect that the creation of subdiscipline is likely to make ecotheologians less attentive to dialogue with theology in general, and therefore more likely to become detached from its concerns and norms.

My proposal that ‘ecotheology’ is now an unhelpful label of this aspect of theological enquiry should be rejected if it can be shown that it refers to a particular theological methodology or group of methodologies that have an enduring

significance, and that represent patterns of thinking that cannot be expected of other areas of theology. For example, were we to understand feminist theology as the prioritization of the experience of women as a key aspect of a hermeneutic for the interpretation of biblical and theological traditions, it seems to me that the term has enduring merit even alongside the expectation that the whole of theology should own the importance of feminist concerns. We might say that all theology should be attentive to the fruits of feminist theology, perhaps, but that not all theology should be feminist in the sense of using this particular hermeneutical lens rather than the many others on offer. Therefore, my argument that we should move beyond ecotheology depends on a judgement that ecotheology does or should not have a particular methodology of its own. It should not, for example, in my view, name a particular set of commitments in relation to ecology that will be used as non-negotiable principles for determining how particular biblical and theological texts should be interpreted, as the Earth Bible project does.¹ This is both because such an approach concedes too much authority to non-theological sources and because it seems to me that the interface between theology and ecology is altogether more complex than is allowed for in this schema: instead, a two-way dialogue is necessary in which ecological commitments are interrogated by biblical and theological insights, as well as the other way around. In any case, since ecotheology has been used with a much broader range of reference than those adopting this kind of stipulative methodology, it seems clear that it does not meet my criterion for retention on the basis of naming an identifiable methodology.²

¹ See, for example, Norman C. Habel (ed.), *Readings From the Perspective of Earth*, Earth Bible (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

² For a useful mapping of a wide range of approaches, see Celia E. Deane-Drummond, *Ecotheology* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2008).

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To move beyond ecotheology is not, we should be clear, to recommend any lessening in the direction of theological attention towards ecological concerns. Instead, it requires vigorous action in making the case that those concerns need to be more widely owned by theologians and that any theological project that fails to attend to ecological questions where relevant fails to be adequate theology as such. In my analysis, we should think of the journey of ecotheology as taking a side-road in relation to the wider theological tradition that has been heading in a similar direction but at some distance and separation from the road on which most theologians are found. Ecotheologians now find themselves at a junction that gives them the option of rejoining the larger caravan, or staying on the smaller path in their own company. In this case, my judgement is that the broader and more populous way is the one ecotheology is called to take.