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in Cooperation with Filip Ivanovic

# Eco-Theology

*Essays in Honor of Sigurd Bergmann*

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# Introduction

The ecological crisis with its truly global dimensions is one of the burning issues of our time: Oceans and seas are both already severely polluted. Each day hundreds of species are irretrievably lost, as decennia forms of economy following unlimited growth ideology destroy more and more of their habitats and thus of the natural basis of life. A fair distribution of air, water, and fertile land for humankind is farer and farer away. We live on credit, allow ourselves more than we are entitled to now at the expense of the future. Given all this, there is need to re-act and to correct the direction, in which we are heading, regarding our political as well as technical future.

However, there is also need to deal intellectually with causes and backgrounds of the ecological crisis, to reflect on religious, spiritual and cultural understandings of current developments. Precisely this is the starting point of this volume. The intention of the book is twofold:

- *Firstly*, to highlight important issues and to engage with scholarly analyses concerning the interdisciplinary field of religion and environment in times of intensified crisis. By this we try to gain insight in spiritual roots of the current disaster and likewise to emphasize the utter need to deal also with ethical and spiritual aspects of this hot issue alongside political and technical aspects.
- *Secondly*, to give thankful resonance to Sigurd Bergmann as an outstanding scholar working within this whole field as his lifelong endeavor. Without any doubt, the religious dimension of nature, environment, and climate change is one of the dominant themes in his lifetime achievement. In his publications, as well as in his teachings, he continuously gave and still gives inspiring contributions to what is called “Eco-Theology”. Academic friends, colleagues and students try to honor him at the occasion of his 65th birthday with this *liber amicorum*.

*Sigurd Bergmann was born January 5th, 1956 in Hannover. He started his academic education in Göttingen, Germany, and moved later to Sweden. In Uppsala he graduated in theology in 1980. From 1980 to 1988, he worked as an ordained minister in the diocese of Lund of the Lutheran Church of Sweden. He received his doctoral degree from the University of Lund in 1995 as a student of Lars Thunberg, Per Erik Persson, and Per Frostin. From 1999-2019, he was professor of Religious Studies (theology, ethics, and philosophy of religion) at the Department of Archaeology and Religious Studies of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim. In the 1990s, he worked as a secretary for the*

*Nordic Forum of Contextual Theology, and initiated and founded the Institute of Contextual Theology in Lund.*

*He was a fellow of the Swedish Research Council at the Department of Art History at Tromsø University, Norway, and taught Systematic Theology in Sweden at Göteborg University, and Lund University where he also has taught at the Department of Human Ecology. He also held and still holds the chair of the European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment. He is a member of the Royal Norwegian Society of Letters and Sciences DKNVS (and leader of its section for philosophy, history of ideas & religion since 2009).*

All through his life, Bergmann presented outstanding contributions to several debates in theology and religious and cultural studies at his workplaces in Scandinavia, as well as in international conferences in which he participated and networks in which he was a part of. Since 1985, he has published more than 250 papers, including a number of Nordic anthologies on the themes of diaconia, power, autonomy, ordinary life culture, and pluralism. The list contains studies on spirituality of early Christian theology, contextual theology, the spatial turn in religion, aesthetics and the religious dynamics of art and architecture. All this gives testimony to the wide spread research activities of Sigurd Bergmann around the globe (cf. the complete bibliography in this volume). Thus, the topic of this book, *Eco-Theology*, by no means covers all areas in which Bergmann has been academically active. However, given the current situation, as well as the occasion of Bergmann's birthday, we believe it most appropriate to focus on this issue.

Already half a century ago, scholars in various disciplines like philosophy, religious studies, and the humanities dared to put forward the provocative idea about the impact of religious images of nature on the Western culture as motivational soil for emerging problems in exploiting natural capital. The initial impulse presented Lynn White in his seminal essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" already in 1967. His concern about Christian historical and spiritual backgrounds of the current abuse of the environment led to the crucial question "What did Christianity tell people about their relations with the environment?". This question has been thoroughly debated, opposed and nuanced manifold. Nevertheless, this critical idea developed into a thorn in the side of Western culture, its religious and ethical debates together with other movements like feminist liberation theory and post-colonial studies to reassess age old ideals about humankind as unlimited power and supremacy upon all other species.

It is the merit of Sigurd Bergman not only to engage in this evolving research movement since the late 80s, and to shape what later was labeled as



“eco-theology” with engaged publications, speeches, and with the setup of effective research networks all over the world. He picked also up White’s suspicion that the roots of our global trouble concerning the environment are deeply religious.

Moreover, he was one of the first to provide interdisciplinary discourses with profound insight into possible remedies to counteract the shortcomings of Anthropocene with its disastrous forms of economy, technique and cultural forms of life. To do so, he put heavy emphasis on getting in touch again with the long lost cosmological dimensions of human and extra-human existence in the modern Western worldview. He devoted much effort in his academic life to overcome the negative backside and the cost of significant human impact on Earth’s geology and ecology, including climate change. Surprisingly, his main intellectual tool to pick up this challenge and to develop an alternative Christian view was based on classical theological arguments. Starting with his dissertation on early Christian spirituality of the Greek theologian Gregory of Nazianz he demonstrated in unremitting efforts the intellectual necessity to bridge nature and spirit, to connect efforts as to liberate nature from human exploitation and to design a renewed spirituality. He pursued this goal with congenial interdisciplinary ideas, however, without nostalgic or romantic glorification of the past.

This book project has been planned and started long ago. What not had been planned were the occurrences in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Only a few weeks later the corona virus arrived in Europe and exploded as pandemic COVID19 causing firstly the infection of millions of people, secondly the deaths of almost one million people to now, and thirdly a global social, economic, and cultural disruption – a disruption that people have never experienced since World War II. Since then, Corona has deeply influenced life conditions all over the globe. It has reshaped the agenda of all public sectors, has asked for unprecedented political, medical and monetary efforts to cope as far as possible with the disastrous effects on human life conditions in all societies around the world.

It is hardly surprising that among those, who reacted publicly to the pandemic and raised their voices for the need to change course the name of Sigurd Bergman is to find in the forefront.

With harsh critical comments he tried to alarm his fellow citizens about what actually happened in Sweden, commenting on unethical measurements and a disastrous public health policy by the Swedish authorities. Nevertheless, he also forced critical thinking about guiding values and images for a “post-Corona” society, which clearly displays its affinity to biblical ideas of radical

conversion. As early as on March 30th 2020, Bergmann published a most engaging article in the Swedish church newspaper *Kyrkans Tidning* entitled “*Omvändelse fullt möjligt post corona*”; an English version was published shortly after entitled “*You have to change your life. Our common post-corona future through a Swedish lense*”<sup>1</sup>. From its first sentence on “Once the coronavirus pandemic is over, we will wake up to a new society” this kind of manifesto tries to convince people to the insight that there is no viable way back to an old “normality”, it is only possible to change going forward in a veritable metanoia to a world worth living for. This article gained impressive resonance by intellectuals as well as in the civil society within Sweden and far beyond. In various ways also contributions in this volume pick up fruitful impulses of this text and propose answers to current challenges.

Alongside the article published in March 2020, Bergmann took numerous other efforts dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. All this resulted quickly in the formation of an interdisciplinary network *Science Forum Covid 19*, which influenced public debates in Sweden and far beyond.

This book with its 14 contributions intends to honor Sigurd Bergmann for all his academic and personal efforts in the areas of critical thinking, responsible ethics and ingenious spirituality in service of the earth as protected habitat. It presents responses from authors, coming from various parts of the world, from Sweden, Finland, Norway, Germany, Montenegro, the UK, South Africa, and Indonesia. The contributions cover a wide range of issues related to eco-theology, namely aesthetics, moral philosophy, theology, history of religion, philosophy of education, history of literature, political theory and economics. The editors after receiving all articles sorted them into five sections with the following keywords (which are, of course, not mutually exclusive).

### Crisis

The first section starts with the article by the Finish-Swedish scholar *Tage Kurtén* (Åbo, Finland). His contribution entitled “Ecological Crisis – So What? Ethics, Views of Life and Academic Writing” draws on the Covid pandemic as moral, intellectual as well as theological challenge and gives an in-depth analysis of Sigurd Bergmann’s numerous works in this respect.

The following text by *Kjetil Hafstad* (Oslo, Norway), “Contesting evil and climate crisis – a discourse on prerequisites for individual action”, focusses on the role of individuals for the survival of democratic societies. Taking up moral philosophy (from Aristotle up to Hannah Arendt) and paralleling ideas to Barthian theology, Hafstad clarifies the need for responsible ethical decisions

based on the intrapersonal dialogue. In other words, he explains the importance to think alone in times of ecological crises.

The third article is written by *Paul Leer-Salvesen* (Kristiansand, Norway). “Hope And Fear In The Climate Crisis” examines current social movements protesting ecological crises like Greta Thunberg and the “Fridays for future-movement” as expressions of basic collective emotions. Drawing on examples like “Deep Ecology” developed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss and Pope Francis’ ecological encyclical “Laudato si” his plea goes for personally rooted engagement combined with thoughtful political answers to the ecological challenges.

### Nature

Eco-theological thinking in more than one way steps towards a renewed concept of nature. The three pieces of the second section pick up this task.

In her article “Eco-Theology Beyond Order and Chaos”, Archbishop *Antje Jakelén* (Uppsala, Sweden) has a closer look at the science-and-religion discourse and its contributions to an adequate understanding of nature through modern scientific thinking. After historical remarks, she elaborates especially on theological models which pick up innovative ideas and metaphors like “emergence” or even “dance” to conceptualise “God” and “creation” beyond the traditional and restrictive binaries like order and chaos.

*Michael S. Northcott’s* (Yogyakarta, Indonesia) article “The Romantics, the English Lake District, and the Sacredness of High Land: Mountains as Hierophanic Places in the Origins of Environmentalism and Nature Conservation” combines environmental, literary and religious studies to deal with nature. The article considers famous 18th and 19th century authors of English poetry and reconstructs the notion of romantic appreciation for mountains as places of moral and spiritual power in England and Scotland as early forms of environmentalism, particularly as protest campaigns against the industrial destruction of nature.

In the last article in this section, *Mika Vähäkangas*, (Lund, Sweden) “Nature and Colonial Hybridity: Lars Levi Læstadius’s Karesuando Sermons”, deals with the religious approach to nature inherent to the 19th century pietist revival movement of the Northern Swedish and Finish Sami culture. The author especially investigates religious images and teachings about nature by the Lutheran theologian as well as botanist Lars Levi Læstadius. Religious rhetoric and images of nature are combined with a research perspective regarding colonialist and liberating interests in the texts.

## Spirit

The third section draws on essential spiritual sources of eco-theology. In the opening article, *Ernst Conradie*, (Bellville, South Africa) “Pneumatology and ecology: Reassessing the state of the debate”, provides a detailed insight into the current state of the debate on pneumatology and ecology. Readers especially get insight into the multi-faceted teachings on the Hl. Spirit within the development of the classical Christian dogmatic on trinity.

The patristic line of thought is followed by *Filip Ivanovic's* (Podgorica, Montenegro) article entitled “The Value of the Sensible World According to John of Damascus”. He examines carefully relevant teachings of the Damascene to clarify what was at stake during the late iconoclastic controversy. Ivanovic explains the scope of dogmatic formula about the “creation in the image of God”. For patristic thinking it was not only relevant for human beings, but also for the entire cosmos – an argument which has pertinent impact on contemporary perspectives on nature as an ecosystem.

The third article written by *Jon Skarpeid*, (Stavanger, Norway), “Liberation of Mother Earth? The Hindu Declaration on Climate Change”, broadens further the perspectives on the spiritual dimension of environmental studies, dealing with perspectives on climate change beyond Jewish and Christian religious traditions. The article offers a scrutinized critical reading of relevant Hindu declarations of the last decennium, elaborates on their religious images (e.g. the universe as “God’s body”) and compares them to traditional Hindu thought as well as to Christian images. In this contribution, readers can learn once more the lesson that “green theology” is by no means an idea exclusively known by Christian theologians.

## Politics

A non-romantic approach to ecological thinking never leaves out questions of politics, power, and economy. Two contributions in the following section deliberately focus on these issues.

In his article “The Sustainable Development Goals, the Club of Rome and Naming the Beast: Capitalism”, *Ulrich Duchrow*, (Heidelberg, Germany), examines goals of recent global declarations on sustainable development (United Nations, the Club of Rome) and unveils their hidden economic ideals about production, consumption, and money. Following this, he reconstructs the socio-historical development of imperial capitalism in Western societies through modernity.

Evaluating factors like property order, the money order and wage labor the author presents a harsh critique on ruinous ecological implications of the ruling economic system. His plea for a less ruinous alternative draws on growing new alliances between social and religious movements.

*Peter M. Scott*, (Manchester, UK), “Political Theologies in the Anthropocene”, addresses political aspects of ecological theology. To do so, he evaluates five recently published outlines of political theology regarding their profile to deal with nature and the environment on implicit normative ideals. Discussing particularly issues like order, justice, suffering and violence, Scott develops a critical evaluation of their understanding of nature. The overall goal is to “to construct the political” in an area of the Corona pandemic.

### Praxis

The last section offers three pieces discussing different ways to react to current ecological crises in regard to religion and religious practice.

*Jan-Olav Henriksen*, (Oslo, Norway), focusses on a masterpiece of artistic ecological engagement in his article “A Religious symbol for a sustainable practice? The Hope Cathedral from a pragmatist perspective”. Henriksen describes in his text a unique local church activity to construct a swimming church building from thrown away plastic and to locate it on the coast side of Frederiksborg, Norway. Furthermore, this symbolic practice is interpreted as a form of reflective practice by means of Peircian semiotics.

The next piece bridges public education to ecological discussions in theology. In his article, “Rethinking inclusive education: What can be learned from an ecological theology of liberation?”, *Thor-André Skrefsrud*, (Hamar, Norway), introduces patterns and ideals of inclusive school education to the readers. Furthermore, he presents a relecture of the educational ideal that schools should provide equal opportunities and participation for all students through the perspective of Liberation theology. This leads back to the critical question of how to understand the very nature of “integration” of diverse groups in public education.

In the last article of the book entitled “Nature and Praxis. Theological and phenomenological remarks”, *Hans-Günter Heimbrock*, (Frankfurt/Main, Germany), deals with the interrelation of pastoral practice and a renewed ecology. Admitting that pastoral theology in its history so far has developed almost no interest in the physical world, the article follows the question what theology might learn from an ecological approach for its own tasks. A fruitful answer leads to the re-examination of anthropological models of perception

as an embodied encounter with the interpersonal and the natural world taken as life-world.

Finally, some words of thanks. We are most grateful to Dr. Martina Kayser and Dr. Rebecca Hagen as well as Uwe Meier of Brill Germany to grant the opportunity to realize the project, thanks to Filip Ivanovic for his contributions to the editorial work, special thanks to Ingela Bergmann for her watercolor painting on the front cover.

*Dear Sigurd,  
thanks for a lifelong commitment to the field of public theology for the benefit of humankind and nature, for your uninhibited struggle for an engaged intellectual discourse, thanks for all your contributions to eco-theology, many of us owe you much – ad multos annos!*

The Editors

Hans-Günter Heimbrock

Jörg Persch

### Endnote

- 1 Published on the blog of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, University of Munich May 18th 2020.