

EUARE May 20-23 2024 Palermo

Panel *Discerning Divine Presence: in nature*

Abstracts

Monday May 20 14:15 - 16:30 at TEATRO LA PIRA

max 40 minutes per paper including Q&A – short break

Gijsbert van den Brink (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

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What Would It Mean to Characterize Human-Caused Climate Change as Sin?

It is widely acknowledged that the current human-induced climate change is at heart a *moral* issue. Somehow we have knowingly transgressed boundaries that apply to human conduct. The Christian tradition has typically described such human transgression of set moral boundaries as *sin*. This raises the question how the vocabulary of sin can show its continuing relevance today, perhaps even beyond the community of believers, by being brought to bear on the current climate crisis? In order to answer this question, I'll first discuss two recent attempts to connect both, by Neil Messer and Ernst Conradie. I will argue that both attempts are very helpful indeed, but in limited ways. They help us to discern the many sins involved in contemporary ecological patterns of conduct, but they seem less able to inspire us to change these patterns. Next, therefore, I examine a historical example of the way in which the Christian doctrine of sin *did* gradually change human communal patterns of behavior. Using this example and the treatment of sin in the Heidelberg Catechism as a mirror, I finally sketch a more robust way in which the Christian doctrine of sin can (should?) be brought to bear on today's ecological crisis.

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Failing Humans and Falling Nonhumans Amidst Ecological Crisis: Denis Edwards-Pope Francis Dialogue on Planetary Spirituality for a Renewed Ecological Theology.

Profound theological discussions have explored human failures and their far-reaching repercussions on humanity and the broader natural world. However, recent scholarly endeavors have not sufficiently investigated how Denis Edwards and Pope Francis explore the complex connections between humans and nonhumans, underscoring the urgent need for a holistic approach to address ecological challenges. This study encapsulates the dialogue between Edwards (2017) and Pope Francis (2015) on planetary spirituality for a renewed ecological theology amidst the escalating environmental crisis. It emphasizes the significance of recognizing the intrinsic value of all beings and advocates for a sense of interconnectedness and solidarity. Edwards and Pope Francis advocate for a planetary spirituality that promotes harmonious coexistence with nature, emphasizing global solidarity and ethical commitments. Through a comparative analysis of their frameworks, the paper argues that they contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse on human-nonhuman world relationships and the ethical dimensions of collective responsibility for environmental degradation. The analysis urges a spiritual and eco-theological renewal that transcends anthropocentrism, offering a compelling conversation that seamlessly integrates theological insights with ecological imperatives. This study aims to unveil a renewed understanding of humanity's role in fostering a sustainable and flourishing future for humans and nonhumans.

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Creation as the ‘Theater of God’s Glory’: Restoring a Criticized Metaphor.

John Calvin famously called creation the ‘theater of God’s glory’. James Nash (1996) has argued that seeing creation as the stage or scene of the divine-human drama is highly problematic for the environment, because it reduces the environment to an instrument in human redemption. Does this need to be the case? I will investigate whether classical theology’s focus on human salvation necessarily comes at the cost of creation or if saved humans might value creation because they glorify God in, through, and with the rest of creation. I will argue that seeing creation as the theater of God’s glory, the scene of the divine-human drama, implies that creation care is not only a divine task in the form of providence (traditionally conceived of as including preservation), but also a human task, since it is entailed in humanity’s chief end to glorify God. To do this, I will briefly summarize Calvin’s doctrine of creation as an awe-inspiring work of God. Next, I will explore whether a Christian understanding of situational ethics might imply that being the scene of the divine-human drama entails moral worth and the necessity of preservation. It will then be argued that glorifying God as Creator includes caring for what God created to be very good, making creation care part of the Christian life. Taken together, this intends to argue that, rather than being problematic, seeing creation as the theater of God’s glory can create a framework in which creation is valued, the Bible is done justice and therefore God is glorified.

James A. Nash. 1996. “Toward the Ecological Reformation of Christianity.” *Interpretation* 50:1, 5–15.

Thursday May 23 10:30 – 12.45 at FATESI TOMASI

40 minutes per paper including Q&A – short break

chair: Theo van Willigenburg

Henk van den Belt (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

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The Spirit in Creation and History: Rethinking Providence from the Perspective of the Extra-Calvinisticum.

This paper explores how the concept of the extra-calvinisticum, the notion of the omnipresence of the divine nature of Christ, might be helpful to solve some of the problems of the classical doctrine of providence, especially in its exclusive attribution to the Father. Christ is with us through his divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit. Moreover, his divine nature remains personally united with his human nature, the nature in which he suffered, died, rose from the grave, and ascended into heaven. This connection colors and determines the divine presence of Christ in the world. The general work of the Spirit in creation and history is the work of the Spirit that proceeds from the Father through the Son. Providence is not an abstract divine rule from a distance nor the unfolding of the eternal divine decree, but it is the involvement of the triune God in the history of this fallen world that he has made and so loved that he gave his only Son. The paper develops this idea attributing the divine ruling (*gubernatio*) to the Son and by reflecting on the work of the Spirit as it is related to the threefold office of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King.

Brett Blackman (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

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Through A Glass Darkly: Herman Bavinck, General Revelation, and Natural Disasters.

In the Christian tradition, the phenomenon of evil has often been difficult to reconcile with the doctrine of general revelation, which is understood in the Reformed tradition to be conveyed in creation, humanity, and history. More pointedly, natural disasters have commonly been used as evidence against Christian claims about the nature of God and his relation to the world. For Augustine, failure to comprehend the problem of evil was, for a time, “the chief stumbling block to his acceptance of the Christian faith” (Pickell, “To See Darkness,” 107). Utilizing the thought of Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), this essay will explore the question, is it possible for natural disasters (natural evil) to be reconciled with the Christian doctrine of general revelation? And, if so, how are we to make sense of this in the mixed and often ambiguous testimony of the natural world? The aim of this paper is to present a brief understanding of Bavinck’s view, arguing that natural disasters may be reconciled with general revelation and that the problem of evil ultimately points to an eschatological reconciliation of all creation through Jesus Christ—including nature.

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Peace between our souls and the soil? Exploring the tension between political populism and ecological justice in Southern African Methodism.

The Southern African Methodist Bishop, Mike Vorster, once said: “Our Souls and Soil need to meet and have a serious conversation about how we need to live in peace with each other. Does not our Creator demand this of us?” This paper will focus on the complex theological interplay between issues of social justice (*eco-nomics*) and environmental justice (*eco-logy*) in Southern African Methodism. It will do so through the lens of a pioneer decolonial African theologian, the late Prof. Dr. Steve de Gruchy, whose notion of ‘*An Olive Agenda: First Thoughts on a Metaphorical Theology of Development*’ presented an invitation to theologically reframe the complex intersections of religion, politics, economics and ecology in Southern Africa. Methodism in Southern Africa has a strong focus on social justice. However, the ‘social’ circle of Southern African Methodism has tended to be anthropocentric. This has, at times, tended towards a kind of decolonial impetus that is politically populist. The aim of this paper is to advocate for a more inclusive decolonial African Methodist theology that seeks justice and flourishing for both human and non-human creation.

(lunch break from 13-14)

Thursday May 23 14.00 – 15.00 at FATESI TOMASI

30 minutes per paper including Q&A – no break

chair: Brett Blackman

Theo van Willigenburg (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

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Collective causal responsibility and individual moral responsibility for ecological (non-)deterioration: a virtue-ethical approach (theologically informed).

Although an individual's impact on ecological (non-)deterioration is negligible, it is undeniable that the (unstructured) aggregate collective of polluters in the Western hemisphere is for a main part causally responsible for the poor condition of the environment. Our individual moral responsibility in the West to act derives from our membership of this collective and the role one plays within it. It does not just depend on one's individual ecological footprint. As individuals we especially have a responsibility to influence others and to bring about effective collective action, for instance by giving ourselves the good example and motivate and mobilize others to go the same way. The question then is how much can reasonably be expected from individuals in terms of change of lifestyle and promotional actions in relation to what is needed on a collective level.

To answer this question, this paper turns from a duty-oriented approach ('what should I do?') to a virtue-ethical view on individual moral responsibility: 'What kind of person ought I to be?'. Behaving virtuously is not dependent on a complex weighing of environmental duties or a calculated effort to influence others in the collective. The posture with which virtuous persons behave is often more important than their discrete actions.

The paper characterizes an environmentally virtuous life in opposition to self-centeredness and complacency. It is a life where virtues like humility, gratitude, frugality, wonder, and cooperativeness are paramount. We will systematize this view by invoking three important theological concepts: nature as creation, human responsibility as stewardship, and justice as reconciliation.

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Monastic landscape: towards a creative collaboration with God in nature

In the theological approach to nature, two attitudes are worth noting: contemplative and managerial. They both help to gain a better insight into God's presence in nature. The first is associated with St Francis, the second with St Benedict - and, unfortunately, is not known although it seems particularly relevant today. For the Benedictine monastic tradition, the important concept is the spirit (genius) of the place, which Frederic Debuyst OSB wrote about, with reference to J.H. Newman. Hence, the notion of monastic landscape with its whole spectrum of consequences is derived. It is a shift from contemplation through liturgical celebration to stewardship. Nature is treated with the utmost respect as a gift from God, but also as an invitation to creative interaction with God. Benedictine monasteries bear witness to this, usually situated in specially chosen, beautiful and secluded places, blending in with their surroundings and adding a new and transformative value. This phenomenon of monastic landscape, present and evolving for centuries, could be called a contribution to a redemptive approach to nature, characterized by great humility and wisdom.