

Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue “Practical Theology Amid Environmental Crises”

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By most accounts, the world we live in has entered the epoch of the Anthropocene, the period in which human activity has irrevocably altered the geology, biosphere and climate of the planet. Not only do humans experience the impacts of environmental crises in their daily lives, but people’s dreams for the future are also haunted by the spectre of ecological apocalypse. Some suggest that compared to other fields and disciplines, practical theology so far has offered little to the interdisciplinary conversations on climate and the environmental crises (McCarroll 2020; Miller-McLemore 2020). This Book seeks to change that perception.

Practical Theology, broadly speaking, has been described as a field that privileges, engages and transforms *human* experience and practices with its guiding motif of the living *human web* (Miller-McLemore 2018), and its focus on *human* suffering, flourishing and justice. The human-centered givens of the field highlight its anthropocentric ethos. No doubt, this ethos has contributed to the delay in fulsome engagement with the environmental crisis through the research, teaching and practice of practical theology. Indeed, when we as co-editors consider the methodological, theological and practical implications of shifting the field away from human-centeredness and towards earth-centeredness, it can be quite overwhelming (see also McCarroll 2020; LaMothe 2021; Pihkala 2018). Practical theology also prioritizes *context* or *situatedness* as it seeks to discern the divine presence and call in the very midst of life. Unlike some other theological disciplines, it engages realities of inequities, oppression and the struggle for justice as it carves out pathways to renewed ways of living and being in the world. It is notable that despite its focus on context and situatedness, the dire realities of our context of environmental crises have yet to be fulsomely taken up in the field even as these realities press in upon all of life at the micro, meso and macro levels of being.

While over the last decade within the field there has been an increase in the amount of research produced on the topic, other than a few exceptions within specific guilds (see Clinebell 1996; Moore 1998; Ayers 2019), this literature is spread across several journals and books and can be challenging to find (Kim-Cragg 2018; McCarroll 2020; Miller-McLemore, forthcoming). A quick look at the tables of contents over the last five years of our field’s premier journals (*International Journal of Practical Theology* and *Practical Theology*) demonstrates the extent to which concern about environmental and climate crises has been peripheral to practical theology. From a total of two hundred and forty-two research articles, only four focus on climate change and the environmental crisis. These numbers suggest that, while there is some awareness of the theme, it is hardly a focus for research (see Williams 2018; McCarroll 2020; Ayers 2021; Marlow 2022). Thankfully, some practical theology associations recently have begun to identify climate change as an emerging priority. For example, the 2022 meetings of the *Association for Practical Theology* hosted a roundtable on climate change, chaired by Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Jennifer Ayers, which generated much inspiration and dialogue with practical theologians across several guilds. Also, the 2023 meetings of the *International Academy of Practical Theology* will focus on practical theology



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in the Anthropocene. Additionally, within various guilds of the field, there are some signs that interest is beginning to build.¹

Even as these signs are promising, it is clear, that there is yet to be a sustained conversation in the field on the theme of the climate and environmental crises. We believe this book, *Practical Theology Amid Environmental Crises*, will make a significant contribution and mark the beginning of a generative and creative conversation. The volume brings together the voices of many around the world who have begun to wrestle with the realities and implications of climate and environmental crises for their own research, teaching and practices from their various social locations. In bringing these voices together, we seek not only to model a collaborative and interactive conversation and contribute to the larger multi/ interdisciplinary conversation, but to begin to discern the primary contours and themes of the conversation within the field.

In envisioning this project, we as co-editors first identified some key leaders in the various guilds of practical theology whose research demonstrated interest in the area. We then put out a call for papers more widely. We invited research that “**contributes to practical theological approaches to the multilayered environmental crises**”. We sought out submissions to help construct a sustained conversation on climate change in the practical theological literature and to contribute to the ongoing interdisciplinary conversation regarding the environmental crises. We identified a need for papers that engage practical theology from intersectional perspectives with a concern for justice and for work that reimagines the field beyond its anthropocentric foundations. We encouraged researchers to retrieve earth-centered resources through texts and practices from the various sub-disciplines of practical theology and identified our interest in action-based, narrative and other practical theological approaches that highlight human embeddedness, dependence and interconnectivity within and as a part of creation. The call went out and we were positively overwhelmed by the response. We cannot be more pleased with this final product. Not only does the enthusiasm of our contributors and the quality of their work suggest that a sustained conversation is emerging through this publication, but the volume also demonstrates depth, insight and creativity, offering much toward continuing the conversation.

When we inductively explore the content of the chapters of the volume, we are not surprised to see concentrations on methodology, theology and practice. In some cases, practices are starting points that generate theological and methodological reflection. In other cases, authors present critical and constructive theological-methodological content that leads to renewed practices. In still other cases, authors share what we will call eco-practical theological models and narratives that invite the reader into new forms of practice and imagination. In all cases, authors seek to address realities of living in the context of environmental and ecological change and instability and to consider this in relation to theology and practices of people of faith and their respective communities. We are delighted to have most of the guilds of the discipline represented within our authorship—religious education, preaching and worship, community and congregational leadership, pastoral and spiritual care. Throughout the book there are several repeated themes that emerge including a focus on embodiment and materiality, on specific populations such as children, youth, students and women, on the impacts of ecological emotions such as eco-anxiety and climate trauma, on the interconnections between Earth justice and social justice, and between the climate crisis and colonialism. The book is rich with convergences, but also includes creative tensions between and among issues represented in the chapters.

In terms of the flow of content in the book, we have ordered the chapters into three distinct groupings or sections following one after the other. The first section is made up of chapters one to four, each of which is addressed to the field of practical theology as a whole and focuses on the intersections of methodology, epistemology, theology and practice. The second section includes chapters five to eight. Each of these chapters present theological reflections on lived experiences of climate and environmental crises, and through this lens reimagine some key theological concepts and practices. The third section includes chapters nine to thirteen. These final chapters look toward the future by presenting models

and approaches for renewed eco-integrated practice, teaching and research across the different guilds.

Addressing Intersections of Methodology, Epistemology, Theology and Practice

In each of the first four chapters, the authors identify how the climate crisis demands a complete re-imagining of the givens of the field of practical theology—the methodologies, epistemologies and theologies central to its research, teaching and practice. Each chapter is addressed to the field as a whole and calls for change in response to the climate crisis. Chapter one, by Mary Elizabeth Moore, identifies the extent to which practical theology has always been concerned with change and explores the how the climate crisis demands radical change across the field. Drawing from eco-theologians and other ecological thinkers, from Indigenous wisdom and from the wisdom of the Earth itself, the chapter identifies challenges, practices and alternative worldviews and concludes by offering up life practices to direct and re-shape life and the field toward climate justice. In chapter two, Pamela McCarroll examines the literature on climate trauma in terms of its interpretation of public discourse, denial and (in)action in relation to the climate crisis and by unearthing the theologies and epistemologies embedded in this literature. She explores and proposes the conceptual architecture required for an earth-centered, de-colonizing, trauma-informed approach for the field. Chapter three, by Un-Hey Kim, draws from ecofeminist theologies and the new materialism for her theo-ethical reflection on the climate catastrophe, re-interpreting humans in terms of the interdependence and inter-relationality of all reality. She explores moves to liberate the human subject from the bondage of human exceptionalism and toward Earth's justice. In the fourth chapter, Mary Hess offers a creative exploratory essay that weaves through multiple narratives from diverse contexts. In her generative narrative weaving, she seeks out "sacred ground within which to root embodied, theologically astute pedagogies" (abstract) for the field. Together, these chapters offer perspectives, resources and approaches to re-imagine the epistemology, theology and methodologies of practical theology.

Theological Reflection on Experiences of Environmental Crisis and Reconceiving Theology

The second cluster of chapters, chapters five through eight, all reflect theologically on lived experiences of climate and environmental crises and seek to reconceive theological concepts through these disruptive experiences. Chapter five, by Christine Tind Johannessen, presents ethnographic theological research on university students' experiences of climate stress. Drawing on her data, and theories from anthropology, psychology and theology, she proposes a model for pastoral care that re-imagines an experiential Trinitarian theological framing for experiencing and perceiving the Divine. In chapter six, Danielle Tumminio Hansen draws on Sallie McFague's body of God metaphor and explores what is at stake theologically when we interpret environmental crises as sexual violation of the Earth. Drawing this metaphor further, she proposes trauma-informed practices for living that shift us away from hierarchical notions of creation. Ryan LaMothe, in chapter seven, interprets environmental crisis theologically as a disruptive revelation of a non-sovereign God. He considers the political, existential and ontological implications of a non-sovereign God and calls readers to reimagine political theologies that frame how we live together. In chapter eight, Tallessyn Zawn Grenfell-Lee draws on a case study from a Swedish experience of crisis to re-interpret experiences of climate disruption in ways that serve resilience and creativity. She concludes with an exploration of hope through a Eucharistic theology of abundance in the face of planetary catastrophe. All these chapters engage either micro- or macro-experiences of climate disruption and explore creative theological constructs and practices to serve life.

Future-Leaning Models for Renewed Eco-integrated Practice, Teaching and Research

The five final chapters, chapters nine to thirteen, all present models or approaches for renewed eco-integrated practice, teaching and research among the different guilds of practical theology. Together, they represent a forward-thinking trajectory that seeks to transform

tools of the field toward Earth-centered practices. In chapter nine, Jeane Peracullo and Rosa Bella Quindoza examine how a Catholic Filipino faith-based community addresses multiple environmental crises within their context. They draw forth the wisdom of the community's practices to present a viable model that moves beyond anthropocentrism and builds capacity for ecological social justice. Chapter ten, written by Leah Shade, presents a case study of the author's development and use of a pedagogical tool designed to teach ministry students about ecological interconnectivity and habitat. The tool, called "Who is My Neighbor?", supports students to engage with issues of environmental justice and to integrate these into their ministry practices. In chapter eleven, HyeRan Kim-Cragg draws on Paul Ballard's work to build a practical theological model for preaching that integrates Scripture as a resource and source to engage with the environmental crisis. Not only does she draw out the elements of the model, but she also shares a sermon that utilizes the model in its construction, demonstrating how it can be adapted into homiletical practice. In chapter twelve, Panu Pihkala presents an in-depth review of the pastoral theological literature on eco-anxiety. He itemizes distinct areas of focus for the discipline at present and projects areas for further research. He also identifies helpful conversation partners for the further development of a body of research for the discipline. Chapter thirteen, written by Joyce Ann Mercer, like the chapters in the first section, includes a call to the field as a whole through an ecofeminist practical theological perspective. We chose to place it here because, with its focus on children and change, it leans towards the future by offering a lens for "toward participatory empowerment for change" (abstract). Mercer examines the experiences of children in terms of the distress they carry and the need for a theology of *oikos*—of home, of habitat—to support them toward engagement and justice, even in the face of environmental chaos. The five chapters in this section all provide concrete examples and specific foci for re-imagining ministry and congregational practices to serve ecological and social justice.

Conclusions

We wish to extend our gratitude to all the authors for their committed and creative engagement of the topic. It has been a joy to work with you. We also wish to thank our Associate Editor with MDPI, Ms. Gloria Qi, whose gracious guidance and support has enabled the coming together of this publication. With deep passion and sense of calling we in practical theology are ready to engage with you in the journey of re-imagining our field from outside its anthropocentric roots. This book is an invitation to enter into this difficult conversation with courage, openness and a sense of realistic and grounded hope—a hope inspired by the Earth, our mother, who generously holds and nurtures all creatures, calling forth new life even in the face of overwhelming destruction and death.

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Notes

- ¹ For example, the recent meeting of the Society for Pastoral Theology included the inaugural gathering of a special interest study group devoted to Pastoral Theology and Climate Change, chaired by Christine Tind Johannessen and Pamela McCarroll; Beginning in December 2022, The Academy of Homiletics will have a new workgroup on climate crisis and creation in preaching, chaired by HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Leah Schade. Jennifer Ayers's recent book, *Inhabitanace*, has garnered much attention within the disciplines of religious education, preaching and ministry. In the area of spirituality there appears to be the most publications in relation to climate and environmental crises (Miller-McLemore, forthcoming) though these, again, are distributed across several books and journals.

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