



Conradie, Ernst M

The Earth in God's Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective

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The stream of publications on theological themes is never-ending, and often, arguably, more vibrant than the ecclesial spaces where these ideas should be embodied. Sadly, the very quality of the water of this stream is not always particularly exciting and only rarely does one come across something quite overwhelming. The new publication by Ernst Conradie – *The Earth in God's Economy* – is such an exceptional occurrence. This is a major and ambitious work which deserves careful attention, not only because of its subject matter, but also of its particular intellectual texture.

The book is a culmination of many years of focussed research on eco-theology and integrates ideas which Conradie has expressed in a large number of previous publications. What remains impressive about his academic career is the sense of discernment and identification of what really matters, the thorough exploration of the state of scholarship on theology and ecology, the location of the research problem in ever-widening frames of reference and the development of thought in a network of international fellow scholars. This work demonstrates *how* the theological task should be approached.

Conradie's work is a Christian and theological response to current ecological destruction and environmental injustice. He construes a narrative of the earth as part of God's economy, God's house-hold which implies "fundamentally God's way of caring for us" (p 17). Underlying his telling the story is a vast array of theological positions and decisions concerning the *nature of doing theology*. The Christian Faith offers a cosmological vision,

“a symbolic way of ‘seeing as’”, of interpreting the world (p. 29). What is seen, is a story: the re-description of the history of the world as God’s acts of house-holding. This story unfolds in *seven* “chapters”: creation (out of love), God’s presence in evolution, the emergence of the human species, God’s providential care, God’s acts of salvation, the formation of Christian communities, and the completion and consummation of God’s work (pp 247f).

This eco-theological position Conradie unpacks in *six chapters* in his book, arguing for the emergence of a trinitarian vision, the mystery of the world in terms of transcendence, the mystery of history and the question of divine agency, the “house-hold of God” as root-metaphor, the nature of the narrative, and finally, ethical and spiritual ramifications. Throughout one is aware of a mature theologian developing his central argument with impressive acquaintance with contemporary states of scholarship on the related issues, with a sharp analytic mind and with striking creativity.

It is impossible to summarise Conradie’s views on, for example, Trinitarian theology, transcendence and divine agency. What is of particular importance to him, the relation between *creation and salvation*, can, however, be briefly mentioned. This relationship, according to him, “cuts to the very core of any theological position” (p 272) and he identifies four possible positions: replacement, recycling, restoration and elevation. In continuity with theologians like Bavinck and Van Ruler, his “inclination is to defend the category restoration as far as this may be possible” (p 287). Creation (as *creatura*) is for him more fundamental than salvation, and salvation does not add anything to God’s work of creation (pp 48, 287). His own position is advanced in terms of “maturation”: “salvation may be understood as removing the obstacles that obstruct the process of the ‘maturation’ of God’s creatures” (p 288).

Conradie constructs a particularly rich eco-theological vision, and much more is at stake than mere ethical discourse. An ambitious thinker is in action who is conspicuously well informed and who is not shy to articulate a bold vision (see e.g. p. 15 on the “ambitious aim of this book”). Inevitably one thinks of Sarah Coakley’s programme of a “théologie totale”. The ecological crisis requires a comprehensive and bold theo-intellectual

response, and this is offered by Conradie. Apart from being academically informed, his theological proposal is both orthodox and creative.

Despite one's appreciation for the exceptional quality of Conradie's work, one cannot avoid raising some *critical questions*, especially about five matters: Does the focus on the work of the triune God not unnecessarily truncate a Trinitarian surplus of meaning when dismissing a focus on the *immanent trinity* as "inner-Trinitarian mysticism" (p 14)? Does the nature of the ambitious vision not require a much more elaborate and bold *Christological vision*, especially along the lines currently be articulated in terms of "deep Incarnation"? Should the proposal not include a more elaborate vision of the nature and possibilities of *human agency*, especially if "our main problem is ...anthropogenic climate change" (p 287). Should an ambitious project like this one not inevitably venture into *inter-religious conversation*, as we find in the recent project of, for example, Kärkkäinen? Is the story of God's householding, as represented by Conradie, not be too simplistic; would a more sensitive antenna for *archaeological and genealogical* thinking, as we encounter in Foucault's oeuvre, not be most appropriate in a most complex era? These theological and epistemological questions do not intend to question the quality of Conradie's work; it merely aims at furthering a critical conversation.

This work by Conradie is a major publication event, and he deserves credit for an exceptional achievement. The book is an expression of an engaged, informed and creative theological mind and is warmly recommended.