

APPRECIATION FOR AWARDING THE CLF- ELISE TEMPELHOFF AWARD FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND JUSTICE

Dear

- Program Director
- Chairman of AMPF, Dr Frits Gaum
- Editor of CLF Publishers, Dr Gideon van der Watt, who motivated the proposal to the AMPF
- Xxxx, who offered the motivation for my award tonight
- Members of the Executive Committee of AMPF
- The respective laureates of this year's prizes and awards
- Guests of honour, guests and in particular, my three children flew to Cape Town, especially for the occasion –

Naturally, one feels modest when receiving a specific award like this. At the same time, one is also profoundly grateful.

The press report on my award pertinently refers to my 1985 dissertation and the work I have since done in the "theology and ecology" field. It, therefore, takes a period of almost 40 years that I grappled with this particular theme – in effect, it is my entire academic career.

Coincidentally, I'm also turning 70 years old this year. We all are aware of the rich significance of this figure. I would also like to regard this award as the crowning achievement of my academic career tonight. I'm so grateful to those who imagined and motivated my work.

I don't want to try to supplement or fill in with the just-presented motivation in any way. It would do inevitable damage. Instead, allow me to briefly share with you critical moments of my journey of *critical faith accountability* over four decades.

First, I want to explain my understanding of theology. Theology, to me, is reality understanding, or more carefully said, a modest attempt to be a responsible interlocutor in man's quest for understanding and sense on planet earthⁱⁱ. I believe theology as a scientific discipline can (and should!) contribute to this discourseⁱⁱⁱ.

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Of course, this is not only about understanding but also about *doing*. Dogmatics and ethics have always been flip sides of one issue. Thinking differently should lead to doing differently^v. The correct view of nature will naturally feed into good

engagement with nature. Environmental consciousness thus finds its flip side in ecological conservation.

Second, we need to understand nature as the handiwork of God. Therefore, nature is creation for us as believers. It encompasses the entire cosmos by definition^{vi}. In recent years, there has even been such a thing as "astrotheology" developing. One of the basic building blocks of my theology was the realisation that we usually think of creation as the act of creation of God as we read, especially in Genesis, but we forget that the creation result is more important than the act itself. It is not about how everything was created, not even that God created, but rather about who and what was created. This created world was neglected in Protestant theology for almost five hundred years until, in the past century, we have been brutally disillusioned by the looming ecological crisis and man's precarious role of exploitation in it.

Thirdly, it also made me realise that we must look at creation not from above (God), from within (soul), but from *around* us^{vii}. If we think of the Apostolic Creed, creation is confessed in the first article as the work of God the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

Karl Barth, probably one of the most cited theologians of the last century, again designed a doctrine of creation where not the Father but where the Son is central. This Christocentric concentration even made him pronounce that creation doctrine is nothing more than anthropology^{viii}, the teaching of man. Nature forms for him, but the auspicious backdrop against which the covenant between God and man plays out.

Therefore, I have concluded that we should not reflect on creation in terms of the Father, or the Son, but in terms of the *Holy Spirit*. The schism between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church in 1054 resulted from a dispute about whether the Spirit went only from the Father or the Son. Choose one for the latter, i.e. that the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ; the Spirit is then primarily Salvation spirit and not so much Creator spirit. The theologians of the Russian Silver Period made me sensitive to appreciate the place of the Creator Spirit anew in theology^{ix}.

Fourthly, it should already be clear that the view of man as the centre of creation must be dethroned; the sooner, the better. *Anthropocentrism* is cancer in any theology. Moltmann, a theologian who strongly influenced my theology and me as a human being, had made it clear before his then Gifford Lectures that not the human is the crown of creation, but the *Sabbath*, where Creator, creature and creation are in harmony. Thus, a Sabbath theology teaches us to appreciate and enjoy God and His handiwork. This approach will also deter us from building a theology based on day 1 to day 6 where work is the focus, but instead building on a theology from day 7 where rest is the focus.

Genesis 1:28's well-known "subject and rule" contributed to the ecological crisis. The sense of life resides in work, as the cynical inscription of the entrance gates of the Auschwitz and Dachau Nazi concentration camps^x also read: "Arbeit macht frei".

In the past, work and labour were central to our life and worldview. The Calvinist work ethic emphasised labour, so we supposedly transformed (or rather deformed?) nature into culture. I was in White River Primary School, and the school's motto is still "labor est ars" (work is an art); I banked at the then Volkskas whose motto was again, "labour" with a ploughshare as its emblem; in Villiersdorp today there is a fruit packing firm called "Labour Joy"; in Pretoria East is a high school whose name is again, "Carpe Diem Academy" (pick the day) is; The motto of Orania municipality is "labour nobility" and I see on their website the following explanation: *This is what Orania is all about – rolling up your sleeves and working for yourself. Labour nobility ennobles you and makes you roll up your sleeves. To understand the true meaning of 'labour nobility', one must look not in a dictionary, but at the building sites in Orania.*

Fifth, this understanding of creation made me realise that I do not have a body but *am* body. I am nature and have been shaped into a *material consciousness* ("embodied soul") through millions of years of evolution.

As Darwin's observations influenced theologians and me working in that vapour circuit, Einstein's insights into relativity and subsequent quantum physics again shaped my insight about time and space as precipitation in many publications^{xixii}. As a result, John Haught, a Georgetown University emeritus professor, argues that there must be *consonance* between theology and science and that we should look into our understanding of reality^{xiii} *Deeper than Darwin* (2003) and *God After Einstein* (2022) – to now use the titles of two of his high-profile books.

This affects my views on the afterlife^{xiv}. We are not aliens and sojourners destined to be destroyed with fire and brimstone. On the contrary, God comes to live with us (John 1:14; Rev. 22:7, 12, 20). This is the rest we must go to, as Hebrews 4 also explains. We do not have words or insights to describe it and can only humbly and silently experience this mystery^{xv, xvi}.

Finally, of course, whether my understanding of reality deserves this award. That question, thankfully, doesn't have to be answered by me! Indeed, the Editor of CLF and his committee have judged so, and I owe them, as already stated, heartfelt gratitude, admittedly embarrassed.

It is impossible to determine the effect or impact of my thinking and insights of a "theology of nature" ^{xviiin, xviii}. The website of *Academia* – a dissemination platform for academic research^{xix} - says my published articles have received 727 references in various academic publications out of some 12,668 readers; *Google Scholar* again calculated that 886 researchers sat my publications^{xx}. Reckoning by this the dozen dissertations and treatises on ecology conferred under my supervision, one would hope that the thoughts expressed above will lead to thinking differently and doing differently^{xxi}.

So I tried to make the "ecodomy" serviceable in theology^{xxii}. It means to build a house or make the kingdom of God a reality in our frame of reference. Of course, this is an all-encompassing concept that combines the cosmos, God, and man,

without fusing the respective substance^{xxiii}. After all, reality always happens in relations.

Am I an eco-theologian or a theo-ecologist? There is quite a difference^{xxiv}. What determines what? Do I look at theology with ecological glasses, or vice versa? Do I look at ecology with theological spectacles? The answer may be which dish you prefer on your plate: beef roasts or roasts!

Dear Programme Director, the constitution of the *CLF – Elise Tempelhoff Award for Environmental Conservation and Justice* describes that the nature and purpose of the award is to recognise:

Individuals and organisations working to preserve the environment's heritage in its many forms through publications, media or projects that influence public consciousness to develop a greater appreciation of the environment and our calling to its preservation in terms of typical Christian (biblical) values and principles.

Therefore, I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude that the judges regard my academic contribution as a particular expression of these values, however minor they may be.

For me, this award honourably crowns my career!

Thanks a lot!

Johan Buitendag
Desmond Tutu Centre
Cape town
May 26, 2023

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ⁱⁱ Buitendag, J., 2019, 'Some reflections on the genealogy of the 'Pretoria model': Towards a definition of theological education at a public university', *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 75(3), s5487. <https://hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/5487>

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^{iv} Buitendag, J., 2016, "'The idea of the University' and the 'Pretoria Model' Apologia pro statu Facultatis Theologicae Universitatis Pretoriensis ad secundum saeculum', *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), a4366. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.4366>

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