Celia Deane-Drummond and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm


Celia Deane-Drummond is one of the foremost contemporary scholars in the areas of ecotheology and the theology of biology. Since this book was published she has been appointed to a major Chair at the University of Notre Dame. So any title with her name on it at once commands attention. Her interaction with Bedford-Strohm and other German scholars here is particularly interesting given (as the Introduction points out) the understandable hypersensitivity of the post-war German mindset to areas of potential catastrophe. (In turn, that reflection sheds light on the complacency of so much of the American population in the face of ecological threat.) Most of the papers published here arise from a conference of the European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment held in Finland in May 2009. Deane-Drummond's own contribution, which ends the book, forms her analysis of the issues arising from the largely abortive Copenhagen Conference on climate change held in December 2009. It showed real courage and commitment on Deane-Drummond's part to take leave from her university post in 2009–10 to spend a year on secondment with the Catholic aid agency cafod, including attendance at Copenhagen. And it is this public engagement of theologians that forms the main thrust of the book. How can theology move out of its bunkers in academy and church and contribute to the formulation of policy in areas of real importance? The subject focused on here could hardly be more important, given the steadily worsening predictions emerging from the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change.

The book starts well with Bedford-Strohm's own essay, ‘Public Theology of Ecology and Civil Society’. He makes the important point, which also emerges from reflection on the work of Mike Hulme (surprisingly not cited), that in order to influence public policy it is necessary to enter the discourse and indeed the mindset of the policy-makers. To develop the well-known adage about speaking truth to power: if power is to hear, it must be spoken to in its own language. This is a simple enough conclusion, but immensely important and often neglected.

Inevitably, the essays in such a volume are of variable standard, and variable in their accessibility. I enjoyed Hans Diefenbacher’s thoughts on the still endlessly frustrating issue of how to do ecological economics. I was interested in Elena Vuola’s challenge to liberation theology to find a really nuanced engagement with ecological concerns. It was useful too that the editors included two case-studies that form vignettes within the whole – the introductory one on
the Baltic, which as an almost entirely enclosed sea is apparently especially vulnerable to the oxygen depletion that is now affecting many waterways, and also the one on uranium mining in Northern Carelia, though here I felt there could have been more analysis of the costs and benefits of the proposed mines. Too often ecological writing gives the impression that the just and righteous way forward is clear, and consists of abandoning whatever development is proposed, instead of acknowledging the complexity of calculations that involve both local and national well-being, and the flourishing of present and future generations of both humans and other animals.

For me, the outstanding essay in this volume is Forrest Clingerman’s treatment of memory. Clingerman points out that the human imagination finds it easier to engage with place than with ‘nature’, and notes the extent to which our construal of place depends on memory, so “remembering place rightly” is an ethical responsibility for civil society (p. 143). But this cannot be allowed to lead to a merely backward-looking engagement with place; rather, the reflection of Christian community on place is both anamnesis and ‘anticipation of wholeness within the infinite memory of the divine’ (148). Though the public debate will not be (explicitly) eucharistic in its focus, it can draw helpfully on shared narrative of place.

Deane-Drummond offers fascinating insights into the Copenhagen Conference, and then asks the question, what ethical framework might both do justice to theological insights and also be able to be heard within secular discourses? She considers Martha Nussbaum’s work on entitlement to capability, and criticizes this both for the arbitrariness of Nussbaum’s list of principles intended to guarantee this entitlement, and because features that, to a scientist turned theologian like Deane-Drummond, seem intrinsic are in her view treated too lightly by Nussbaum. Thus religion appears in Nussbaum’s list only under the entitlement to the capability of free choice, and environmental concerns are made to seem just one item on a list, rather than reflecting the ground of our embodied flourishing. It is no surprise that Deane-Drummond turns in the end to her preferred source of ecotheological resources, the lists of classical and theological virtues that have informed the Christian tradition from its beginnings. In this case she emphasizes the importance of charity, as well as her usual favourite, prudence. Interestingly prudence turns out to include the ability to act well in the face of the unexpected, which she terms solertia. This has important links with the emphasis now being developed by William Grassie on the need for resilience, on a planet on which there are bound to be periodic disasters, both natural and man-made. Deane-Drummond also touches on a motif I mentioned above, the need for care with language. Distinctive Christian truth-claims, offered into a secular, transnational and multi-faith