1 Introduction

ALEXANDER J. B. HAMPTON

The masterpiece of Sienese painting known as *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise* by Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia is a fitting place to begin a consideration of the relationship between Christianity and the environment (Figure 1.1). One way to read the painting is to understand it as simultaneously representing two elements of the complicated relationship that Christianity's adherents have to the natural world of which they are a part. On the top left of the panel, once part of a multipanelled predella, God the Father is depicted in the act of creation. Surrounded by twelve cherubim, he is suspended above a celestial globe; a schematic rendering of the universe. The concentric circles represent the constellations of the zodiac, the known planets, and the four elements. At its centre is a *mappamondo* showing the physical features of the terrestrial world.[1] Christian theology has often understood creation as a divine gift, a physical manifestation of God's goodness. At different times, Christians have understood it as a book of divine revelation from which to learn, a gift to nurture and steward, a wild garden in need of cultivation and betterment, and as a resource for the improvement of the human condition. These ideas have informed, and continue to inform, our relationship with the environment. Christianity has shaped the collective understanding of nature for countless individuals, both within and without the religion, directly and indirectly, and affected everything from environmental policy to resource extraction.

On the right half of the panel is the Garden of Eden, with its four rivers issuing from the ground in the lower portion, and its fecund vegetation in the upper section symbolising the sinless prelapsarian state of humanity. The action depicts the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden, with the nakedness and human form of the angel thought

[1] Kristen Lippincott, 'Giovanni di Paolo's Creation of the World and the Tradition of the "Thema Mundi" in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art', *Burlington Magazine* 132, no. 1048 (July 1990): 460–468, at 464.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108860666.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

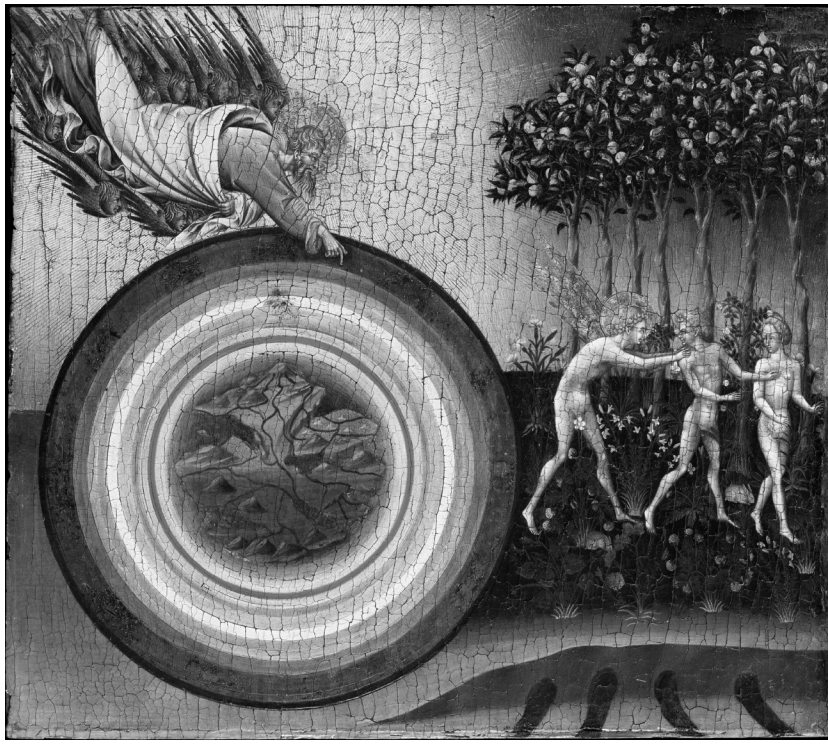

Figure 1.1 Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia (Italian, Siena, 1398–1482) / *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise* / 1445 / Image ID: KNWGAD/ Photo: agefotostock/Alamy Stock Photo.

to symbolise deep compassion for the fallen state of humanity.[2] This story of the goodness of creation and human alienation from it was then completed in the next panel of the predella, which depicts a final stage of reconciliation in the garden of Paradise (Figure 1.2). Here saints and angels are shown embracing one another. At their feet, rabbits silflay unconcerned among the flowers, while the fruited trees, whose canopies fill the top of the panel, share a suggestive similarity with those depicted in Eden.

The divine comedy depicted by Giovanni di Paolo is both a spiritual and a natural history. It is the story of falling from divine grace, and

[2] Ingeborg Bähr, Zum ursprünglichen Standort und zur Ikonographie des Dominikaner-Retabels von Giovanni di Paolo in den Uffizien, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 2002, 46. Bd., H. 1 (2002), pp. 74–120, at 95–96.

Figure 1.2 Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia (Italian, Siena, 1398–1482) / *Paradise* / 1445/ Image ID: KCD1RT / Photo: Artokoloro/ Alamy Stock Photo.

in so doing, coming to be alienated from the creation of which we are a part. It is also a story of returning to God, and to the Edenic state of one's proper place in that creation.

RELIGION AND THE HUMAN–NATURE RELATIONSHIP

The way this story has shaped the human–nature relationship is at the heart of this volume and the broad intellectual history it offers. The

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108860666.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

radical alteration of the state of the planet through anthropogenic factors has prompted a deeper critical awareness, and active engagement with the way we conceptualise the natural environment and our place within it. Increasingly this critical awareness questions the deeply embedded concepts that have structured our evolving understanding of nature and the religious genealogies that lay behind them. The question of Christianity's role in the environmental crisis is not a new one. The publication of Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', in 1967, is often seen as an important moment for its consideration in the twentieth century.[3] The text, which considers the role of Christianity in the crisis, was important for a number of reasons. Foremost, it pointed out the importance of religion in setting the social-intellectual imaginary for the human–nature relationship.[4] White contentiously offered a critical assessment of Western Christianity's role in creating the intellectual conditions that had precipitated the anthropogenic degradation of nature. In particular, it singled out the placing of humans above nature, leading to White's claim that 'Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen'.[5] In the years that have followed, this claim has been debated, contested, and shown to have significant problems owing to its wide-ranging nature.[6] In part, this volume works to helpfully complicate wide-ranging claims such as those made by White by showing a landscape far more varied than that presented in the oft-cited article.

White's claims about Christianity are only one aspect of the legacy of his article. What is perhaps its lasting contribution is that it highlighted the importance of understanding the role of religion in the

[3] Lynn White Jr, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207. Originally delivered to the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (26 December 1966). White offered a more detailed consideration in his other works: Lynn White Jr, *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Lynn White Jr, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

[4] White Jr, 'The Historical Roots', pp. 1205–1206.

[5] Ibid., p. 1205.

[6] For 'Lynn White Thesis', see *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The 'Lynn White Thesis' at Fifty*, eds. Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson (New York: Routledge, 2017); *Religion and the New Ecology: Environmental Responsibility in a World in Flux*, eds. David M. Lodge and Christopher Hamlin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Willis Jenkins, 'After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems', *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 2 (2009): 283–309; Elspeth Whitney, 'Lynn White, Ecotheology, and History', *Environmental Ethics* 15, no. 2 (1993): 151–169.

environmental crisis, and most importantly, pointing out that the solution to it lay neither in science nor technology, but in the philosophical and cultural context in which they are realised, a context set largely by religion. White claimed that humanity would not extract itself 'out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion or re-think our old one'.[7] The necessity of considering the environmental crisis in a civilisational context that accounts for religion is reinforced today in the context of the environmental humanities; as an umbrella term that characterises a range of scholarship with the particular aim of challenging the traditional allocation of the understanding of nature to the separate sphere of the natural sciences. A core claim in environmental humanities literature is the rejection of any characterisation of humanities-based approaches to nature as being of lesser value than those of the natural sciences, as it is the qualitative human context that dictates the direction and employment of that technical knowledge.[8] As such, the environmental humanities provide an intellectual framework whereby the topic of religion and nature can be reconceptualised within the context of a wider key development occurring throughout the humanities.

NAMING NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

All of this begins to explain the title of this volume, insofar as Christianity has a long-standing role in shaping and contributing to our conceptions of the environment. But a further clarification is yet needed, as the terms 'creation' and 'nature' – already used and employed throughout the volume – also speak to the concepts, intellectual history, and contemporary issues involved in the relationship of Christianity to what is termed the environment. If circumstances allowed, a more expansive title, such as 'Christianity, Nature, Creation, and the Environment in the West' might have been suitable, as each term has its place in the story of Christianity's relationship to the subject of the environment. One important task, then, is to clarify for the reader what is meant by these terms, and subsumed here under the single word 'environment',

[7] White Jr, 'The Historical Roots', p. 1206.

[8] Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye, *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 7–11, 71–92; Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 38–61; Jeremy David Bendik-Keymer and Chris Haufe, 'Anthropogenic Mass Extinction: The Science, the Ethics, and the Civics', in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, eds. Stephen M. Gardiner and Allen Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 427–437.

if the volume is to be a 'companion', a helper, for understanding the relationship of these given subjects.

The environment can be defined as 'the physical surroundings and conditions in which humans and other organisms live and develop'.[9] Focussed on the physical and biological environs, it is not quite sufficient on its own to the task of encompassing the historical, metaphysical, theological, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions considered in this volume. Nature as a term is more all-encompassing – going beyond the 'physical' restraints of 'environment', it includes the metaphysical nature of things, and addresses how that nature, for much of Christian history, referred to a reality beyond itself, in which nature participates. It also opens up considerations of the problematic distinctions between the human and the rest of nature, and between anthropogenically affected nature and putatively pure nature, something which may no longer exist if we accept the thesis of the Anthropocene. Creation, a more theologically resonant term, historically reflects the view of Christianity that nature is a divine formation – as such, it resonates with an artistic tenor and the tradition of seeing creation as a divine work of art. The term's history, however, is also freighted with Creationism, and its exclusively literalist readings of Biblical sources which have put some adherents of Christianity in opposition to other adherents' efforts to protect creation, a conflict visible in the climate debate. Ecology is another term present in this volume and, like environment, it most often refers to the natural scientific or social scientific understanding of nature, but with a particular emphasis on ecosystems, species-interaction, and interconnection. It is defined both as 'the branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment, or the study of the relationships between humans and their environment' and as 'the political movement concerned with protection of the environment'.[10] On the one hand, 'ecology' may seem to limit the understanding of nature to the immanent frame alone, seemingly excluding the faith tradition that is the focus of this volume; on the other, it helpfully emphasises the interrelations between humans and the rest of nature, and speaks to the often morally or religiously infused political movements that address environmental issues. All these terms have their benefits and disadvantages, and this is not even

[9] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. 'environment (*n.*)', accessed 9 July 2021, www-oed-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/63089?redirectedFrom=environment.

[10] Ibid.

to bring up the vexed issue of defining religion in general or Christianity in particular. What it does point to is the vastness of the topic, which no one volume can ever do justice to. It also points to the necessity of hearing multiple voices on such a broad topic of existential importance to us all, and it is to this multifarious conversation, between diverse religions, cultures, and disciplines, that this volume contributes.

INHERITED CHALLENGES

There is no monocausal explanation for the present environmental crisis. It is the product of myriad factors, throughout the course of history. However, it is the case that the present crisis is deeply bound up with a now globalised version of the modern Western subject-centred social imaginary. This has a range of results that minimise the inherent meaning and value in nature, destabilising and displacing local and indigenous forms of nature knowledge, whether Western or Eastern, Northern or Southern. In doing so it reinforces inequitable power structures and wealth distribution, while at the same time disembedding humans from nature by placing them outside and above it. From this detached subject-centred standpoint, the external world of nature is rationally ordered through the culture of science and technology. In this context, nature is rendered passive, with meaning and value determined by subject-based narratives of meaning-making. Ultimately, this can lead to an instrumentalist, utilitarian, commodified view of nature, whose basic logic must be reversed if our environmental crisis is to be seriously addressed.

The sources of this world view are complex. It has its origins in places we can easily identify, such as in the Renaissance and Reformation, and the development of their view of the individual; in the scientific and industrial revolutions, and their mechanised and utilitarian view of reality; in the Enlightenment and secular liberalism, with their emphasis on liberty, and the identification of that liberty with capital; and in the international exportation of the legacy of these developments through colonialism, economic imperialism, and cultural exchange. But the deeper origins of our globalised world view are more extensive than these modern causes. They are also found in the debates within medieval scholasticism concerning the nature of divine universals, in ancient concerns about the right relationship of humans to God, and in archaic speculation about the connection between the eternal heavens and the changing earth. It is because of the globalisation of the modern Western world view, because of the fact that its impact is planetary, that

this volume focusses upon its sources, its problems, and the potential solutions that may lie dormant in it. Our aim here is not to claim that Western Christianity and its legacy offer a universal history of nature. Rather, by presenting an overview of Christianity – and some of its central concepts, history, and issues that relate to the environment – the intention is both to complicate it, by demonstrating that it is far from monolithic and uniform in its understanding of the environment, and to provincialise it by showing that it is characterised by alternative possibilities, dissenting voices, as well as constituting dominant narratives. For these reasons, this volume focusses largely on central aspects of the legacy of Christianity that has been dominant in the West, acknowledging the many worldwide Christianities that could each likewise contribute to this conversation.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The book is divided into three sections. The first section, 'Concepts', aims to explicate some of the formative ideas concerning the environment that have shaped Christian thought and the culture shaped by it. Section two, 'Histories', considers how key periods have perceived nature and the environment, and how that understanding has shifted over time. The third section, 'Engagements', takes up central themes concerning the environment and Christianity, explicating them conceptually and exploring their constructive possibilities.

'Part I: Concepts' opens in Chapter 1 with 'Naturalism, Supernaturalism, and our Concern for Nature', where Fiona Ellis inquires into the possibility of considering nature truly on its own terms – with its own value and in light of the limits it puts upon us – without reverting to supernaturalism nor atheism. Ellis clarifies the connections between a disenchanted nature and a scientific naturalist position, and the ensuing resistance to the theistic position that affirms an external, divine source of value; both positions often end up centring on human concerns. Ellis then argues for a concern for nature that can in fact be both naturalist and theistic, without being anthropocentric.

Jörg Lauster's Chapter 3, 'From Disenchantment to Enchantment: Mind, Nature, and the Divine Spirit', complicates the materialism–enchantment opposition by looking first to Lucretius who affirmed an intrinsic value and self-sufficiency to nature without it possessing a hidden, enchanted meaning. Lucretius prefigures the modern non-anthropocentric view of nature, which the phenomena of human consciousness furthers with the notion of the voice of nature. Lauster argues that the

mind and nature are mutually dependent, such that human reflection can be seen as nature thinking itself, a reflection that partakes of the divine spirit, resulting in a new understanding of enchantment.

Charles Taliaferro in Chapter 4 examines 'Human and Nonhuman Animals from Secular and Sacred Perspectives' by both clarifying and challenging scientific naturalism and broad naturalism (as demonstrated by Ellis). On these grounds, Taliaferro affirms the necessary recognition of human consciousness or self-awareness in order to also affirm nonhuman animal consciousness, without a resulting anthropocentrism. He offers objections to a reliance on analogy with the human, and argues, rather, that theistic perspectives provide a productive view of nonhuman animals, as writings in these traditions – and particularly Christianity – affirm their animal consciousness, intrinsic value, and moral significance.

In Chapter 5, 'Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism, Stewardship and Co-Creation', Robin Attfield clarifies the eponymous concepts and describes and critiques both Lynn White's and John Passmore's associations of Christianity with anthropocentrism. In contrast, Attfield argues that the tradition of stewardship in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – far from being managerial and anthropocentric – offers a fruitful version of a sometimes biocentric approach to the environment. He combines this stewardship-biocentrism, distinct from Deep Ecology, with a Christian position that also upholds co-creation, which can inform a productive contemporary religious understanding of the human role in the community of creatures.

Andrew Davison's Chapter 6 , 'Participation and Nature in Christian Theology', argues for the reconciliation between an environmentally aware and a religious, God-centred position, countering the idea that these positions are mutually exclusive. Davison outlines aspects of both theological and biological 'partaking in' or 'sharing in': theologically, all things participate in or are derived from God, making creation a good gift which should flourish; biologically, ecological dependence and species interactions betray a nature to which we all belong. Davison also incorporates ideas of knowledge, love, and divine mediation, arguing that a participatory vision can affirm – and protect – creation's integrity.

Finally, in Chapter 7, 'The Book of Nature, Jacob Holsinger Sherman elucidates this enduring motif and describes central aspects of the tradition that interprets nature's own expression or articulation. In early and medieval Christianity, this book of nature accompanied the book of Scripture, both of which spoke of God because both were dependent

on the idea of Christ as *Logos*, as Word. Sherman discusses the literary layers of interpretation involved in contemplating the divine mysteries in this book of nature. Although this approach shifted with early modernity, Sherman argues for its continuity, visible in its influence on Puritans and Pietists, Romanticism, and modern nature writers.

'Part II: Histories' begins in Chapter 8 by looking to 'Environmental Perspectives in Ancient Greek Philosophy and Religion'. Here, Crystal Addey both describes and challenges the common perception that Plato's philosophy is reducible to a dualistic and anthropocentric view. In contrast, Addey depicts the often-religious significance of place and landscape in Plato's Greece, and argues for the ensuing historical legacy in Greek philosophy that demonstrates an eco-holistic or eco-centric view – a view based in a participatory kinship of all natural entities, and present in Platonic philosophy, in Plotinus' 'ensouled cosmos', and in the Neoplatonic ritual practice of theurgy.

Such Greek thought was significantly influential on early and medieval Christian theologians who synthesised biblical understandings of creation with Neoplatonism and Aristotelian *physis* (nature), a synthesis which itself saw a revival in twelfth-century western Europe. In her Chapter 9, 'Medieval Nature and the Environment', Kellie Robertson addresses this revival or 'discovery of nature' with a description of the medieval encyclopaedic tradition that presented a hierarchy or chain of being(s) and generated speculation on divine ordinance and providence, as well as on the boundary between the natural and unnatural. Robertson then shows how personifying Nature allowed writers of this medieval period to explore both the knowledge that Natura herself actively offered as well as issues concerning God's relation to his created universe.

Turning to Chapter 10, 'Natural Philosophy in Early Modernity', Nathan Lyons addresses the shift from medieval Christian (Aristotelian-infused) understandings of nature to the 'mechanisation' of nature in the seventeenth century. This mechanist philosophy newly incorporated experiment and the practical sciences in order to discover and understand this machine-like nature, contrasted with rational and speculative medieval argumentation. Rooted in natural 'laws' rather than Aristotelian 'causes', this early modern mode of discovery likewise influenced, as Lyons examines, new methods of biblical interpretation and the prevalence of a pragmatic, rather than contemplative, view of nature.

This pragmatic orientation to nature accompanied the rise of industrialisation, but the contemplative or religious sensibility had not

disappeared with the modern turn, as Mark Stoll demonstrates in Chapter 11, 'Protestantism, Environmentalism, and Limits to Growth'. Stoll looks to the Puritan heritages of George Perkins Marsh in America and William Stanley Jevons in Britain – almost simultaneously in the 1860s, they warned of the limits to industrial growth based on a moral irresponsibility of natural resource use. A religious sensibility, Stoll shows, impacted these men's advocacy for resource conservation, generating governmental-level environmental initiatives in their two nations.

Treating further the nineteenth century's contemplative views of nature, Laura Dassow Walls examines 'Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and Ecological Thought' in Chapter 12. Influenced by New England's liberal Protestantism, Europe's Romanticism and Idealism, and the view of modern science as a divine interpreter (contrasting early modernity's mechanist science), the American Transcendentalists affirmed a faith in the 'transcendent, all-unifying truth' of Nature. Walls discusses the varied branches of the Transcendentalist movement, arguing for the assorted fruitful visions of the moral relationship between humanity, nature, and God – visions which bore fruit most visibly in the burgeoning ecological sensibility and environmental movement of subsequent centuries.

In the final chapter of Part II, Sean J. McGrath brings us into 'Contemporary Religious Ecology' conversations in Chapter 13, arguing that current morally informed ecological perspectives, although varied, all challenge anthropocentrism. McGrath examines three such positions: ecological pantheism, which affirms a 'spiritual–material continuum of being' in nature; ecological neo-paganism, which upholds a sense that nature, as living, is a guiding force for humans; and ecological monotheism, which emphasises stewardship and divine manifestation, grounded in the biblical creation account. These positions address the moral responsibility of humans to counter anthropogenic ecological damage.

'Part III: Engagements' focusses first on 'The Sublime and Wonder', as Emily Brady , in Chapter 14 explores the constructive possibility of these concepts in relation to the environment. She distinguishes a 'natural sublime' as described by Kant – the experience of being overwhelmed by natural phenomena – from the more recent 'environmental sublime' as seen in nature writers such as Muir and Carson. Brady then examines wonder with a focus on questioning that ensues from the aesthetic, receptive experience of the natural world. Present in both the sublime and wonder is the aspect of 'other-regarding attitudes', a non-anthropocentrism that has ethical implications for meaningful relations to the environment.

In 'Religious Traditions and Ecological Knowledge' (Chapter 15) Michael S. Northcott addresses the creaturely agency long-acknowledged in indigenous traditions, which anthropologists have recognised as impacting human relations to the environment. Although at first incorporated into world religious traditions, including Judaism and early Christianity, the view of a shared realm of all beings declined in the Latin West as Christianity increasingly favoured human beings, culminating in the Enlightenment's scientistic hermeneutic. Northcott traces this decline and suggests 'hybrid approaches to conservation' that newly incorporate traditional indigenous and religious knowledge, including the 'original participative ontology' described in this chapter.

Jame Schaefer in Chapter 16 considers 'Venerating Earth: Three Sacramental Perspectives' by drawing upon Christian reflections on God's presence in creation, while also addressing the complex relation between science and the sense of the sacred. She examines three prominent ways the 'sacramentality of creation' has been historically apparent: in the contemplative experience of God's presence in the world; in the theological reflection on God's character from studying the world; and in the Christian ritual of receiving the Eucharist as a material encounter with God. Schaefer argues that these sacramental perspectives engender attitudes and actions that promote the flourishing of all earthly life.

In an examination of 'Nature and Aesthetics: Methexis, Mimēsis, and Poiēsis' in Chapter 17, Alexander J. B. Hampton points to the constructive capacity of aesthetic realism to both articulate a lamentable human alienation from the rest of nature and challenge the anthropocentrism at the root of this alienation. Incorporating the central aesthetic concepts of methexis (participation), mimēsis, and poiēsis, he explores the productive focus on nature's own inherent value and meaning, as it is expressed in poetry, painting, music, and architecture. The varied sources considered demonstrate that aesthetics has an important role in creatively reshaping our conceptions of the environment.

Douglas Hedley's engagement in Chapter 18 with 'Sophia and the World Soul' – the feminine personification of divine Wisdom and the Platonic *anima mundi* that expresses a living cosmos – further complicates a characterisation of the Christian legacy as purely anthropocentric. He traces the association of these two intellectual concepts in their complex transmission, from the Hebrew Bible and Plato's *Timaeus* to their reception in the twelfth-century Italian Renaissance, the later Cambridge Platonists, and in German Romanticism's complex conjoining of Sanskrit literature and Spinozistic thought infused with Cabbalism.

Revisiting the multilayered religious metaphor of a world soul offers promising metaphysical implications for ecological thought.

In the volume's final chapter, Chapter 19, 'Creation and Gender: A Theological Appraisal', Willemien Otten addresses the historical-intellectual Christian legacy of imposed gender hierarchies, rooted in the exegetical opposition between 'creation' and 'nature'. Along with discussing this exegesis, she treats critiques found in ecofeminism, the movement that drew upon women's liberation to challenge gendered social and environmental imbalances. Otten proposes two conceptual ways forward: to understand gender roles as humanly created rather than divinely-made; and to look to what she calls the prophetic voice of nature which can create both creature and gender unity, as well as interreligious endeavours for climate justice.