

## Book Review

Lisa E. Dahill and James B. Martin-Schramm, eds.  
*Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril.*  
Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016  
pb, xxi, 306, \$28, £30.

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On the cusp of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a major catalyst of the Protestant Reformation – Martin Luther’s nailing his 95 theses on the Wittenberg church door – another multifaceted crisis with global implications requires urgent action. Humanity’s comprehensive degradation of God’s creation has undermined and problematized “our ability as stewards, and our conviction that we are neighbor-lovers” (McKibben x, from the Foreword). In response to interlocking ecological threats, and in alignment with the Lutheran World Federation’s tripartite theme for this season of remembrance (“Salvation: Not for sale. Human beings: Not for sale. Creation: Not for sale.”), Lisa E. Dahill and James B. Martin-Schramm have brought together 16 leading Lutheran scholars from the disciplines of biblical studies, systematic and pastoral theology, history, and ethics. In *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*, they seek “to pull forth resources from the Lutheran tradition in particular that constructively advance the vision of a socially and ecologically flourishing earth” (xiii).

They have, for the most part, succeeded. *Eco-Reformation* incorporates several creative, sophisticated essays that significantly realize its editors’ aims. A few of the contributions are particularly strong, including Cynthia D. Moe-

Lobeda’s analysis of the structural dimensions of sin and concomitant discussion of the global interrelatedness of ecological destruction and social injustice. H. Paul Santmire calls for a profound recognition of the integrity of nature, since “*God hears the phenomenologically discernible destructivity of nature as the groaning of nature [and] the phenomenologically discernible creativity of nature as nature’s praise*” (83, emphasis original). Aana Marie Vigen interweaves Advent and Lenten liturgies with an exposition of the importance of bodily health, against which climate change poses many demonstrable hazards. And Terra S. Rowe, in conversation with the Finnish interpretation of Luther, proposes understanding “free gift” as inherently involving interdependent relationship, in contrast to later capitalist misunderstandings of the concept: “Luther’s own sense that Christ both *gives* and *is* the gift in reciprocity and interdependence may function today as a corrective to a pervasive and ecologically perilous articulation of grace as a gift free of exchange” (268, emphasis original).

Overall, there is much to commend about this ambitious project. The authors make creative use of Lutheran concepts (justification by faith alone, theology of the cross, creation as God’s mask, consubstantiation) and figures (Martin Luther himself, of course; but also twentieth-century Lutherans Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Joseph Sittler). Additionally, they converse with scientists, activists, ministers, and scholars from

other traditions, while incorporating insights from Scripture, geological and biological research, and practical suggestions for faith-based ecological fidelity. Perhaps the most salient achievement of *Eco-Reformation* – all the more remarkable given how many authors are involved – is the relative unity of its tone: soberly entranced with creation's God-given grandeur, painfully cognizant of humanity's failures to care for it properly, and critically hopeful about the possibilities of bearing fruit in keeping with repentance. These essays are consistently passionate, frequently compelling, and occasionally inspiring.

At some points, however, this consonance in perspective risks devolving into repetitive insularity. Fully one-fourth of the essays make reference to one of Luther's treatises on the Eucharist, which claims: "God is substantially present everywhere, in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God" (Rhoads 9, *et passim*). Such frequency at least raises the specter of proof texting, especially given that over half of the remaining essays refrain from quoting Luther at all. Additionally, although some essays assert broader connections between the sacraments and the ecosystem, they insufficiently develop such links. At best, they may presuppose a more expansive theology of consubstantiation that was formulated elsewhere; yet when reading a sentence such as "Christ's presence in the Eucharist is a particular example, for the forgiveness of sins, of the general presence of God in all creation" (Simmons 201), one wonders whether some steps in the argument are missing. Either way, such overlap – both in general content and specific contours – gives the impression that *Eco-Reformation* is primarily an in-house Lutheran discussion, even as the authors genuinely desire to partner beyond

their tradition for creation's healing.

A deeper concern is the book's pervasive fuzziness about the distinct role of Christ in creation. The incarnation is lauded as indicating "an immanent presence of God in *all things*" (Rhoads 10, emphasis original) and as "challeng[ing] the rampant dualism of our era" (Martin-Schramm 111). Yet it is unclear whether the Word made flesh is the same as the cosmic Christ that authors invoke along panentheistic lines, especially when one reads, "It's disorienting: Jesus is dissolved, all that's left is the wind" (Dahill 181). This lack of clarity in Christological method is indeed disorienting.

Even with these critiques in mind, *Eco-Reformation* is a constructive, hopeful contribution to ecological theology and ethics, as well as to Lutheran and Reformation studies. It should prove helpful to students and scholars, as well as laypersons who wish to become more informed on these themes in this crucial time. Although the book's greatest effectiveness will be reserved for Lutheran contexts, it has the potential to promote dialogue within and among other traditions as well. Half a millennium after Luther – and this time with a friendly Pope – Dahill and Martin-Schramm, along with their team, deserve our gratitude for advancing the conversation about our need for ecological reformation.