

THE  
PLACE  
OF  
STORY  
AND  
THE  
STORY  
OF  
PLACE

Edited by  
Ernst M. Conradie & Willie James Jennings

AN EARTHED FAITH:  
Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”  
Volume 3

THE PLACE OF STORY  
AND THE STORY  
OF PLACE



AOSIS

Published by AOSIS Books, an imprint of AOSIS Scholarly Books, a division of AOSIS.

### **AOSIS Publishing**

15 Oxford Street, Durbanville, 7550, Cape Town, South Africa

Postnet Suite 110, Private Bag X19, Durbanville, 7551, Cape Town, South Africa

Tel: +27 21 975 2602

Website: <https://www.aosis.co.za>

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Published in 2024

Impression: 1

ISBN: 978-1-77995-305-6 (print)

ISBN: 978-1-77995-306-3 (epub)

ISBN: 978-1-77995-307-0 (pdf)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2024.BK355>

How to cite this work: Conradie, EM & Jennings, WJ (eds.) 2024, *The Place of Story and the Story of Place*, in *An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene"*, vol. 3, AOSIS Books, Cape Town.

An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the "Anthropocene"

ISSN: 2790-4288

Series Editor: Ernst M. Conradie

Printed and bound in South Africa.

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Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”  
Volume 3

# THE PLACE OF STORY AND THE STORY OF PLACE

Editors  
Ernst M. Conradie  
Willie James Jennings



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## Research Justification

Christian ecotheology is at times reduced to creation theology, anthropology or environmental ethics. Nevertheless, adequate creation theologies that do justice to the materiality of what is created (*creatura*), to the act of creating (*creatio*) and the identity and character of the Creator, remain surprisingly scarce. Moreover, the danger that creation theologies tend to legitimize positions of power and privilege remains prevalent amid the legacy of imperialism, colonialism and apartheid. In the context of the “Anthropocene,” where a clear separation between nature and culture can no longer be condoned, an adequate creation theology has become urgent. This third volume of the “An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the ‘Anthropocene’” series captures the state of the debate in contemporary ecotheology on creation theology and extends this debate through a set of diverse contributions from around the world.

The title of the volume suggests that creation narratives necessarily emerge from within a particular context that requires a sense of place—one that can come to terms with the destructive dynamics of power in that place. This indicates a tension between place and displacement and allows for a dialectic of orientation, disorientation and reorientation. At the same time, there is a need to recognize cosmic, biological and cultural evolution by telling the story of any particular place. The question, then, is how such a story is to be told amid the rupture associated with the “Anthropocene.”

The ambitious aim of the editorial introduction to this volume is to describe the state of the debate on creation theology, especially (but not only) in Christian ecotheology. It does so by outlining how the debate has shifted from one agenda to another over the last five decades. It concludes that there remains considerable confusion on what the question is that creation theology addresses: Should the focus be on whether, how, who, what, why or for what purpose the world was created, or what the act of creating may mean? On this basis, each of the essays then addresses the following core question raised in this volume: “What difference does it make to the story of cosmic, planetary, human and cultural evolution to re-describe this as the creative work of God’s love? Inversely, what difference does it make to the story of God’s love to describe it in evolutionary and geographic terms?”

The essays included in this volume are all original and develop constructive responses to the same underlying question from within distinct contexts. They adopt a similar methodology, namely, a critical and constructive review of the available literature in the field of Christian ecotheology. These are scholarly essays in the sense that they are written by leading scholars together with a few emerging scholars in the field. The volume is aimed primarily at experts in the field and has been checked for plagiarism and self-plagiarism.

The ten contributors (two had to withdraw belatedly) were selected in order to optimize a diversity of positions in terms of geographical context, confessional traditions, and theological schools, also taking considerations of gender, race, age and language into account.

The concluding conversation between the contributing authors identifies current paths and emerging horizons in creation theology in order to take the debate forward in the context of contemporary ecotheology. It invites other participants in the field to join the conversation on the basis of this volume.

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## Artist statement

Garth Erasmus is a South African artist born in Uitenhage and currently based in Cape Town. He participated, together with Nesindano Xhoses Namise, Peter Thiessen and Ruth May, in an exhibition entitled “Sand Sand Sand” at the Kunsthaus Hamburg in Hamburg, Germany, from 20 August to 02 October 2022. A unique feature of this exhibition is that the artworks were not displayed on the wall but on the floor as sand work or hanging from the roof. Ink on Paper 2018 Drawing 7 was one such work.

Erasmus explains the significance of this exhibition in the following way:

‘In the frame of an international collaboration, visual artists and musicians explore sand – as a material and as a medium for reflecting on traces of colonial history, for the reappropriation of indigenous knowledge and the respective worldviews. Sand is like the skeleton of the world, a foundation of modern culture and technologies, the invisible but essential ingredient of constructed living environments and digital communication devices. For its extraction, entire beaches are hauled away, seabeds are sucked out, gigantic pits are dug out, mountains are piled up. Wars are waged, villages sink into the ground and islands are washed over by the sea. Against this background, the artists participating in the project will create a space at the Kunsthaus Hamburg, in which fleeting sounds, fabric, combined with textile and mineral images interweave in a spatial and acoustic installation to form a landscape.’

For more detail on this exhibition see <https://www.mutualart.com/Exhibition/Sand-Sand-Sand/75D00D60799FB126>.



# Table of Contents

Abbreviations and Acronyms Appearing in the Text and Notes	xiii
Notes on Contributors	xv
<i>An Earthed Faith: Envisaged Volumes in the Series</i>	xix

## **The Place of Creation in Christian Ecotheology – Some Shifts in the Story** **1**

*Ernst M. Conradie with Willie James Jennings*

The Series on “An Earthed Faith”	1
The Question Posed in this Volume	3
Agenda 1: The Self-critique of (Western) Male Theologies	4
Agenda 2: Widening the Scope of Ecotheology Beyond Creation Theology	6
Agenda 3: Creation, the Natural Sciences, and Ecological Concerns	8
Agenda 4: The Shift to (Western) Ecofeminist Theologies of Creation	11
Agenda 5: Liberation, Black, Womanist, and Subaltern Creation Theologies	12
Agenda 6: The Retrieval of Indigenous Theologies of Creation Globally	16
Agenda 7: Ecumenical Efforts Toward Telling the Story Together	17
Conclusion: The Question is ... What is the Question?	20
Bibliography	21

## **Treaty as a Shared Narrative: Indigenous Treaty as Canada’s Creation Story** **25**

*Ray Aldred*

Introduction	25
Heal the Land	27
Develop or Raise Emotional Intelligence and Skill	28
Cast a Vision of Unity That is Neither Tribalism nor a New Imperialism	29
Identity, Spirituality, and Law from Creation Stories	30
Identity	30
Spirituality	33
Law	34

A Treaty Is an Attempt by First Nations at a Shared Narrative	35
Spirituality is Built upon the Understanding of a Good World	37
Conclusion	39
Bibliography	39
 <b>From an Island of Africa to an Island of Europe: Perspectives on a Theology of Creation from Madagascar and Crete</b>	 <b>41</b>
<i>Louk Andrianos Andriantitsaholiniaina</i>	
Introduction	41
Sacredness and Virtue in God's Creation in the Malagasy Context	43
The Origin of Human Virtue in Malagasy Belief	44
Stories of <i>Fihavanana</i> —the Malagasy <i>Ubuntu</i> —and the Creation of the Island	45
A Story of the Youth “Blue Cross” Movement to Protect Creation	47
A Story of the “Mirror” at the Orthodox Academy of Crete to Praise the Creator	49
Feminine Influence in Understanding an Orthodox Theology of Creation	51
Living a Theology of Creation with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the World Council of Churches	53
The Greed Line Study	55
Conclusions	57
Bibliography	58
 <b>Ecotheology and Creation Theology: Shona People's Indigenous Cosmologies</b>	 <b>59</b>
<i>Sophia Chirongoma</i>	
Introduction and Self-Location	59
The Mwedzi/Dzivaguru Creation Myth	61
The Guruuswa Creation Myth	65
Interrogating Inherent Gender and Social Inequalities Within Shona Society	67
The Encroaching Ecological Crisis in Zimbabwe	68
The Interface between Creation Theology and a Theology of Responsible Ecological Stewardship	71
Conclusion	75
Bibliography	76

<b>Reforming Place or Placing Reform? One Western Cape Version of the Story</b>	<b>79</b>
<i>Ernst M. Conradie</i>	
Situating Creation Theology	79
The Places of My Story	81
The Reformed Stories of Place That Shaped Me	83
Storying Place	87
Placing Story: A Constructive Thesis	91
Seeing the World as God's Creation: The Difference That Makes a Difference	96
Bibliography	98
 <b>The Story of a Place in the North: Natural Disasters within God's Good Creation—A Lutheran Perspective</b>	 <b>101</b>
<i>Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir</i>	
My Place of Origin	103
A Pastor Serving God and Distressed People in Catastrophic Circumstances	105
"The Destructive Fires of God"	107
To be Created and Cared for by a Loving God	110
Prayers of Lament	111
When the Creative Work of God's Love Is Destroyed by Natural Disasters	112
Eruption in Heimaey	113
Avalanches in the Westfjords	114
"Christ to One Another"	116
Conclusion	117
Bibliography	118
 <b>Place and Space: Gathering Wisdom from the Life Work of Proto-Ecowomanist Fannie Lou Hamer</b>	 <b>121</b>
<i>Melanie L. Harris</i>	
Introduction	121
Origins	122
African Cosmology and African American Stories of Place and Space	124
Fannie Lou Hamer: Place and Space	127
Bound with the Earth: Fannie Lou Hamer Biographic Notes and Hamer's Courageous Contributions to Climate Justice	128

Hamer's Theo-Ethic of Love: Three Movements	131
Conclusion	135
Bibliography	135
<b>An Arawete Cannibal Theology of Noncreation: Patriarchy, Capitalism, and Food</b>	<b>137</b>
<i>Eneida Jacobsen</i>	
Placing My Essay	137
An Arawete Theology of Creation in Between Places	140
Patriarchal Societies and Patriarchal Theologies	145
An Arawete Critique of Capitalism: From Patriarchy Back to Nature	148
Conclusion	151
Bibliography	153
<b>The Struggle of Earth-Storytellers</b>	<b>155</b>
<i>Willie James Jennings</i>	
Garden Life	155
Displacement	158
The Body-Land Connection	161
Bibliography	168
<b>Continuing the Conversation on Creation in Christian Ecotheology</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>185</b>

# Abbreviations and Acronyms Appearing in the Text and Notes

COP	Conference of Parties
ECOTHEE	Establish a Biannual Conference on Ecological, Theological, and Environmental Ethics
FJKM	<i>Fiangonan' i Jesoa Kristy eto Madagasikara</i>
FORTH	Foundation for Research and Technology, Hellas
IKS	Indigenous Knowledge Systems
ITHE	Institute for Theology and Ecology
OAC	Orthodox Academy of Crete
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SOC	Season of Creation
TRCA	Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada
UWC	University of the Western Cape
WCC	World Council of Churches



# Notes on Contributors

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# ***An Earthed Faith: Envisaged Volumes in the Series***

The following twelve volumes are envisaged in the series entitled “An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the ‘Anthropocene’”:

## **■ 1) Taking a Deep Breath for the Story to Begin ... An Earthed Faith 1 (Prolegomena)**

This volume will address the following question: How does the story of who the Triune God is and what this God does relate to the story of life on Earth? Is the Christian story part of the earth’s story or is the earth’s story part of God’s story, from creation to consummation? This raises many issues on the relatedness of religion and theology, the place of theology in multidisciplinary collaboration, the notion of revelation, the possibility of knowledge of God, hermeneutics, the difference between natural theology, and a theology of nature, etc. The word “breath” in the title suggests the Spirit of God as the source of inspiration for the story, already present in any further deliberations. It hints at an air of anticipation, indicated by the three dots in the title.

## **■ 2) How Would We Know What God is up to? An Earthed Faith 2 (Method)**

This volume will address the following question: given what we know about the “Anthropocene,” how does one even begin to answer the question of

what is this God up to? And how would we know how to respond to that? These are questions of theological method, including the sources and interlocutors of Christian theology, its aims and starting points, social theories shaping it, and presuppositions grounding it. Addressing these questions is the classic task of doing contextual theology, namely, to describe and analyze the particular context that is addressed and to consider how this may best be addressed theologically. This question highlights the need for prophetic theology to discern the “signs of the times,” to recognize a “moment of truth” (*kairos*), and to discern counter-movements of the Spirit. Such methodological questions are necessary in order to tell the story of who God is and what God does amid the “Anthropocene.” In terms of narrative/rhetorical theory, a focus on method requires attention to the plot upon which the narrative hinges; the sense of crisis that will draw together the characters; and the exigencies that invite passion, reflection, and persuasion. Theological method is inherently a theological question about sin and salvation, creation and redemption, God and God’s world—and shapes where the story may lead and how it may be told.

### ■ 3) The Place of Story and the Story of Place? An Earthed Faith 3 (Creation)

This volume will address the following question: “What difference does it make to the story of cosmic, planetary, human and cultural evolution to re-describe this as the creative work of God’s love?” Inversely, what difference does it make to the story of God’s love to describe it in evolutionary terms? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on creation and cosmic, biological, hominid, and human evolution (the story of place). Such reflection on the beginning is, of course, not situated “in the beginning” but entails a narrative reconstruction of the story where current interests, positions of power, and fears are necessarily at stake (the place where the story is being told). This is a contested space, indeed a “site of struggle,” often dominated by issues of race rather than by grace. How, then, is this story to be told given a sense of place? It will not be possible to avoid questions around suffering, sin, evil, and the tragic (the theme of the next volume), but the focus will be on why on Earth a loving God would deem this story to be “very good”—despite the prevalence of suffering, injustice, and oppression?

### ■ 4) Making Room for the Story to Continue? An Earthed Faith 4 (Providence)

This volume will address the following question: How could the suffering of God’s creatures in the “Anthropocene” be reconciled with trust in God’s

loving care? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on the classic themes related to the doctrine of providence, including *creatio continua*, *conservatio*, *gubernatio* and *concursus*. For some, God's providence (common grace) is a necessary requirement to allow (to make room for) the history of salvation to proceed. For others, the suffering embedded in God's "good" creation requires responses to the theodicy problem: Why would a loving God allow creatures to suffer so much? What is the relationship between so-called natural evil and social evil? Is the underlying problem human sin, or is it the inadequacies, the tragic dimension, indeed the violence embedded in God's world? Again, this last question is hinted at in the question mark after the title.

## ■ 5) The Saving Grace of the Story? An Earthed Faith 5 (Soteriology)

This volume will address the following question: How is the Christian message of salvation to be interpreted given current ecological destruction and apocalyptic fears associated with the "Anthropocene"? Is this message plausible given the failure of Christianity to address so many other urgent problems over 20 centuries? This will require theological reflection on Christological symbols such as atonement and Pneumatological symbols such as liberation, healing, reconciliation, regeneration, moral guidance, justification, and sanctification—insofar as these may be pertinent in the Age of the "Anthropocene." The title is ambiguous and ironic to indicate that the story is highly contested but is, at best, to be understood as good news for the whole Earth.

## ■ 6) The Keepers of the Story? An Earthed Faith 6 (Ecclesiology)

This volume will address the following question: What is the place and significance of the church in God's "household," now situated in the destabilizing context of the "Anthropocene"? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on the formation, up-building and very nature of the church, and on its many ministries and missions. Presumably, the question is no longer whether there is salvation outside of the church but indeed whether there is salvation to be found within the church. Can it still be said that the church is God's main (even only) instrument (sign, sacrament, icon) to bring salvation, given the challenges posed by the "Anthropocene"? Or is the task of the church the monastic one of "keeping" the story, that is, to maintain the inner secret to the mystery of history, amid dark clouds looming and despite few outsiders taking any notice? Does this not sound as if it is the church that needs to come to God's rescue, or is the inverse true?

## ■ 7) Where the Story Ends and its Ends ... An Earthed Faith 7 (Eschatology)

This volume will address the following question: How should the content and significance of Christian hope be understood in the context of the “Anthropocene”? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on the eschatological symbols of the final judgment as a sign of hope, on the resurrection of the dead, on the coming reign of God and on eternal life. It will also have to assess whether such hope is to be understood as the restoration (neo-Calvinism), elevation (Roman Catholicism), replacement (Anabaptism), recycling (liberalism/secularism) or deification/theosis (Eastern Orthodoxy) of this world. Does the meaning of the story lie in its end, or in the journey/pilgrimage toward that end? Any answer to such questions will remain provisional, hinted at in the three dots in the title.

## ■ 8) Being Blessed as the Inner Logic of the Story? An Earthed Faith 8 (Election)

This volume will address the following question: Can the notion of being God’s chosen people/instrument be retained in a religiously plural world under the threat of the “Anthropocene”? Addressing this question will require theological reflection on the themes of divine election and vocation. Can “being blessed” by God be understood as the inner logic of the story? Is such blessing not often experienced as a curse? What about divine reprobation, punishment, and justice for the victims and perpetrators of history? How is a theology of religions to be understood in a context characterized by common threats, the need for tolerance, and compassion across religious divides? How can Christians move beyond the options of exclusivism and relativism in the context of the “Anthropocene”? What does it mean to be blessed and for the whole of creation to receive God’s blessing?

## ■ 9) The Spirit of the Story? An Earthed Faith 9 (Pneumatology)

This volume will address questions around the identity and character of God’s Spirit. It will require theological reflection on how the very notion of spirit should be understood in relation to person, matter, ideas, force, energy, and related concepts. What does it mean that this Spirit is “holy” and makes things “holy”? Is this Spirit able to overcome what is “demonic” in the “Anthropocene”? Is it money or love that makes the world go round? Or is this Spirit the spirit that makes matter move, even if this movement is not all that obvious and requires discernment?

## ■ 10) The Letter of the Story? An Earthed Faith 10 (Christology)

This volume will address questions around the identity and character of Jesus of Nazareth, proclaimed to be the Christ, anointed by God's Spirit, the One who would inaugurate God's coming reign. It will require theological reflection on the significance of all six Christological symbols, namely (deep) Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, Ascension, Session, and Parousia as these may relate to the coming of the "Anthropocene." If the cross is a concrete symbol of the history of imperialism and oppression, can the (bodily?) resurrection still function as an equally concrete symbol of hope in the "Anthropocene"? How is the interplay between the letter and the spirit of the story to be understood given long-standing ecumenical divides on the *filioque* controversy—which still divides the East and the West, the North and the South—over whether the Spirit works (only/primarily) on the basis of the Letter (as most so-called mainline churches assume)? Or should the relative independence of God's Spirit be emphasized (as many others emphasize)?

## ■ 11) In Communion with the Storyteller(s)? An Earthed Faith 11 (Trinity)

This volume will address questions around the doctrine of the Trinity as the inner secret/apophatic mystery/doxological culmination of the Christian faith. It will offer theological reflection on how the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity are related by exploring God's identity and character. The question is which of God's characteristics need to be foregrounded in the Age of the "Anthropocene." In particular, how is God's mercy related to God's justice, given the interactions between God as Father, Son, and Spirit? Can these (patriarchal) symbols be maintained in the "Anthropocene"? Should one favor the social analogy (emphasizing communion) or the psychological analogy (perhaps allowing for a more generic notion of God) for understanding the Trinity? What difference does faith in such a God make (if any) in the Age of the "Anthropocene"? Moreover, who is telling the story? Are we (Christians?) the ones responsible for telling the story or are we characters in a story ultimately told by Godself? Given these reflections, what does it mean to believe in "God" (a God, any God) in the world in which we now live? Note that this (philosophical) question is not addressed upfront but penultimately. For Christians, the question remains whether this Triune God can be regarded as the ultimate mystery of the world.

## ■ 12) What, Then, is the Moral of the Story? An Earthed Faith 12 (Ethics)

This volume will address questions around the relationship between Christian doctrine, Christian ethics, Christian spirituality, and Christian praxis—between the ultimate and the penultimate, between the indicative of God’s grace and the imperative of ecological gratitude. Such relatedness has been there implicitly in all the other volumes but needs to be made explicit here. In dealing with climate change (for example), there is a need to find common moral ground with those standing in other religious traditions and with organizations in civil society. This has implications for all the relevant ethical categories—such as moral vision, virtues, duties, rights, responsibilities, values, middle axioms, action steps, and so on. For Christians, the question will be whether – and if so, how – such common moral ground is deeply rooted in the story of who God is and what God has done, is doing, and will be doing.

*The Place of Story and the Story of Place* stands out for its unique content. The book's strength lies in its broad scope, encompassing a diverse range of geographical, confessional, and theological perspectives. The authors, representing a variety of genders, races, ages, and languages, offer fresh methodologies and perspectives that push the boundaries of Christian ecotheology. This volume provokes interlocutors in a novel manner, inviting them to reimagine Christian ecotheology in an intercultural and ecumenical frame. This book successfully invites engagement with a new methodological approach and broadening of the epistemic horizons.

**Kuzipa Nalwamba, Unity, Mission and Ecumenical Formation Programme,  
World Council of Churches, Grand-Saconnex, Switzerland**

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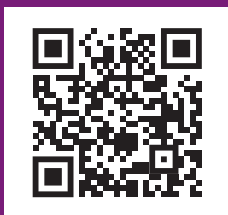
*The Place of Story and the Story of Place* is a subversive book that challenges the dominant creation theology. It offers a creative, polyphonic perspective that situates creation theology in specific places and spaces. This restoration of creation theology is a powerful critique of the obsession with pristine nature, proposing a situated ecotheology rooted in locations of exclusion and plunder. This volume, the third in the "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'" series, is a must-read for those passionate about environmental justice, offering an earthed faith perspective that is both challenging and inspiring.

**George Zachariah, Trinity Methodist Theological College | Te Haahi  
Weteriana o Aotearoa, Auckland, New Zealand**

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In this visionary and inspiring third volume of the "An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the 'Anthropocene'" series, an ensemble of leading international ecotheologians from various geographical locations and confessional traditions retune the story of God's creative love to reflections on place, drawing on geography, biology, indigenous creation stories and the wisdom that comes from inhabiting and caring for the land. Foregrounding the experiences of inhabitation by peoples marginalized by capitalist colonial regimes and attending to a plurality of earth-stories, this groundbreaking scholarly book significantly refractures the colonial framing of most theologies of creation. This important, path-breaking work opens new vistas for how to do ecotheology in a decolonial key.

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[https://doi.org/10.4102/  
aosis.2024.BK355](https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2024.BK355)



ISBN: 978-1-77995-305-6