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ECHOTHEOLOGY BEYOND ADJECTIVE
Editorial Introduction to Special Issue

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Abstract

This editorial introduction explores the distinctive characteristics of doing theology in Asia and the Pacific that should redefine the discourse of ecotheology: not merely a theology qualified as ecological, but one transformed by the earth it names. As a subject matter, too, ecotheology is redefined: not anymore as an item of confession, but as a political theology, that is, an integral part of political life, where nonhumans are also the political subjects. The last section summarizes five contributions to the issue, covering "behavior-regulating" concepts of the Sea, archipelagic everydayness, cash economy, Divine economy, denial/rejection, feel-good theology, Swaraj, Dukkha, and Spirit. The authors hope that the new turn of the field is to be a documentary as well as an alternative to the dualistic, objectifying, and instrumentalizing patterns of thought and behavior; to be genuinely descriptive while remaining committedly normative.

Keywords: ecotheology, adjective, political theology, Asia, the Pacific

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EKOTEOLOGI YANG MELAMPAUI ADJEKTIVA
Pengantar Editor untuk Edisi Khusus

Abstrak

Tulisan pendahuluan ini menelusuri karakteristik khas dari kegiatan berteologi di Asia and Pasifik yang seharusnya mendefinisikan ulang diskursus ekoteologi: bukan hanya sebagai teologi yang diupayakan menjadi ekologis, tapi sebagai diskursus yang diijinkan dibentuk oleh bumi yang dinamainya sendiri. Sebagai sebuah materi pembahasan, ekoteologi juga didefinisikan ulang: bukan lagi sebagai butir dari pengakuan iman, tapi sebagai sebuah teologi politikal, yakni, bagian integral dari kehidupan politis, yang di dalamnya nonmanusia juga merupakan subyek politik. Bagian terakhir dari artikel merangkum lima sumbangan naskah ke edisi ini, mencakup konsep-konsep "pengatur perilaku" seperti Laut, keseharian arkipelagis, ekonomi tunai, ekonomi Ilahi, penolakan, ekoteologi penyejuk hati, *Swaraj*, *Dukka* (penderitaan), dan Roh. Penulis berharap bahwa arah baru dari bidang studi ini bisa menjadi dokumentatif sekaligus alternatif terhadap pola pikir dan perilaku yang dualistik, mengobjektivikasi, dan menginstrumentalisasi; menjadi deskriptif secara jujur sekaligus tetap berkomitmen normatif.

Kata-kata Kunci: ekoteologi, adjektiva, teologi politik, Asia, Pasifik

Learning from Communities in Asia and the Pacific[1]

The term "ecotheology" is already well-known and understood in theological discourse. The "eco" part functions as a modifier, an addition to "theology" to demonstrate ecological concern. Yet adjectives rarely alter the structure of the idea they modify. And the crisis that now shapes the planet requires more

[1] The use of "Asia and the Pacific" here and in the special issue title, "Ecotheology in Asia and the Pacific," is more pragmatic, aimed at representing the regions from which scholars involved in this project write, rather than a geopolitical category commonly identified with the footing of the United States in the Pacific Ocean and East Asia. This is also why we do not refer to them as "Asian ecotheology" or "Asia Pacific ecotheology." Recently, there has been a growing engagement among scholars of Asian theology, Pacific theology, and Asian North American theology to build a "Transpacific Political Theology." See Kwok Pui Lan, ed., *Transpacific Political Theology: Perspectives, Paradigms, Proposals* (Baylor University Press, 2024). Further conversations between ecotheology and Transpacific Political Theology are not impossible.

than specified knowledge, calling for theology to reconsider its own foundations, its inherited ways of perceiving creation, humanity, and God. To think beyond the adjective is not to discard the term "eco," but to allow the ecological condition itself to determine the form and method of theology.

Much of what came to be known as ecotheology in Euro-American discourse took shape in the late 20th century, partly in response to the oft-cited Lynn White's essay on the historical roots of the ecological crisis.[2] Its central figures, such as Jürgen Moltmann and Sallie McFague, sought to reform the relationship between theology and nature by retrieving neglected dimensions of creation.[3] In addition to the collection of classics featured in Roger S. Gottlieb's *This Sacred Earth*, various efforts to propose insights and methods at this time have shaped the academic conversations in the early 21st century.[4] Yet they were also shaped by intellectual and cultural geographies, primarily Western, where theology proper could still imagine itself as a central discourse and where ecology was often treated as an ethical or subdisciplinary extension.

In Latin America, Leonardo Boff extended this theological horizon into the field of liberation theology, linking ecological devastation with social and economic injustice. His vision of the *cry of the earth* and the *cry of the poor* redefines creation not as a neutral environment but as the site of both oppression and redemption.[5] This integration of ecology and liberation would later resonate strongly with contextual theologies in Asia, the Pacific, and other places where environmental and social suffering are inseparable.

In Asia and the Pacific, these interwoven realities of ecology, society, and faith take on a distinct configuration, one in

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[2] Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1203–07.

[3] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (SCM Press, 1985), 11–12; Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Fortress, 1993), 22–25.

[4] Roger S. Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (Routledge, 1995). Examples of late 20th-century writings are: Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, ed., *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue: An Interfaith Dialogue* (Beacon, 1992); James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Abingdon, 1991); J. Carol Adams, ed., *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (Continuum, 1994). To be more precise, scholars in the early 21st-century onward began to reflect back into the 20th-century discourses and offered more heuristic and methodological texts which later formalized ecotheology as a field. Cf. Ernst M. Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research* (Sun Press, 2006); Ernst M. Conradie, Sigurd Bergmann, Celia E. Deane-Drummond, and Denis Edwards, ed., *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

[5] Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Orbis Books, 1997), 75.

which ecological devastation is not a distant abstraction but an integral part of the everyday struggle for survival, deeply intertwined with histories of colonization, economic dependency, and religious coexistence. Theological reflection here arises not from cultural dominance but from marginalized locations, often from communities negotiating displacement, poverty, and the dense layers of social and religious pluralism.[6] To write theology in such a world is not to add an ecological perspective to existing frameworks but to begin again from within the fragility of life. The earth itself—lived, contested, and shared—becomes a source of reasoning and imagining. In this sense, theological reflection rooted in Asia and the Pacific is expected to think beyond adjectives: not merely to qualify theology as ecological, but to let theology itself be transformed by the earth it names.

Thus, "context" is not simply a background for theology and becomes its primary condition. Theology rooted in Asia and the Pacific is understood as situated knowledge, born from the entanglement of material, cultural, and spiritual realities. This is not a call for regional specialization but for epistemic honesty. The planetary crisis is experienced differently across regions, and those differences matter. They reveal that the so-called "universal" theological language often reflects a limited history and geography. A truly global ecotheology must therefore proceed from multiple localities, each with its own cosmology, wounds, and forms of resilience.[7]

In Asia and the Pacific, "interreligiosity" is not an optional theme but the ordinary condition of belief. Theological language is continuously shaped in conversation with Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Indigenous cosmologies that understand reality as relational.[8] Confucian ethics imagine personhood through reciprocal ties; Buddhist philosophy defines existence through interdependence; Hindu thought envisions cosmic balance as an

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[6] Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, *Asian Christianity and Theology: Inculturation, Interreligious Dialogues, Integral Liberation* (Routledge, 2022), 51.

[7] By appealing to "context," we are thinking beyond the categorization of ecotheology as "a next wave of contextual theology," a famous classification proposed by formalizers of the field such as Ernst Conradie. Although he acknowledges that "all theologies reflect the contexts within which they are situated," he maintains contextual theology as a discipline of "theology which can respond to the challenges of our time." In this old sense, ecotheology is a specified "response" to an emerging challenge (Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology*, 3). Instead, we are furthering the implication of such a view of contextualized nature of theology by asking questions: What if theology in Asia and the Pacific does not need to exert a specified response to climate crisis in order to be considered ecological? What if theology in Asia and the Pacific itself, lived or articulated, is already ecological in the first place?

[8] S. Lily Mendoza & George Zachariah, *Decolonizing Ecotheology: Indigenous and Subaltern Challenges* (Pickwick, 2022), 14.

ongoing moral task; not to mention Indigenous "religions" lived and ritualized by multiple Austronesian communities. These traditions are not parallel systems to be compared with and against Christianity. They represent distinct yet resonant ways of thinking about life and the sacred. For us, to engage interreligiously is not an act of cultural accommodation but a theological necessity. It is here that theology learns to speak across boundaries, not by asserting its completeness but by discovering its incompleteness.

Learning from communities in Asia and the Pacific, then, is not a matter of adding diverse examples to a preexisting discourse of ecotheology—not inserting an adjective within an adjective. It is a reorientation of what counts as theological knowledge. Here, theology is pressed to attend to bodies, places, and relationships rather than abstractions. It asks whether theology can still be a language of life when the communities it serves are caught between industrial expansion and ecological collapse. In other words, theology must learn to think with communities who live at the intersection of exploitation and endurance, and for whom care for the earth is inseparable from the struggle for justice.

By invoking "justice," we understand that the destruction of ecosystems is inseparable from social inequality. The same forces that exploit the land and sea exploit human labor, gendered bodies, and Indigenous lives. Theology cannot avoid this entanglement; it is therefore called to be a theology of survival and solidarity as much as of wonder and beauty. The ecological crisis, consequently, is not merely environmental; it is also economic, political, and spiritual. The language of faith now needs to move beyond stewardship toward more radical ethics of relationships, where to preserve life is to resist structures that produce death.

To learn from communities in Asia and the Pacific is to see theology as a discipline of attention, a sustained attempt to read the world as it is rather than as doctrines portray it. This learning begins in humility, in the recognition that theology no longer occupies the center of meaning but stands among others—rites, communities, species, movements—within a shared vulnerability. From here, ecotheology becomes less a theorizing about the natural world than a practice of listening, interpreting, and joining the work of renewal already taking place in fragile and faithful communities across the planet

Ecotheology as Political Theology

If, with realities in Asia and the Pacific, we learn that ecotheology as a discourse is not simply a branch or adjective for an existing field, perhaps we may also begin to rethink what the term might refer to in terms of subject matter. No longer do we classify ecotheology as a mere modified version of a certain dogmatic subject, like Christology, eschatology, soteriology, and

others. Nor is it simply a tandem for other "contextual theologies," like feminist theology, Black theology, and others, as suggested by Ernst M. Conradie. But we still need an alternative, perhaps a better category for this subject matter.

After learning from five authors involved in this project, we find an affinity with the term "political theology." Yet, we must clarify two things to argue for *ecotheology as political theology*.

First, we recognize that the term "political theology" has been associated solely with Christian and even Nazi-related references, given the immense citations to Carl Schmitt, even if followed by mentions of his counterparts such as Walter Benjamin, Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, or Dorothee Sölle.[9] Not only is this fixation contradictory to our learned interreligiosity, but it also fails to provincialize the Eurocentric genealogy and to include people who had fought against colonialism and imperialism into the historical trajectory of political theology, as Kwok Pui Lan has repeatedly reminded us.[10]

Moreover, this association misunderstands what political theology *can be*, and seems hesitant to genuinely represent the further conversations in the last decades. Reflecting back on the development of the field, especially as shaped by scholars associated with the Political Theology Network, Vincent Lloyd and Alex Dubilet observe,

> No longer is political theology a branch of Christian thought. No longer does it name the contested legacy of fascist legal theory. Today, political theology is a field engaged across a variety of disciplines, from cultural studies to anthropology, from comparative literature to Black studies. As we become increasingly aware of the dangerous and liberatory entanglements of religion, secularity, and power, political theology names a crucial site for research and teaching, discussion and collaboration.[11]

As they rightly note, those who use the term today can be either theologians, continental philosophers, political theorists, anthropologists, literary scholars, or scholars of cultural studies. One does not even need to adopt the "correct" definition of

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[9] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[10] Kwok Pui Lan, "Postcolonial Intervention in Political Theology," *Political Theology* 17, no. 3 (2016): 223–25; Kwok Pui Lan, "Introduction: Transpacific Political Theology in the Making: Development and Themes," in *Transpacific Political Theology: Perspectives, Paradigms, Proposals*, ed. Kwok Pui Lan (Baylor University Press, 2024), 1–20.

[11] Vincent Lloyd and Alex Dubilet, *Political Theology Reimagined* (Duke University Press, 2025), 4.

political theology, as any research can operate under any operative definition. The subject matter of political theology today is no longer an item of (Christian) theology with a specific attention to the political.

Yet, there are two common threads in this 21st-century conversation. One, scholars are more comfortable being identified as "working on political theology" rather than calling themselves "political theologians." Likewise, many scholars writing on ecotheology in Asia and the Pacific do not consider themselves "ecotheologians." Some of them might even be reluctant to be categorized as (Christian) theologians properly, although they engage with ecotheology as a subject matter. When they invoke a certain notion, it does not mean that they are parochializing the term as an extension of a certain creed. Two, most scholars of political theology confidently adopt the failure of the secularization narrative, even if not discussed. That religion is inseparable from political life will always be the assumption of their research, whether literary or fieldwork. A similar type of recognition also comes from scholars in and of Asia and the Pacific writing on ecotheology, be those from the departments of religion, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, or others.

For this project, we refer to political theology to mean a *politically significant notion that operates as theology*, a notion that is authoritative and regulatory to individual and collective behavior, as well as providing a "descriptive statement" about who we are as human beings.[12] In this definition, political theology is not part of

[12] Although readers may find this similar to Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* (1932), we view his definition of "the political" as well as "the theological" to be so limited, if not problematic. In addition to his fixation on the state—that is, everything political is always related to the state—"the political" in his classification is rarely about the realm beyond the human. Cf. Ádám Lovász & Zoltán Pető, "Political Theology After Humanism: Eco-theopolitics for the Twenty-first Century," *Political Theology* (February 2025): 1–23. The latter term, "the theological," is also problematic given his obsession to the Christian monotheistic God as the decisionist figure masked as the state. In the last two decades, there has been an exploding engagement with Jamaican novelist and essayist Sylvia Wynter, through which scholars search for a new reference point of political theology, although they know she never uses such terms. Like Schmitt, Wynter tracks the significant modern (and colonial) notions seemingly perceived as secular–such as Being, Man, Race, and others—and argues that they still maintain Christian "descriptive statements" or "behavior-regulating terms" and conserve similar teleological drives. They are surely "non-supernatural, but no less extrahuman" either. But unlike Schmitt, Wynter defines the mechanism of the emergence of modern political theologies not as simply as "secular translation" Christian concepts, as Schmitt perceives it. Instead, they result from generic "auto-instituting" ability of sentient beings to reject the old form of religion and to imagine a new one. See Justine Bakker and David Kline, *Words Made Flesh: Sylvia Wynter and Religion* (Fordham University Press, 2025).

theology, let alone an item of a creed or confession. It is rather an integral part of political life. But the perceived political reality always includes the lives beyond humans. They, too, are part of our household (*oikos*), therefore, are political subjects. And they, too, regulate our behavior and help describe who we are as living beings. And to mirror the tenet of political theology discourse, we foreground that our ecology might have been theological in the first place, because nothing in Asia and the Pacific is separable from theological and religious aspects, to put it crudely. Hence, the political, the ecological, and the theological are almost just one, undetachable from one another.

Second, we recognize this is not the first time scholars engaging with ecotheology have used the category of political theology. Stephen Bede Scharper's *Redeeming the Time* (1997), Peter Scott's *A Political Theology of Nature* (2003), Michael S. Northcott's *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (2013), and Catherine Keller's *Political Theology of Earth* (2018) are some examples.[13] Although they correctly argue for the problem of theology as the hidden problem of ecology, these authors, except Keller, rarely advocate for political theology beyond monotheism (or Trinitarianism), beyond Christian, beyond Europe, let alone beyond confessional theology–a typical hesitation that at times has rendered the reconfiguration and revival of Christian theology as the better (or the only) solution for ecological revision.[14]

By taking ecotheology as political theology, we are seeing a wide-open opportunity to include in our inventory any politically significant notions or concepts that have regulated people's lives and their relationship with their ecosystems in Asia and the Pacific, be it confessional or not, Christian or not, supernatural or not. We are hoping that more scholars write about "ecotheology of…" someone in these regions who never claims themself an ecotheologian. Analysis to unpack such concepts can be exercised from theological studies, history of receptions, political theory, anthropology, environmental humanities, sociology, history, Indigenous studies, and other disciplines, insofar as they highlight

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This Wynterian definition is perhaps what could better describe what we mean by political theology.

[13] Stephen Bede Scharper, *Redeeming the Time: A Political Theology of the Environment* (Continuum, 1997); Peter Scott, *A Political Theology of Nature* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), Michael S. Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (Eerdmans, 2013); Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of Earth* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

[14] Based on this logic, we recognize the globalizing works like David G. Hallman's edited volume, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Orbis Books, 1995), but also recognize its limitation to Christian narrative and "global ecumenical community."

the subject matter of ecotheology. This might be another fruitful turn in the development of the field.

The Concepts

Although it is not our initial intention to argue as such, five authors in this special issue have led us to further this attempt and to invite more conversations. Faafetai Aiava (Fiji) writes about the commodification of time and God under the global cash economy. He resists the disciplinary separation of ecology and economics; for him, the study of the household is the study of the household's management. Aiava takes an issue with the ecological and spiritual disconnection in the Pacific, a crisis irresolvable by the common appeal to the stewardship management model. He then proposes *Divine economy* as a significant paradigm corrective to the cash economy. These are two contrasting political theologies or, in Aiava's terms, two "competing narratives," in the Pacific and perhaps elsewhere. In Divine economy, the Earth's rhythm, instead of the controlled rhythm, is honored, and the whole of life is taken as sacred. And as he notes, both political theologies shape the "why" of the lives of the Pacific Indigenous communities; both are inseparable from the figures of God. But particularly with Divine economy, rest and restraint are encouraged, while the life-sustaining systems are prioritized over commodification and monetization.

As perceptive as Aiava, Elia Maggang (Indonesia) focuses his article on tackling "the dominance of the green" in the field of ecotheology. Reminding us of the crises affecting the sea, Maggang notes how "blue ecotheology" has correctly highlighted the experience of marine and coastal communities. Yet, he further argues for the recognition of the interconnectedness of the land and the sea, appealing to the subject matter of "archipelagic ecotheology" as a framework to elevate the blue perspectives while articulating the sea/land community, that is, a unified planetary entity itself. From Maggang and the maritime practice of the Indigenous Baranusa people, we learn about the notion of *archipelagic everydayness*, one that consists of the "dynamic interactions within and among the multiple ecoregions comprising its biodiversity" (178). Spectacular in archipelagic everydayness is when the sea influences human agency, while human responds to the sea's agency. Foundational as it has been, this lived and understood everydayness not only shapes how the Baranusa people relate with existences beyond human, but also becomes the regulatory paradigm in Maggang's own interpretation of the Gospel narrative.

Kai Ngu writes as an anthropologist, researching Indigenous and Catholic religious traditions in Sabah, Malaysia. Like Aiava and Maggang, Ngu describes one operative concept, but

they take a more descriptive analysis. But with their microscopic attention, Ngu promotes dialogues between anthropology and theology, two fields often unrelated to one another. Through a meticulous examination of Jojo Fung's Shamanistic pneumatology, Ngu introduces us to the *Spirit*, a subject matter that can be understood through polysemous analyses of Shamanism and the primordial Spirit in the Hebrew Bible. We learn that this Spirit is considered "the basic ontological category, that which unites all living beings" (198). With this political pneumatology (our terms), humans are placed on an equal plane with other "life-forms." Ngu finally concludes that theological studies can highlight and question the secular humanist assumptions of anthropology, whereas the discipline of anthropology can help theologians who want to center Indigenous and other religious voices to ask the real meaning behind the circulated terms, as well as to be aware that theologians, too, interpret the Other through a Christian lens.

The two latest articles take a bird's-eye view. Here, George Zachariah surveys the historical development of environmentalism, particularly in India, identifying the ecotheology of *denial and rejection* on the one hand, and the *feel-good* ecotheology on the other. The former denies the inclusion of the earth and nature in any salvation talk, whereas the latter, often identified as better, tends to accuse anthropocentrism and human-induced emissions as the root causes of environmental crises. With this finding, Zachariah joins Aiava to problematize ecological disconnection. Yet, neither of these two competing political theologies is considered "good" ecotheology by Zachariah, although they both have become regulatory paradigms not only in academic institutions but also in political-ecological activism. For him, these two narratives submit to neoliberalization of ecological intervention and fixate on a monocultural, single-issue approach. It is only through a subaltern and Indigenous approach, he argues, that we can imagine a new mode of environmentalism. In addition to his main argument, another political theology that appears in his survey is the Gandhian vision of *Swaraj*, further developed as *Eco-Swaraj*.

Like Zachariah, Anupama Ranawana utilizes documentary research, but she focuses on expounding ecological thinking in the aftermath of the war between the Sri Lankan State and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam during 1983-2009. Her attention to war is perhaps the best example of our insistence on the political-ecological nexus, considering the war's impact on the land, air, and waterways, as well as the state mechanism of land grabbing that has suffered minority communities, particularly Tamil and Indigenous ones. In this seeming impasse, Ranawana argues for the importance of *Dukkha* (suffering), a subject matter that has already been around but must be centered in the post-war Sri Lankan

community as well as the field of ecotheology. In her article, the political theology of *Dukka* is illustrated by the mourn of Buddhist and Catholic widows as a way to imagine how we might mourn with Creation. Further, Ranawana draws primarily from Buddhist tradition to suggest that the journey from "understanding" the cause of *Dukka* to the "cessation" of it and to the "overcoming" of it is not automated. It requires an approach that involves the work of *Karuna* (compassion), once expressed by the grief and rage of environmental movements.

In highlighting these concepts, our contributors engage with tensions between accounting for the structure and exercising agency. They attempt to describe the circulating terms, notions, or imaginaries, ones that we have categorized as political theology. But they also assume or imagine an alternative that would offer a new "descriptive statement" about who we are as human beings, a description that better accounts for the way this planet has shaped our presence, conditioned our self-understanding, and guided our behavior. In all, they might have shared a standpoint that the subject matter of ecotheology must be analyzed with tools beyond the discipline of theology, by scholars beyond theological and religious studies.

Here, we have encountered the Sea, archipelagic everydayness, cash economy, Divine economy, denial/rejection, feel-good theology, *Swaraj*, *Dukkha*, and Spirit. But with this project as a commencement, we hope to see further documentation about other ecotheologies in these shared regions. Only this way can we renew the field, while maintaining its dual function: to be descriptive of the political life as well as normative to the current environmental crises, to be a documentary as well as to be an alternative.[15]

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude to these contributors, whose works not only fostered global solidarity but also reminded us that ecotheology is an integral part of political life; hence, ushering in a new way of understanding ecotheology. Moreover, this project could not have been completed without the keen insights and constructive suggestions from all esteemed scholars who generously gave their time to review the drafts of the manuscripts. We are also thankful for Hans A. Harmakaputra, Febrianto, and

[15] We resonate with Lisa Sideris's description of ecotheology as a field that seeks "an alternative to 'mechanistic' (or 'Newtonian' or 'Cartesian') perspectives that regard nature and animals as mere matter and therefore perpetuate dualistic, objectifying, and instrumentalizing patterns of thought and behavior." Lisa Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection: Suffering and Responsibility* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 2.

Christopher The, whose exceptional copyediting skills have furnished the final version of this issue.

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