

## **GIVING CHEEK: ECOTHEOLOGIANS SPEAKING IN A GLOBAL AGE**

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In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian theology finally came down from heaven. Centuries old submerged traditions linking theologies of immanence and moral imagination have found new openings in new conversations.<sup>1</sup> It is the nature of these conversations, particularly in ethics, that I want to explore here.

Not all theology underwent this change. We are still surrounded by religious groups that relentlessly direct their adherents' gaze inwards to their own curious blend of offensiveness and sanctity and upwards to a God with his own curious blend of vengefulness and love. We are still bound by notions and myths that serve to limit rather than to expand the human repertoire of responses to the provocations of life. We are still subjected to simplistic nostrums about fixing up the world or so-called human nature.

Yet, theology concerned to live honestly and to face complexity of the context in which it emerges finds itself firmly this-worldly. Marc Ellis in *Unholy Alliance: Religion and Atrocity in Our Time* puts it thus: 'over time theology has moved from certainty to history, from proclamation to testimony, from salvation to resource.'<sup>2</sup> In Australia at least, no longer

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<sup>1</sup>The concept of immanence is used in theology to talk of a sense of God present throughout the world. Here, God is close. It is contrasted with transcendence that in which the sense of God is found only on rapturous states or in which God is considered remote and in an other realm such as heaven. Debate about the transition identifies internal pressures which grew from the passion of the liberation and feminist theologians, the clamour from other peripheral peoples - indigenous, disabled, gay and lesbian people of faith and the challenge of the environment movement. Theology's internal critics and new producers are as creatively vocal and bold as any external detractors. Other forces include all the usual suspects: capital, power, technology, war and the impact of post modern literary theory and philosophy.

2. Marc Ellis *Unholy Alliance Religion and Atrocity in Our Time* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis) 1997,103

are church leaders and theologians powerful determiners of community opinion about sexual and other ethics; no longer do views about God shape community life; no longer is theology a pretender to consequence and importance; no longer is theology the queen of the sciences.

When one falls from grandeur where can one decently go?

***On Earth Revealing, Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology***

Drawing on systems theory, let's imagine contexts nested in contexts as we move closer to the work my colleagues and I have been generating in recent years. We are a diverse group of theologians committed to developing an ecological theology.<sup>3</sup> We are nested within a university research centre, contributed to by various mainstream churches and the university, within privileged and peaceful communities, within national and international networks.

Building on our shared position that human beings have produced an ecological crisis that demands all of humanity's wisdom, ingenuity and commitment we are aware that some theological attitudes have contributed to exploitation and disregard for the good of the planet.<sup>4</sup> Ellis says that we are living 'in the shadow of Christian life.'<sup>5</sup> So we acknowledge a need to rethink theology.<sup>6</sup> This shadow can threaten to overwhelm us, leaving us in despair and unable to see a path to the future. How can we even speak God into this world?

The story is told that Martin Buber, when challenged by another professor about his

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<sup>3</sup> Ecological theology, that is, theology that takes as its starting point a concern with global ecology and an immanent sense of God is also referred to as ecotheology, a term used throughout this paper.

4. Sharon Welch in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis) 1990 analyses this as the outcome of an ethic of control derived from absolutizing God's power and conflating it with our own.

5. Ellis, Chapter 4 in *Unholy Alliance etc*, titled 'In the Shadow of Christian Life'

6. These sentiments are taken from the Introduction of Denis Edwards (ed) *Earth Revealing Earth Healing Ecology and Christian Theology* (Liturgical Press Minnesota) 2001

apparently easy use of the name of God, had this to say:

“Yes,” I said, “ it is the most heavy-laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated. Just for this reason I may not abandon it. Generations of men have laid the burden of their anxious lives upon this word and weighed it to the ground; it lies in the dust and bears their whole burden; the races of man with their religious factions have torn the word to pieces; they have killed for it and died for it, and it bears their finger marks and their blood...we must esteem those who interdict it because they rebel against the injustice and wrong which are so readily referred to ‘God’ for authorization. But we may not give it up...we cannot cleanse the word God and we cannot make it whole; but defiled and mutilated as it is, we can raise it from the ground and set it over an hour of great care.”<sup>7</sup>

In our ecotheology project and other parts of our work we have made this attempt to face up to the great care of our hour. Sharon Welch in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* proposes that theologians with a concern for the great care of our hour will move away from despair when we embrace an ethic of accountability, an ethic of risk and a theology of immanence.<sup>8</sup> Seeking accountability for (not apologising for or sweeping aside) the shadow of our tradition demands that we speak – not to extend control or to cleanse the name of God, but because our hour of great care cannot allow those who speak for hope and transformation to shut up.<sup>9</sup>

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7. Martin Buber *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (Harper and Row New York): 1952 7-8 cited in Ellis, 151

8. Blurb comment from Henry Giroux from Miami University on Welch (1990)

9. Welch in *Feminist Ethic of Risk* says that risk is the appropriate response to control but that we cannot move to it until we have activated an ethic of accountability. Chap 3 p49-65

Building on conversations with a wider group of people committed to caring for the earth, we have delved into two main themes. *Earth Revealing* explores the connections between ecological commitment and a sense of God. In *Earth Healing* we ask: ‘How can we contribute to the healing of our abused planet?’<sup>10</sup> Surely this is a compelling question and is our issue here. We can strive to answer this question prescriptively, ‘trying to make the rough places smooth’<sup>11</sup> by upholding gilt-edged, God-kissed principles in an effort to display reason, authority and merit. However, the ethic of accountability won’t permit it and besides, having by now lived much in the world, we know that this won’t work.<sup>12</sup> Exhortation is a pretension.

### **On freeing the moral imagination**

We have learned that whilst the dissonance between exploring our sense of God and our part in and concern for the planet can lead to perplexity, it can also free the moral imagination and deliver ethical creativity.<sup>13</sup> It is here that our conversation with all those interested in public ethics gains relevance. According to Patricia Werhane, moral imagination as ethical process involves:

at least four things: (1) that one disengage oneself from one's role, one's particular situation, or context; (2) that one becomes aware of the kind of scheme one has adopted and/or that is operating in a particular kind of context; (3) that one creatively envision new possibilities, possibilities for fresh ways to frame experiences and new solutions to present dilemmas; and (4) that one evaluate the old context, the scope or range of the conceptual schemes at work, and new

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10. This paragraph draws directly on the introduction of Edwards *Earth Revealing: Earth Healing: 2001*

11. Jeanette Winterson ‘The Semiotics of Sex’ in *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (Vintage London) 1995, 113

13 The reference to freeing the moral imagination comes from Welch 1990 as she explores theological contributions to stopping the arms race.

possibilities.<sup>14</sup>

Surely these are processes open to all who seek to find ways that public efforts can protect vulnerable citizens, scarce resources and increasingly fragile environments. You will see that our work is shaped in this way: by our attempts to understand a much wider context; by preparedness to critically assess our history and our traditions; by attempts to be refreshing and creative and finally to see where it all fits. Welch advocates embrace of an ethic of risk in which we know in our minds and hearts that ‘it’s much, much, much too late, and continue to mourn the loss...inseparable from which is a profound, wrenching, far-from-sentimental affirmation of the beauty and wonder of nature, of human life’.<sup>15</sup> For us at least, Welch’s prognosis is right. Risking both honesty and the affirmation of the life of this world we have come to share the experience that a unique and illuminating moral imagination emerges when theology is done communally and focuses on the planetary community.

This experience encourages me to continue God-talking with and back to churches and other people of faith. Therefore, first, we have to interact with our own traditions. This experience also makes me think it worthwhile to talk with people interested in public ethics. Our ethics of accountability and risk lead us to seek exchanges outside our traditional boundaries.<sup>16</sup> Our renewed sensibility must be informed. We know that we do not hold the world intact – our world is not the full picture. We are theologians in conversation with those who approach questions of meaning, love and destiny from diverse discourses and disciplines. Secondly therefore, this is just the opening we need to engage in conversations with science, ethics, philosophy, literature, art – all activities conveying information and

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14. Werhane, Patricia H. (1995). ‘A Note on five traditional theories of moral reasoning’. Darden Case Bibliography. cited Michael E. Gorman, *Technology, Culture and Communication*, University of Virginia Ethics, Invention and Discovery <http://onlineethics.org/contest/virginia/context/ethicsinv3.html#top>

15 Welch 1990, 70.

16. Ellis reminds us that ‘what is in reach – a sensibility, a language, a culture – is what is available to human beings.

displaying emotion and imagination. Finally, given that we acknowledge that work for eco-justice is essential to our love of life, we need to be clear when we can speak in judgment of destruction and in favour of life.

To all of this we aim to bring an unpretentious demeanor and resilience. Within this spirit we can safely enter into the puzzles of our endeavour as listening, conversing, creating theologians. I explore of four of these puzzles here:

1. Our vexed relationship with traditional truth claims.
2. Our vexed relationship with the church as institution.
3. Our relationships beyond the boundaries of our discipline.
4. Our grounds to denounce eco-injustice and advocate a cultural shift towards an ecological ethos.

### **On tradition as contest**

To open this out I will use what to some might be a surprising text: Jeannette Winterson's literary essay 'The Semiotics of Sex' in *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*. I will not go into its arguments and merits here but I will say what excites me about it.

Winterson starts by looking at sexuality and art. She ends by opening up a discussion about the place of art in releasing what she calls complex emotion. She says that in complex emotion 'there is a clash between what I feel and what I expected to feel. My logical self fails me, and no matter how much I try to pace it out, there is still something left over that will not be accounted for.'<sup>17</sup> She claims that 'against this fear, art is fresh healing and fresh pain.'<sup>18</sup> Unpretentious eco-theology, like art, is fresh healing and fresh pain.

I have argued that our theology has a shadow history of misguiding our relationship with

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<sup>17</sup> Winterson, 1995, 113

<sup>18</sup> Winterson, 1995, 109

the planet. Yet, disowning tradition severs connections across time and communities thereby constraining our context and inhibiting our moral imaginations. Our traditions are the stuff of much of our theology. Theology cannot be ahistorical...it is the stories and struggles of all those before us who have spoken of God to better understand their humanity. Traditions emerge from these power struggles. Traditions give voice to power but because they are themselves contests they also give muted voice to the less powerful. And it is seeing tradition as contest rather than dry bones piled on our shoulders by our forebears that can liberate our imaginations. The muted can be amplified and therefore transformed. Clearly, by persisting with theology we have not concluded that the shadow of our tradition is a fatal flaw.

Winterson, speaking of constructs like art, science and religion sees them as shared human connections that trace the possibilities of past and future in the 'whorl of now'.<sup>19</sup> This striving for connection through time is central to enlighten our understanding of the whorl of now; to use our traditions to expand our responses; and discover the freedom of imagination. We are not simply trying to puff vigour into atrophying religion.

Understanding tradition as contest validates the exercise of our contemporary imagination. It is the task of this generation to honour the insights of those before us, and to add our own dreams. Indeed Ellis suggests that this might be the most perverse paradox we face: 'perhaps it is only within the language from which barbarism erupted that a healing can begin.'<sup>20</sup> I dispute that it is only within this language that healing can begin but I agree that a certain sort of renewal can only happen when we, reckoning with the destructive potential of our symbols, can also believe in their creative power.

If seeing tradition as contest puts us into an uncertain relationship with what has been

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<sup>19</sup> Winterson, 1995,117

<sup>20</sup> Ellis 1997,110

labeled truth it also puts us in an uneasy relationship with the institutional church and the wider community. Unpretentiousness subverts the very forces of control that have been used to hold church as hierarchy together. As eco-theologians we are caught up in debate across our boundaries, critically assessing the shadow life of our faith history and seeking reconciliation with those who have historically been placed beyond the bounds of our established concerns.

### **On ecumenism**

How do we build solidarity? We have moved into the borderlands between diverse traditions, between imagination and reason, science and technology, faith and religion. Do we just end up as quaint, earnest lone rangers or are we genuine about working with and learning from other people and the planet? Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian writing out of the context of the war in the Balkans, argues that we can give away the path of separation based on a fixed identity in favour of ‘differentiation to describe the creative activity of separating and binding that results in patterns of interdependence.’<sup>21</sup>

Given our commitment to this differentiation linked with a renewed interdependence, are we genuine, to quote Buber again, about ‘swimming with a new stream whose source may still be hidden?’<sup>22</sup> In part, this stream is embedded in ecumenism. The unpretentious eco-theologian, impressed profoundly with the abiding connection within and across all life, must be an ecumenist. Ecumenism is a specific term that describes the efforts of various traditions in Christian churches to build unity. It is also used to refer to inter-faith dialogue. It can also be used in a wider sense to describe open, deliberative processes aimed at finding common concern and perspectives across disciplines. Ecumenism, in this widest sense, encourages solidarity across boundaries of tradition, faith or non-faith – solidarity to resist

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20.Miroslav Volf *Exclusion and Embrace: A theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and reconciliation* (Abingdon,Nashville)1996, 65

21 Buber *ibid*

destruction and to rebuild.<sup>23</sup> The ecumenist is one who does not defend a closed identity or seek to conform others to it. However, an ecumenist is also one who does not hide from the claims of their tradition and their faith. The ecumenist shares and does not control the agenda, and is always seeking enriched or new symbols to inform the processes of transformation. The ecumenist knows that the costs of accountability and risk are historical sanctity, cohesion and control. Finally, the dedicated ecumenist is prepared to name what destroys life acknowledging how deeply we are enmeshed in all that produces it, not to defend it but to expose and condemn.

At a practical level, in the production of our book *Earth Revealing: Earth Healing Ecology and Christian Theology*, this ecumenism was manifest at four levels. First, we consulted with activists and other academics with a passionate and concrete commitment to working ecologically. Secondly, we worked closely with a group of Indigenous artists from Dunilli Arts Centre in the Northern Territory as they told their stories and concerns about their world. Their art works are included in our book. Thirdly, you will find amongst the writings of my colleagues an astonishing array of interlocutors from a wide range of backgrounds: the early church fathers and their detractors; historians and anthropologists; economists and poets; the scriptures and scientists; theologians of all hues. Finally, as we worked together, coming from diverse traditions, political perspectives, academic and professional backgrounds we read and reread each others writing, building up communal contributions to highly distinctive and individual works. Paradoxically then, the group processes amplified the voice of each contributor. And yet, we have produced a chorus of concern and reflection

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<sup>23</sup> Ellis critiques the current ecumenical movement for its odd compromise with destructive powers saying that the churches are empowered to speak on behalf of others while acting to rescue the power and prestige of the very churches and institutions challenged' p190 Whilst this may indeed reflect a cynical compromise between institutions striving to preserve current power relationships behind a facade of care, it may also represent the intensity of the internal struggle within the church between control and risk, amnesia and accountability, pretension and effrontery; meanness and costliness...

that has its own distinct note and harmony.

Ecumenism thus lived, as it drives dynamic community for unpretentious theologians, embraces complexity and respects uncertainty. However, it does not back away from our obligations to the planet and to our downtrodden neighbours. Living with complex emotion, we understand that this combination of information and sensibility compels us to make our advocacy active. I have argued that we adopt an unpretentious demeanor, grounded in an ethic of accountability. Thus lead to an ethic of risk – an ethic that directs us to lay down our aspirations to control – we are freed to humbly address, critique and elaborate our traditions. We are released into renewed moral imagination. We are drawn beyond the boundaries of our identities, into an active, ecumenical advocacy. This you will find in our works as well. And there is more.

### **On Effrontery**

Winterson urges us on in this task of imagining. She says: ‘The artist is an imaginer. The artist imagines the forbidden because to her it is not forbidden’. In this she is not speaking of what she calls ‘disgust around the well known.’<sup>24</sup> For Winterson, the forbidden in art is the ground unconquered by social niceties.<sup>25</sup> She believes that: ‘it is the poet who goes further than any human scientist. The poet who with her dredging net must haul up difficult things and return them to the present.’<sup>26</sup>

Ecotheology cannot avoid this dredging process, we haul up the dreadful and the sublimely beautiful and hopeful.

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<sup>24</sup>Winterson, 1995,116

<sup>25</sup> Winterson 1995,108

<sup>26</sup> Winterson 1995,115

For our theology the forbidden is the declaration the we start not with our desire for transcendence in God, nor the mystic glory of gorgeous nature, nor with authority of the institution of the church. The forbidden lies in naming as our inspiration that which us causes us most dread – the exploited planet, and our overlooked and downtrodden neighbours. In my work the forbidden lies in declaring my partisanship with large numbers of people with impairments declared unlovely, unworthy and socially burdensome in a world entranced with beauty, autonomy and irresponsibility. The forbidden named thus is an effrontery to all that is content with injustice. The forbidden named thus begins to break up ‘the dominant narrative of the lie.’<sup>27</sup>

And amongst the dominant lies are Winterson’s ‘last days signposts persuading us that nothing is worth doing and that each of us lives in a private nightmare, occasionally relieved by temporary pleasure’ or in the Christian’s case relieved by epiphanies, private salvations or eschatological hopes.<sup>28</sup> In my work the dominant lies tell us that people with impairments represent a form of social toxin, likely to limit our enjoyment and consume our hard won resources.

### **On giving cheek**

Unpretentiousness implies modesty and effrontery implies down-to-earthness. This is a great period of history to be an unpretentious theologian. Far from provoking regret, this shift from powerful assertion to humble probing is cause for rejoicing.<sup>29</sup> Langdon Gilkey

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<sup>27</sup>Robert Schreiter *Reconciliation*(Maryknoll NY 1992) re the narrative of the lie: violence tries to destroy the narratives that sustain people’s identities and substitute narratives of its own. These might be called the narratives of the lie, precisely because they are intended to negate the truth of people’s own narratives...the negation is intended not only to destroy the narrative of the victim, but to pave the way for the oppressor’s narrative. (34)

<sup>28</sup> Winterson, 1995

<sup>29</sup>Marc Ellis’s caution ‘to step slowly, to linger as it were, in a despair and a questioning that have been largely been lost’ Ellis 1994,15

puts it graphically :‘Theology (at least as I do it) is hardly serene, self-generated, or in control; it is barely able to get the ship in before the unexpected storm, or the clothes in out of the rain – and it is always gasping for breath!’<sup>30</sup>

This breathless theology is saved from authoritative gravitas and can be delivered from embarrassed muttering, spiritual excitability or rarefied irrelevance. This theology is saved from defending power just because the church historically seeks power. Unpretentious theology is theology set free to become responsible. Yes, we live in an hour of great care. We live in the shadow of our history. We also live in an humble and hospitable house, we are willing to listen and to question, not simply pronounce.

This makes us resilient. We are filled with desire for justice. We do not look away, we can talk straight. We relinquish seriousness and take up boldness. We return to subversiveness. So, *this* is giving cheek. It is the audacity to relinquish pretension as demanded by accounting for the shadow of our history. It is the impudence to refuse to relinquish our traditions declaring the stuff of our dissent not solely the narratives of lies. It is the forwardness to release our moral imaginations. It is the brazenness to risk an active advocacy in the face of all the says ‘give up, seek comfort, seek solace, seek beauty.’

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<sup>30</sup> Langdon Gilkey *Theology for a Time of Troubles* at [www.christiancentury.org](http://www.christiancentury.org).  
Langdon Gilkey is Shailer Matthews professor of theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School This article appeared in the Christian Century, April 29, 1981, pp. 474-480. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation; used by permission.

Giving cheek means we do not lose our nerve. We will not shut up. We have the guts to go on – even though our stance may be judged as too much focused on the distressing context in which we live and work. ‘I realise that when theologians talk of love this is often taken as a sign of hotheadedness,’ says Anthony Kelly CSSR.<sup>31</sup> Giving cheek means we have the guts to be softheaded. It means we can play! Brazenness in play dissolves the usual lines of authority. It tolerates ambiguity, expecting nothing, but ready for anything. It opens up the possibility for genuine communion.<sup>32</sup>

We are not embarrassed about our attempts to explore the connections between our ecological commitment and our senses of God. This too is giving cheek in a self satisfied technological age justified by the bland pragmatism of utilitarian ethics. But more than this, we have the effrontery to declare that those of us who are drawn to God and accept that the invitation to abundant life is for all of us, have something to say to those beyond our cultural and discipline boundaries.<sup>33</sup>

I have spoken much of our stance, but we must also have something to say.

**In conclusion then, I want to return to my first question: When one falls from grandeur where can one decently go and what do you do when you get there?**

Albert Camus, in dialogue with Dominican Monks in 1948, ‘thought that the world needed to hear (from the church) denunciation of injustice backed by forthright and efficacious action.’<sup>34</sup> We know that efficacy in action is always easier to call for than to carry out. Action

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<sup>31</sup>Anthony Kelly *The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God* (Michael Glazier Wilmington, Delaware)1989

<sup>32</sup>O Fred Donaldson *Playing by Heart the Vision and Practice of Belonging* (Health Communications, Florida) 1993,160

34. Ellis offers this insight from Camus, asserting (Epilogue n8,208) that *Camus in Resistance, Rebellion and Death* New York Modern Library 1963 55,56 recognises the compromise between rhetoric and activity

that does not compromise with power may not be ultimately transformative – indeed as Welch reminds us we are not powerful enough to make change in just one generation.<sup>35</sup> This is the work of generations. Camus' message however calls for an end to the compromise that silenced so much of the church during the Holocaust. We hear that message, calling theologians to speak out and not to compromise with the economic, social, cultural and scientific forces that pursue power and wealth at the expense of planetary health and justice.

So, we are prepared to undertake the vital cultural work to:

- echo that call to end a compromise with the life-denying tendencies of our traditions and to expound theologies of life.
- invigorate the moral imaginations of all who care for future life and 'who grope for God in the midst of creation's persistent groaning'<sup>36</sup>
- explore an ecological ethos that centralizes concern for the whole planetary community.<sup>37</sup>
- explore and advocate an ecological ethos that 'locates human interests in the context of the interests of other species and entities.'<sup>38</sup>

We believe that in these ways we can come to a meeting of minds and hearts with others who with Welch have found that, 'the work for justice is not incidental to one's life but it is an essential aspect of affirming the delight and wonder of being alive.'<sup>39</sup>

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as the terminal condition of Christianity.

35. Welch 1990,70

36. Ellis develops this argument in relation to what he sees as the institutional church's ongoing complicity with aggression - the Pope calls for non-violence yet recognizes governments that abuse human rights...

37. Carol Dempsey, cover *Earth Revealing Earth Healing* (2001)

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Dutney in his chapter on bioethics in *Earth Revealing Earth Healing* concludes that: 'ecological bioethics insists that [a full range of] questions move to the front of our minds so that we can become more specific about what it means for non-human species and entities that they are God's beloved creatures.' Dutney 2001, 228

39 Welch 1990, 70.

Avishai Margalit has characterized a decent society as one in which its institutions do not humiliate its citizens.<sup>40</sup> Maybe to this we should add that a decent society aims to undo the humiliation of the citizens of the globe, indeed the entire planetary community.

Unpretentious theology at its giving cheek best is firmly committed to establishing this sort of decency. I agree with Ellis: 'Theologians speak about God to better understand the human condition.'<sup>41</sup> Unpretentious theology is not maverick for the sake of having some fun and 'skiving off'. Ecological theology is not scuttling off into insignificance, it brings us boldly to the table of all people who have the effrontery to seek a radically different ethos that will offer us all an ecologically sustainable future.<sup>42</sup> The capacity to use our traditions creatively renews the contest of ideas and wisdom within our own communities. It brings us into solidarity with those who would take responsible action wherever we recognise each other. It inspires us with Toni Cade Bambara's 'sheer holy boldness' to name eco-injustice and to desire change. Freed from gravitas, we find a humble, a decent place, not reduced, but enlarged in our capacity to be purposeful, thoughtful, informed, insightful, imaginative yet vulnerable in our trusting in the resilience of life and God.

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<sup>40</sup> Avishai Margalit *The Decent Society* (Harvard University Press Cambridge, Mass.) 1996

<sup>41</sup> Ellis, 1994, 109

<sup>42</sup> Edwards, Introduction *Earth Healing, Earth Revealing* 2001 p xii

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