

The Death of Life Sean McDonagh ssc (Columba Press 2004)

The author is well known for his passionate concern for the earth and its rich variety of species that now face the threat of extinction.

In this book he traces the birth and growth of his own awareness of what has been happening to the planet. He recalls the lack of ecological training given in seminaries where the focus has been on the human and divine, not on the larger earth community and the cosmic context. His ministry in the Philippines centred on protecting human rights during a period of martial law. It seemed to him at that time that ecological concerns could appear to be a distraction from the pressing work of building a more just and caring society. But subsequent ministry among the T'boli people led him to appreciate the value of rainforests and the myriad variety of species there.

The current thinking about global warming has made us aware of the imminent destruction that climate change can cause. Sean McDonagh sketches a broader perspective as he examines the complex interweaving of the factors leading to extinction of species. His life experience in Ireland and the Philippines is supported by his wide knowledge of how this extinction is affecting the ecosystems. He grieves the tragic loss of languages and cultural diversity that accompanies this "death of life".

In analysing the theological heritage of Christianity, Sean McDonagh offers a succinct journey through the teachings of significant Christian writers across the centuries. As one of the many students who heard of the heresy of Pelagius, I was fascinated to find out how this man's teaching and approach to ministry have been misrepresented. McDonagh acknowledges the insights of other Christian men and women, but he shows that, on the whole, "Theology forgot creation".

I found reading the chapter "Theological Reflections" an enriching experience and one that invites a reflective revisiting. He looks at the current extinction phase from a religious and theological perspective, in the light of the cosmology expounded by Fr Thomas Berry, the riches of biblical tradition and contemporary Catholic theology.

McDonagh ends on a note of hope as he challenges the Churches to develop not only an ecologically sensitive theology but also an appropriate ethical framework for promoting the integrity of justice and creation in the face of the current crisis. He outlines some of the initiatives already taken and offers suggestions on how different organisations and cultures might proceed to preserve biodiversity and save many habitats and species.

While he speaks from his Irish clerical background, Sean McDonagh's ideas have a resonance beyond his own culture.