Making Tracks: Sigurd Bergmann

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

“Religion as a Creative Skill in Environmental Change—Exploring the Entanglement of Images of God, Nature, and the Sacred”

by **Sigurd Bergmann**

The thread of my research is the understanding of how images of nature and those of God and/or the sacred interact and emerge in specific contexts, and how they impact ethics, worldviews, and practices in these contexts. Much like the ecological turn from “nature” to “environment” in the 1970s, my research has explored the deep religious dimension of this turn from the beginning in a process where new fields, themes, methods, and theories have been experimentally explored. After a strong emphasis on the historical implications, I began to focus on cultural and contextual interactions, and have increasingly shifted to exploring the “aesth/ethics” and spatiality of religion. These new ideas have been examined in interdisciplinary collaborations with scholars in various areas of science.

My first study investigated fourth century Greek theological sources in a subtle, methodologically unique association to contemporary environmental theology discourses. While this carefully linked theological exploration to approaches in life sciences, my second study established a sustainable synthesis of cultural studies and religious studies applied to theology, with an emphasis on the environmental humanities and the search for a constructive ecological theology. In 1996 my research offered a surprising turnaround through the field of contemporary Saami visual arts, conducted with a complex, new methodology where tools from art history, art anthropology, human ecology, and religious studies/theology were interwoven to explore understandings of nature, religion, art, and ethnicity. This led to an investigation described by the distinguished Yale philosopher

Nicholas Wolterstorff as **“**a breakthrough in theological aesthetics” (*In the Beginning is the Icon*, London: Equinox 2009).

I later initiated and chaired (2005–2011) the **European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment** that, with three others in the USA and Canada, counts among its members the four most dynamic and influential international research structures, and today has more than 100 active scholars. Deepening further the exploration of belief, ethics, and space and expanding it to technology, motion and mobility, I co-led the interdisciplinary research project “Technical Spaces of Mobility” at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, which has generated unique, widely recognized insights into the human dimension of mobility. Among several international publications from this project one should especially mention *The Ethics of Mobilities: Rethinking Place, Exclusion, Freedom and Environment* (ed. with Tore Sager, Farnham and Burlington VT: Ashgate 2008).

My own contributions since 1999 have elaborated avant-garde research on space and religion, nurtured by my concept of “aesth/ethics,” an ideational invention that has emerged in conversation with scholars in architecture and urban space and has enabled me to probe the religious dimension of human spatial design. Cooperations with architects, artists, and designers have resulted in two inspiring and unique works (cf. *Architecture, Aesth/ethics & Religion*, Frankfurt: IKO 2005, and *Theology in Built Environments: Exploring Religion, Architecture, and Design,* New Brunswick and London: Transaction 2009) among several other publications. My stay at the RCC offered valuable conditions for me to prepare a monograph, *Religion, Space, and the Environment* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction 2013) and to carefully knead its chapters, besides preparing work on a research project on *Religion in Climatic Change* with colleagues in climate science, anthropology, and theology.

These projects have shown the need to develop new ideas, tools, and modes of understanding of the complex interaction of religion and the environment. Even if the ideas, applied and deepened in my work in the past, have proved successful, the necessity of a more integrated compression of theories and methods is clear; the challenge of ongoing climate change in particular demonstrates the insufficiency of vague assumptions of religion that must expand to different places and contexts, ideologies, and practices. Together with Dieter Gerten, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Undine Frömming, environmental anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin, and Markus Vogt, LMU/RCC, I have worked on the development of a long-term project on the

significance and function of religion for climate change. Three international workshops and two pioneering publications have been published as a result (*Religion and Dangerous Environmental Change,* Berlin: LIT 2010; *Religion in Global Environmental and Climate Change,* New York and London: Continuum 2011).

Presenting parts of the project at the RCC's research seminary and Lunchtime Colloquium offered constructive and inspiring responses to push the project further. My stay as an RCC fellow in Munich provided valuable opportunities and rich communicative inspiration as to which direction my future research could take, a threshold where mature projects were to be accomplished, and where an open horizon for novel research gently forms.