

## PAPERS AND REGISTRATION

Those who wish to present a paper should send a summary (500 words at most) by e-mail to St. Andrew's Institute by 15 September 2016. The Organizing Committee selects papers for the Conference and sends invitations to the speakers. The full text of all selected papers will have to be submitted by 1 November 2016. The working language of the conference will be English.

Upon arrival at the conference every participant will receive summaries of all the papers and the conference programme. Papers are scheduled for 20 minutes each.

Numbers are limited and early registration is strongly advised. Registration form can be found on St. Andrew's website [www.standrews.ru](http://www.standrews.ru). Registrations, summaries and papers should be sent to:

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## ORGANIZATION AND ACCOMMODATION

The conference will assemble on 9 November 2016 for a reception and opening ceremony in the evening. Participants will depart after breakfast on 12 November. Accommodation and meals will be provided by the organizers. Travel expenses (within Europe only) of the speakers can be reimbursed.



ST. ANDREW'S  
BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL  
INSTITUTE  
(Moscow, Russia)



ICCO – KERK IN ACTIE  
(Utrecht, the Netherlands)

DELM – DEVELOPMENT OF ECUMENICAL LEADERSHIP IN MISSION NETWORK  
NELCEE – NETWORK FOR ECUMENICAL LEARNING IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Invitation and Call for Papers

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

THEOLOGY OF NATURE:  
DIVINE GIFT AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

9–12 November 2016  
Utrecht, the Netherlands

## THEME OF THE CONFERENCE

Nature has long been a subject of theological reflection. Called “good” and “very good” (Gen 1), nature has in God’s eyes a value of its own, irrespective of the human being; at the same time, God enjoins humans to subdue the earth and to have dominion over other living creatures (Gen 1:28). Although the first attitude has always been present in Christianity (the best example being St. Francis of Assisi), it is the second one, placing the human being above nature as “the crown of creation”, that prevailed in the end.

The early and medieval Church, especially in the East, perceived nature as a symbolic system through which God speaks to the human being. Already here nature was considered mostly as a means of divine revelation rather than something valuable in itself. Admiration for nature’s beauty was usually regarded with suspicion by the church as possibly leading to the deification of nature and thus being a threat to “pure” God-human relations.

In the West, already in the High Middle Ages but especially in the modern era when natural sciences emerged, interest in nature shifted from what it might symbolize to how it operates and how it could be used. Nature thus was demystified and turned into an object of scientific investigation and a resource for technological exploitation.

Further development of science and technology has led to catastrophic consequences for the environment all over the globe. However, the roots of today’s ecological crisis can be traced back to the arrogant Christian attitude that saw nature mostly in an anthropocentric perspective and paid little or no attention to its independent existence. Excluded, as an inferior part, from God-human relations, nature was made simply a means to satisfy human needs.

What can contemporary Christianity say and do about this? There have been many good initiatives undertaken by various Protestant denominations, which encouraged human

responsibility for nature and care for the common good; Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s recent activities underline the necessity of deeper concern for the environment; and Pope Francis’ latest encyclical *Laudato si* also expresses concern for the impending ecological catastrophe. Can care and responsibility for the gift God has given us become a joint Christian initiative transcending confessional and denominational bounds?

At the same time, for many theologians nature is still conceived of in old dualistic (God-human) categories. Is it possible for Christian thinking to regard nature as our equal partner and to construct a theology based on trilateral (God-human-nature) relations?

The theology of nature, to which the forthcoming conference is dedicated, needs to develop a new approach that sees nature as God’s fully-fledged creation, in no respect inferior to the human being and not an object of human manipulation. This approach is similar to that used in liberation theology: it is an interpretation of Christian faith from the perspective of suffering nature and imminent ecological disaster. What kind of language could theology use for this? Can it learn from other religions characterized by a more respectful attitude toward nature?

On the other hand, the theology of nature has to take into account the scientific knowledge obtained over recent centuries. It makes no sense simply to repeat traditional Christian notions about nature. New challenges and issues such as those raised in the sphere of bioethics require new approaches and solutions. The theology of nature should seek to cast (or recast) our theological understandings in a manner consistent with what has been uncovered about the natural world through science, thus trying to bridge the gap between scientific discovery and theological insight. However, the aim here is not to build a new system of theology with science integrated into it but to develop an open theology that promotes real human responsibility for the world of nature, the divine gift we have long abused.