

Reviews

Reviewed in *Science & Theology News*
February 10, 2006

Christianity has long endowed the natural world with sacred meaning. Every day, material existence — food and drink, life and death, humans and animals, Earth and sky — is recalled in countless rituals and stories as the primary medium through which God relates to humankind and the wider Earth community.

Christianity's central ritual is a group meal that remembers the saving death of Jesus by celebrating the good gifts of creation — eating bread and drinking wine. Its central symbol is a wooden cross — two pieces of lumber lashed together as the means and site of Jesus' crucifixion. Its central belief focuses on the body — namely, that God became flesh in Jesus and thereby becomes a mortal, breathing life-form who experiences life's joy and suffering.

And Christianity's primary sacred document, the Bible, is rich with ecological imagery that stretches from the cosmic potter fashioning the first man from dust to the tree of life yielding its fruit to Earth's inhabitants. Christianity, then, is a “deep green” or “earthen” religion because it binds God to the created order and thereby values the natural world as a holy place.

In *Finding God in the Singing River*, I take up the question of Christianity's earthen identity by way of a nature-based retrieval of the Holy Spirit as the green face of God in the world. The Holy Spirit reveals herself in the biblical literature as a physical, earthly being who labors to sustain humankind and other beings' solidarity with one another. The natural world — the body of God, as it were — is best understood as the primary mode of God's presence among us today.

Without a deeply felt spiritual bond with the Earth community as the enfleshment of God's presence, it is difficult for Christians and other people of faith to develop long-term, sustainable relationships with the good creation God has made. A partial turn to valorizing nature as sacred ground was made in post-Vatican II papal encyclicals and bishops' pastorals where the created order is understood sacramentally as the dwelling place of God's goodness. But a residual anthropocentric bias in contemporary Catholic thought — namely, that the end of creation is human flourishing — has prevented a full biocentric turn to ascribing holiness or sacred value to the created order.

In the earthen theology I propose, Christianity's “animist” identity is reawakened through the ancient ideas of incarnation and spirit — the Bible teaches that while God is beyond all things, God is radically enfleshed within all things. Apart from a thoroughgoing deep green reawakening of Christianity's central teachings, it will be impossible to experience a spiritually charged connection to the land that is our common home and common destiny. Without this connection, the prospects of saving our planet, and thereby saving ourselves, are not good.

It's elemental, my dear

While Christianity's primordial identity is fundamentally nature-centered and body-loving, this thesis has historically been at odds with a residual Platonist tendency within Christian theology to emphasize spirit or mind as superior to matter or body. But rather than prioritizing the spiritual over the earthly, Scripture figures the Holy Spirit as a carnal, creaturely life-form always already interpenetrated by the material world. Indeed, the Bible is awash with imagery of the Holy Spirit borrowed directly from the natural world. The four traditional elements of natural, embodied life — earth, air, water and fire — are constitutive of the Holy Spirit's biblical reality as an enfleshed being who ministers to God's creation.

As earth, the Holy Spirit is both the divine bird with an olive branch in its mouth that brings peace and renewal to a broken world, and a fruit bearer — such as a tree or vine — that yields the virtues of love, joy and peace in the life of the disciple. As a bird or a flowering tree, the Holy Spirit is a living being who shares a common physical reality with all other beings. Far from being the “immaterial substance” defined by the canonical theological lexicon, the Holy Spirit is imagined in the Bible as a material, earthen life-form who mediates God's power to other Earth creatures through her physical presence.

As air, the Holy Spirit is both the vivifying breath that animates all living things and the prophetic wind that brings salvation and new life to those it indwells. The nouns for the Holy Spirit in the biblical texts — *rûach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek — mean “breath,” “air” or “wind.” Literally, the Holy Spirit is pneumatic, a powerful air-driven reality analogous to a pneumatic drill or pump. The Holy Spirit is God's all-encompassing, aerial presence in the life-giving atmosphere that envelops and sustains the whole Earth. As such, the Holy Spirit escapes the horizon of human activity and cannot be contained by human constraints. The Spirit is divine wind — the breath of God — that blows where she wills, driven by her own elemental power and independent from human attempts to control her, refreshing and renewing all broken members of the created order.

As the living water, the Spirit quickens and refreshes all who drink from her eternal springs. As physical and spiritual sustenance, the Holy Spirit is the liquid God who imbues all life-sustaining bodily fluids with flowing divine presence and power. Moreover, the water God flows and circulates within the soaking rains, dewy mists, thermal springs, seeping mud holes, ancient headwaters, swampy wetlands and teeming oceans that constitute the hydrospheric Earth. The Holy Spirit as water makes possible the wonderful succulence of life as we experience it on a liquid planet sustained by nurturing flow patterns.

Finally, as fire, the Holy Spirit is the bright flame that alternately judges evildoers and ignites the prophetic mission of the church. Fire is an expression of God's austere power. On one level, it is biblically viewed as the element God uses to castigate human error. But it is also the symbol of God's unifying presence in the fledgling Christian community where the divine *pneuma* — the rushing wind of God — is said to have filled the early church as its members became filled with the Spirit, symbolized by, as it says in Acts 2:3, “tongues of fire [that were] distributed and resting on each one” of the early church members. Aberrant, subversive and creatively destructive, God as fire scorches and roasts who and what she chooses apart from human intervention and design — like the divine wind that blows where she wills.

God as Spirit is biblically defined according to the tropes of earth, wind, water and fire. The Earth's bodies of water, communities of plants and animals, and eruptions of fire and wind share in the Holy Spirit's very nature, as she is continually enfleshed through natural landscapes and biological populations. The Holy Spirit is an earthen reality — God's power in the land and sky that makes all things live and grow toward their natural ends. God is living in the ground, swimming through the oceans, circulating in the atmosphere. God is always afoot and underfoot as the quickening life force yearning to bring all denizens of our sacred Earth into fruition and wellbeing.

Idolatrous ecology

Pope John Paul II and many bishops — as well as countless religious leaders from non-Catholic traditions — have broken new ground in religious environmentalism by emphasizing the biblical creation story and the ethic of respect for life as central to a moral response to the ecological crisis. On New Year's Day 1990, Pope John Paul II issued "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility." A year later, U.S. Catholic bishops promulgated

"Renewing the Earth" as a response to the crisis. These statements and others emphasize the goodness of God's creation, and that Adam and Eve were made in God's image in order to exercise dominion over the Earth in wisdom and love. Human sin, however, destroyed this divine ordering and creation has suffered as a result of human beings' continued decisions to not live in harmony with the Creator's plan. Pope John Paul and the bishops have regarded the environmental crisis as a moral crisis.

Catholic social teaching prioritizes human welfare as the bedrock norm for maintaining the wellbeing of creation. In his 1990 World Day of Peace address, Pope John Paul made this point in the language of a moral first principle: "Respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person, is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress." The pope and bishops contended that locating human need at the center of environmental policy-making results — in a ripple-like effect — in the extension of moral regard for non-human creatures.

The logic is that once the needs of the human community are secured, human beings will be empowered to reach out in justice and compassion to the wider biotic community. At the World Day of Peace in 1999, the pope makes a similar point: "Placing human wellbeing at the center of concern for the environment is actually the surest way of safeguarding creation; this in fact stimulates the responsibility of the individual with regard to natural resources and their judicious use."

It is understandable why they place human dignity at the center of environmental wellbeing. On apparent biblical grounds and in light of the environmentally degraded state of most human populations, it is natural to posit the restoration of human dignity as the keystone value necessary for building a morally just social and ecological order. It is assumed that making human flourishing the center of environmental concern will have a green halo effect on other beings.

'Ecological without being ecocentric'

Catholic social teaching has another reason for assigning, relative to the whole of the natural

order, supreme value to human well-being: It protects Christian ecology from erasing the distinctions between humans and others in the manner of creation spirituality. This anxiety with this type of spirituality is given full expression in the bishops' 1991 pastoral statement, which calls for a love for creation that is "ecological without being ecocentric." The bishops warn, "We can and must care for the Earth without mistaking it for the ultimate object of our devotion."

This statement clarifies the difference between "ecological theology," which preserves the hierarchical order that separates Creator and creation, and "ecocentric theology," which runs the risk of overly venerating nature as an object of worship, according to the pope and bishops. If there is excessive dialogue with nonreligious environmentalism, mainstream Protestant and Catholic theology worries that Christianity will disintegrate into a neopagan reverence for earthen well-being that blurs the distinctions between God, humans and others — which some Christians deem necessary for a proper and ordered relationship with creation. In a word, the charge against deep green theology is idolatry, that is, bestowing undue reverence on the creation that diminishes God's status as the supreme bearer of absolute value. But how well-grounded is this charge?

Human dignity — the primary focus of classical Catholic doctrine — is best secured by maintaining the health of biologically diverse species linked together through intricate feeding relationships. Correspondingly, practical decisions about resource allocations and the like should focus on ensuring the dynamism and vitality of the energy cycle, not on the particular needs of individual participants within the cycle, including individual human needs. In conversation with conservation biology from a religious perspective, we humans should see ourselves as equal citizens of the biotic order, rather than as overlords of creation who possess more value than other beings.

Critics regard this subordination of human concerns to the welfare of the whole as a dangerous flattening of important differences, even a kind of ecofascism in which human interests are now located in — or subordinated to — the wider orbit of ecosystemic interests. The point is not that human happiness is unimportant in green systems theology, but rather without the well-being of the whole as the paramount concern, attention to human needs and interests is not possible. Frankly, if the worldwide system of energy flow patterns collapses due to ecocatastrophe of our own making, then our discussions about whether human beings have more value than other beings will seem academic at best and, at worst, contributory to the very mind-set that gave rise to the collapse in the first place.

Home of God's presence

If earthen theology seeks to shift the center of gravity toward ecosystem well-being rather than human flourishing as such, does this make it a type of paganism or idolatry that dare not speak its name — I think not. The witness of Scripture and tradition is to the world as the abode of divinity, the habitation of life-giving Spirit, the home of God's presence where the rhythms and vitalities of everyday life are sacred. All life is sacred because the Earth is a natural system alive with God's presence, which supports the well-being of all created things.

God's gift to all beings is this highly complex, biologically diverse Earth where life itself is celebrated in all its fecundity and passion. Sacredness inheres in the God-given capacity of plants and animals to stock and replenish the food chain on which we all depend. God as Spirit is the green force in the Earth who animates the living food chains that make possible the flow of energy for all of us.

It is not blasphemous, therefore, to say that nature is sacred. It is not mistaken to find God's presence in all things. To speak in animistic terms, it is not wrong to re-envision Christianity as continuous with the worldviews of first peoples who bore witness to and experienced divinity everywhere — who saw and felt the Spirit alive in every rock, tree, animal and body of water they encountered. God is holy, and all God made participates in that holiness. Thus, when we labor to protect and nurture God's good creation, we invest all things with inherent, supreme value as a loving extension of God's bounty and compassion.

Sacred, then, is the ground we stand on. Holy is the Earth where we are planted. Discovering the natural world as holy ground has the potential to vivify our primordial sense of belonging to the life-web that our kind and others need for daily sustenance and future well-being. This perspective signals a reevaluation and continuation of characteristic Christian themes that celebrate the important connection between human beings and the natural order that sustains them.

Christians speak of the embodiment of God in Jesus 2,000 years ago, but now the entire life-web is the incarnation of God's presence through the Spirit on a daily basis. Christians speak of the miracle of the Eucharist, in which bread and wine become Christ's flesh and blood, but now the whole Earth is a living sacrament full of the divine life through the agency of the Spirit who animates and unifies all things. Christians speak of the power of the written word of God, in which God's voice can be heard by the discerning reader, but now all of nature is the book of God through which one can see God's face and listen to God's speech in the laughter of a bubbling stream, the rush of an icy wind on a winter's day, the scream of a red-tailed hawk as it seizes its prey and the silent movement of a monarch butterfly flitting from one milkweed plant to another.

In the warmth of the sun, the shelter of the encircling sky, the strength of the great oceans and the fecundity of the good land, we have everything we need to recover our kinship with the Holy Spirit and the Earth.