Prologue

A Christian Spirituality of Nature for Today's Seekers and Their Teachers and Pastors

Ours is an era in which "the Nones" represent a growing segment of the U. S. population. As the time of this writing, almost a fifth of all Americans say that they have no religious affiliation. By a recent count, there were more Nones than mainstream Protestants, and it appears that their numbers will continue to grow for some time. About a third of the Nones are in their young adult years, with the highest percentage of them ages thirty to forty-nine. Although the Nones have distanced themselves from institutional religious affiliation, they have generally not abandoned the spiritual quest altogether. On the contrary, their spiritual lives overall seem to be alive and well, if not well defined.[1] Many of the Nones are exploring a variety of spiritual options, especially influences from Asian religions.[2]

In my experience, the Nones do not stand alone. *Within* our churches, as most theology teachers and pastoral practitioners know well, there exists a sizable group whose members are "Nones-Sympathizers." While these individuals still identify themselves with historic Christianity in general, they are more concerned with what they think of as spirituality and less interested in what they consider to be the external, religious expressions of Christianity, such as regular worship attendance. Sometimes, like their spiritual cousins the Nones, they look to Asian or Native American religions for inspiration alongside their primary Christian identification. Think of these Nones and the Nones-Sympathizers as *spiritual seekers*, a term well understood by the aforementioned teachers and practitioners.[3] Together, the Nones and Nones-Sympathizers represent a major and still growing constituency in American religious life today.

This poses a challenge for teachers of Christian theology and Christian pastoral practitioners, as most of them recognize. How can the faith claims of a traditional "religion" like Christianity be communicated—inside as well as outside the churches–to such seekers, a group that is downplaying, sometimes even rejecting, what its members consider to be the external, religious

expressions of Christianity? Obviously, there is no simple and surely no single answer to that question. Theologians and pastoral practitioners have experimented with a variety of approaches to this challenge in recent years.[4]

A Christian Spirituality of Nature as Common Ground

I would like to enter this discussion with a proposal of my own. It has to do with *nature*. Could the seekers both outside and inside our churches who are deeply concerned with spirituality, over against what they often perceive to be the arid world of religion, find common ground with the teaching theologians and pastoral practitioners, who are struggling to be faithful interpreters of the classical Christian tradition, in *a Christian spirituality of nature*?

Over the last four decades, as a college instructor, a traveling lecturer, and a practicing pastor, I have encountered an intense interest in nature on the part of a wide range of spiritual seekers, both within church settings and beyond. Long ago, I concluded that the spiritual quest in "the cathedral of the great outdoors" is alive and well, even flourishing.

I am thinking here not only of the deep attraction such spiritual seekers feel for wilderness and coastal areas but also of their more domestic ecological consciousness, expressed in their fascination with proposals for living "closer to the land" and their fondness for urban green places, for bike trails in and around metropolitan areas, for walking, for birding, for gardening, for farmers' markets that sell locally grown produce, for rooftop agriculture, and for organic foods. So it was no surprise for me to learn that, according to one recent study, more than half of the Nones surveyed said that they "often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth."[5] I have every reason to believe that that is true, perhaps all the more so, for the Nones-Sympathizers within our churches.

In the same vein, many spiritual seekers today, notwithstanding escapist tendencies in some quarters, also seem to be committed to political and economic campaigns in behalf of nature, particularly campaigns championing the causes of clean air, restored wetlands and grasslands, and an effective response to global warming. Many of these seekers are also involved in animal rights causes and vegetarianism. In a variety of ways, these seekers care deeply about nature and appear to be open to, if not self-consciously seeking, a spirituality that is engaged with nature.

At the same time, much as these spiritual seekers show signs of a deep-seated love for nature, most also appear to exhibit a deep suspicion of historic Christianity's attitudes toward nature. This suspicion is predicated on the assumption that Christianity not only has little of value to say about nature

but also seems to be *hostile* toward nature, particularly toward the human body. How have these seekers arrived at such judgments? On the one hand, it is because those judgments are in some ways factually accurate: historic Christianity has had an ambiguous relationship with the world of nature and with the human body in particular.[6] On the other hand, for various reasons, what might be called the nature-friendly trends in historic Christian life and thought have not always been identified, much less celebrated, by interpreters of the Christian faith themselves, even by professional scholars. How then could grassroots spiritual seekers know about such trends?

Further, the voices of a range of Christian theologians who *have* been extensively involved in ecological theology and ecojustice ethics for the past five decades have simply not been taken seriously by many Christians at the grassroots level, again for various reasons.[7] As a result, what has been called "the ecological complaint against Christianity" (James Nash)—more about this later—has been widely and successfully propagated, even within some church circles. It is no wonder, then, that today's spiritual seekers, who themselves generally feel such a deep solidarity with nature, also regard historic Christianity with an equally profound suspicion. Nor is it any wonder that they have been absenting themselves in large numbers—psychologically if not also physically—from the great indoor cathedrals of their heritage in behalf of the cathedral of the great outdoors.

What if someone were to "attempt the impossible"? What if someone were to show how it is possible to stand in two places at once, to be *bifocal*? By this I refer not to eyeglasses but to the root meaning of the word, having *two foci*. What if we were to imagine the cathedral of the great outdoors engulfing, surrounding, embracing the cathedral of Christian practices, and imagine ourselves standing at the entrance of that Christian cathedral, contemplating the vastness and the mystery and the beauty of the world of nature before and all around us in the cathedral of the great outdoors?

The Legacy of St. Francis

I have in mind here the justly famous painting by Giovanni Bellini, *St. Francis in Ecstasy* (1480), which I have contemplated many times in the Frick Collection, in New York City, and which I have chosen as the cover of this book.[8] In this painting, Francis has apparently just emerged from a rustic shed nestled in the bedrock of a cliff. Francis's own book, perhaps the book of scriptural readings for the Mass, is on the lectern behind him. He is surrounded by the fecund

beauties of the Tuscan landscape and its many creatures——including a rabbit, a heron, a donkey, a flock of sheep, and a lovely laurel tree, whose form mimics the shape of Francis's own body——all transcendentally illuminated by the rays of the sun. Francis himself stands in a kind of cruciform position, with his arms extended horizontally in prayer and his hands showing the stigmata (the wounds of Christ) that he had miraculously received, according to traditional testimony. Francis's eyes are evidently open, as he contemplates the sun, basking in its light, and his lips appear to be moving, as if he is singing.

While we cannot read the mind of Bellini at this point, of course, it appears that he might well have wanted to suggest that Francis, who had been stigmatized by the cross of Christ, has just emerged from his cavelike retreat, as from a kind of spiritual womb, an experience that now allows Francis to see the whole creation with new eyes. If that is, as it appears to be, how Francis's stance is to be read at this point, Bellini's assumption would almost certainly also have been that Francis was there singing the saint's celebrated Canticle of Brother Sun—generally known as the Canticle of the Creatures—which addresses the sun at the very beginning.[9] The received story of Francis's life, which would have been well-known to Bellini, came to its conclusion in two great ecstatic moments: Francis receiving the stigmata and, later, Francis, close to death, creating and thereafter singing his Canticle of Brother Sun and singing it often.[10] That is the kind of bifocal standpoint—behind Francis the book of the scriptural readings and the cave of spiritual death and rebirth, and before him the glorious book of nature—that I am presupposing in this narrative.[11] Francis celebrated the cathedral of the great outdoors, and at the same time he, who made every effort to partake of the Mass every day after his conversion, lived by the revelation he found indoors in the cathedral—or the cave—of Christian practices.[12]

This is what I hope to do in this book: to show before your very eyes (*ad oculos*) that a bifocal Christian spirituality like Francis's is not only possible in our day but even compelling, following in the footsteps of Francis. I propose to do this in a way that speaks simultaneously to two audiences: on the one hand, the spiritual seekers of our time, both outside and inside our churches, who are taken both by spirituality and by nature, and, on the other hand, the cadre of theology teachers and pastoral practitioners who are seeking to enter into conversation with those seekers. I suggest that the two groups can meet amicably and even ecstatically at the place where Francis stands, in a Christian spirituality of nature.

My method will be personal, as any spirituality must be, and bifocal, as this particular spirituality must definitely be. This is the legacy of St. Francis,

for me. I want to show my readers that it is not only possible but also possibly enchanting to stand in this one place where the cathedral of the great outdoors and the cathedral of historic Christianity are one world. To the seekers, I will be saying: come walk with me in this enchanted place so that I might show you around. You may be astounded by the spiritual riches you will discover.

To the theology teachers and pastoral practitioners, I will be saying: come along after us and observe us, look over our shoulders, in this enchanted place. See what we are seeing. And then consider whether walking in this place in this way makes sense to you, with a view to your own conversations with the seekers of this world. As you join in this journey, perhaps you will want to revisit your own spirituality along the way. If you do not wish to follow the particular path that I will be exploring, what spirituality of nature will you propose? And how will you communicate that spirituality to the seekers with whom you are in conversation, both outside and inside the church?

The Meanings of "Before Nature"

To prepare the way now for the bifocal Franciscan explorations before us, I want to describe in more detail where I am coming from, both professionally and personally, as well as more specifically what this particular book is and what it is not.

As I remember my life, I have always stood *Before Nature,* engaged with nature, as my title for this book suggests. I have been moved, at various times and places, to contemplate the material-vital world of God's good creation, its integrity, its beauties, its terrors, and its mysteries. I recount many such moments of contemplation in this book, beginning with my discussion in chapter 1, "Blessedly Scything with God." Not only have I regularly and, often, passionately stood before nature in contemplation, but I have also written about what I have seen. Five of my six books, starting with my 1970 volume, *Brother Earth: Nature, God, and Ecology in a Time of Crisis*, have been preoccupied with the theology of nature.[13] This current book brings that theological preoccupation full circle, but it does so by stepping back into my own interiority. Thus, it is *Before Nature* in a second—spiritual—sense as well.

In this book, as I stand before nature, contemplating its integrity, its beauties, its terrors, and its mysteries, including the delights and the frailties of my own body and the particular configurations of my own environmental settings, I am preoccupied not with what I see, as such, but with "the eye of the beholder." I reflect about the fragile faith—as I will call it—of the one who has contemplated the world of nature for so long and with such rapt attention.

I explore this fragile faith *before* it consciously connects with nature. This book, in a word, is self-reflective. It is not primarily an account of the objects of my contemplation and all of the related issues, as were my other works on nature. Rather, this book is a spiritual testament.

As such, this book has a particular angle of vision. It tells my own interior story, a story that has been thoroughly nurtured, for better or for worse, by the classical Christian tradition. Hence my subtitle: *A Christian Spirituality*. Everyone has some kind of a spiritual standpoint, and this happens to be mine. To tell the story of my own interiority, I must tell the story of my own particular faith.

I celebrate that faith in its fullness. My father used to say to me, "When you take hold of the rug, you take hold of the whole rug." Similarly, for me, to take hold of a spirituality of nature is, as a matter of course, to take hold of the whole Christian tradition, the faith and life of the Christian church throughout the ages to the present. In my view, there is no such thing as an independent, self-contained Christian spirituality of nature. Hence, readers of this book will encounter a steady stream of reflection about what may be familiar Christian theological and spiritual themes, including, above all, the focus on the classical Christian prayer to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—notwithstanding the problematic shape of some Trinitarian spiritualities.[14] The core of this book is reflection about what I call—and what I want to commend to the reader—"the Trinity Prayer." In some portions of this book, you will find that the theme of nature is muted. This is not a book on nature in the sense that it is the explicit topic on every page.

Hence, well-recognized theological themes *will* permeate the following narrative. For this reason, readers who have little or no theological background may find a few parts of the trail before us a little steep. I hope such readers will do what a good mountain guide once advised me to do: just put one foot in front of the other, and when we get there, it will have been worth it. My intent in this book, in other words, is not to detour around theological essentials, such as the Trinity, however complex or even obscure they might appear to be at the start, but to explore those parts of the trail as carefully and as clearly as I can, precisely because they are essential to the whole story. I own up to this explicit theological orientation at the start, since popular books on the spirituality of nature often tend to avoid or downplay traditional theological language, for reasons that I can understand but which will not work for me. If I were not so explicitly theological, I would not be addressing one of the major purposes of this book: to show that a bifocal Christian spirituality is possible, one that

arises from a single place but with dual foci, the cathedral of the great outdoors encompassing the cathedral of historic Christianity.

At the same time, it is important for me to tell the story of my own spiritual passion for *nature* from my own spiritual angle of vision, since many in this generation of seekers are asking whether a viable Christian spirituality of nature, informed by the classical theological tradition, is available or even possible. Emphatically, I believe it is.[15] In this respect, this book stands in continuity with most of my other writings, which have been preoccupied with nature. In the following pages, nature is always on my mind and in my heart, even in the midst of discussions where it may not be mentioned. This book is intended to be a Christian *spirituality of nature* as well as a *Christian spirituality* of nature.[16]

This means, furthermore, that I will *not* explore a whole range of other topics, as I would want to do if I were attempting to offer a more complete account of the fragile faith that so inspires me. Thus, I will consider in detail how, for me, God is present (immanent) in nature, but I will only allude to God's more particular involvement in the dynamics of human history. Likewise, I will accent concrete experiences, such as beholding the lilies of the field, but I will bracket any detailed account of what it means for me to speak with an inmate whom I'm visiting in prison. I will also celebrate the human body, which is essentially immersed in the world of nature, but I won't explore at length "the long struggle to be at home in the body, this difficult friendship."[17]

A Spirituality of Place

The world of nature, as I have experienced it spiritually, will not only be my chief concern but will also shape how my narrative unfolds. Throughout my life, the natural settings in which I have found myself have always been players or characters in their own right rather than merely some kind of scenery. All my life I have been preoccupied with the natural world as a lived-in experience. Hence, I can only tell my own spiritual story in terms of such settings.

In recent years, I have found a similar self-reflective focus on natural locations in the works of some concerned with *the spirituality of place*.[18] This theme not only offers a language for narrating my own experience but also provides a necessary corrective for anyone, like myself, who is navigating in the currents of historic Christian spirituality, which all too often have pulled the faithful into the interior life, away from the larger stream of experience in and with the natural world, to the disservice of the spiritual life itself.[19]

This is one reason, I now realize after many years, why I have long been haunted by Henry David Thoreau.[20] Thoreau instinctively felt the valence

of place. For him, walking, in particular, was a sacred discipline.[21] True, Thoreau never understood how walking in a place like Boston can be just as enlightening as walking in the environs of a Walden Pond. Even less was Thoreau able to imagine how revelatory one's walking in a church procession in a city like Boston might be. But the spirituality of walking—of living in a place and exploring a place and in some sense being at home in a place—is the critical point here. Hence, in the following pages, I will invite the reader to come walking with me, to visit different places of my own experience that have been crucial in my own spiritual life over the years.

A Narrative of Affection, Anxiety, and Vocation

This book is dedicated to my children and my grandchildren, out of great and heartfelt affection, of course, but with a deeper purpose, too. Consider my children, Heather and Matthew, first. By my own reckoning, both are spiritual seekers, albeit in different ways. Both are persons of good character who care about the disenfranchised and about the good earth. On the other hand, both have for many years, if not always, distanced themselves from historic Christian practices. In this sense, they represent one of my two target audiences: the seekers. In this book, I will be conversing publicly with my two children in a way that I have *not* done with them privately. For what are probably understandable reasons, I have never sat them down and explained my own spiritual story: what has kept their father so fixed—fixated, they might have thought now and again—on the world of nature and at the same time so earnestly engaged with the practices of the church. Here follows, then, dear children, that very long conversation in my study that you never had to have with me. I hope you will come along with me on this journey, whenever you are ready to do so.

And my grandchildren? Most of them are not old enough, as of this writing, to read a book like this. But I have their futures in mind. I am imagining them picking up this book in years to come, after they have come of age intellectually, and after they may have heard that their grandfather had dedicated his last book to them, along with their parents. Each may wonder, as he or she holds this book in hand, why this grandfather was so spiritually preoccupied with nature. When that day comes for each of them, I fully anticipate that questions about the spirituality of nature will still be alive in their world, probably more acutely so than today. So I do indeed write this book for them, as well as for their parents, and with much affection.

I also write this book for them with some anxiety. As I now am about to tell the story of my own spiritual engagement with nature, I have noticed that some of them who are old enough to be up and about by themselves have already fallen in love with "the great outdoors," particularly as they have experienced that world in the rural locale in southwestern Maine that I will describe in chapter 1. But I am well aware that they soon will be subjected to strong counterforces, if they have not already encountered them, cultural trends that push children closer and closer to what has been called "nature deficit disorder."[22] According to a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, children in this country ages eight to eighteen spend some *seven-and-a-half hours a day* inside, occupied with electronic media, not playing or otherwise occupied outside. Some evidence also shows that the nature deficit disorder that typically coincides with such habits is not good for their physical or mental health. Nor, in my mind, can it be good for their spiritual health. Will my grandchildren be able to resist such trends and therefore find themselves continually fascinated with the cathedral of the great outdoors? I hope so. And I hope that this book will help them to do that, as they continue to grow in wisdom and in stature.

Furthermore, I write for my children and my grandchildren, and indeed for all of my readers, with a profound sense of urgency. In these times, anyone who cares about the good earth and the poor of the earth must be similarly driven, since the global crisis before us all is so severe and the available options for addressing that crisis so limited. Now, perhaps as never before, is the time for resolute action in behalf of the earth and the poor of the earth. We are facing what NASA scientist James Hansen called a "planetary emergency."

Arguably, therefore, my own lifelong spiritual engagement with nature should at this moment be taking me away from my writing out to the streets, where numbers in my generation ended up during the memorable days of the civil rights movement of the 1960s in the United States. The prophetic environmentalist and theologian Bill McKibben has called on people like me to do precisely that (as he has also shown himself willing to do) because the time for the human species to address the issues of climate change and other related issues is so short, if not already past.[23]I may yet end up out in the streets wearing my clerical collar, with the likes of a Bill McKibben, as I have done before. People in my age bracket, who now are a part of what we used to call "the Establishment," *can* do that kind of street work with some effectiveness, once we have resolved to "put our bodies on the line," to invoke another phrase from the sixties.

But the civil rights movement taught me this, too: we must do everything at once. What if a sizable number of the 2.1 billion Christians on this earth could learn to *love nature* the way that the eminent Christian ethicist James Nash called us to do in 1991?[24] That could make a huge difference in global climate change politics, especially if many American Christians were numbered among them, given the fact that the United States is one of the world's leading climate change offenders. So, whatever else I may feel called upon to do in this era of near-apocalyptic uncertainty, I believe that I must also tend to my own interior garden: to continue, and in some measure to complete, what has been a long-standing vocation for me, laboring in the field of the theology of nature, to try to show my readers why and how they are called, as I believe I have been called, to love nature.

Retrospect and Prospect

I offer three last comments now, as we make ready for the first steps of the bifocal explorations before us. First, I know that one is never supposed to say "never," but I am now in my late seventies and this book has the feel of my last. It therefore offers me a kind of closure for more than four decades of writing in this field as well as for just as long of an engagement in random acts of public advocacy in behalf of the earth and the poor of the earth. Hence, I am eager to acknowledge here the names of all those who have helped to make my vocational trajectory possible, including numerous family members, friends, students, teachers, professional colleagues, parishioners, editors, and other coconspirators in many good causes over the years. But I am not going to mention all your names. Such a list would be long indeed. Rather, I must be content here with a generic thank you to all concerned. You know who you are. I am most grateful for your encouragement, your companionship, your insights, and your occasional stubborn insistence on changes in my ways or my thoughts or my wordings. And, of course, I hope that you will read every page of this book, and take it personally, along with everyone else.

Second, I want to address the length of this book. You won't read this volume from beginning to end while you're waiting at the airport for your next flight. The story I want to tell in the terms of my own experience is a long and sometimes challenging narrative. It will take awhile and will require intense effort at points. In some respects, this book is much more like a trek in the mountains than a walk in the park. So I ask you, right from the start, to think about the journey on which we are about to embark in terms not only of Thoreau's penchant for walking but also of Thoreau's onetime commitment to

climb Mount Katahdin, Maine's highest peak. This, for better or for worse, is the only way I know how to tell my own personal story.

Third, and finally, I want to note the format of this book. As I explain in chapter 1, I understand spirituality to be *a religious experience that is intense and transforming*. That is what this book is about. That is its character. This book *is* spirituality. It's a personal exploration of faith. It's a confessional expression of a particular constellation of experiences. It is *not* a scholarly study of spirituality.

On the other hand, readers will encounter occasional endnotes, a practice that might be taken to suggest that what follows is *not* the personal narrative I intend it to be. Many books of spirituality do not have endnotes (imagine finding endnotes, say, in Augustine's *Confessions*). Hence, I want to emphasize at the outset that I intend the scattered endnotes along the way to be read as *extensions* of my personal spiritual narrative, as side trips, which I have added to the itinerary to give readers additional options for reflection. I am thinking here especially of the second group of readers whom I am addressing in this book, those who are currently theology students or practicing pastors or seminary faculty or college religion teachers, many of whom will have a passion for such off-the-trail adventures. But other readers, I anticipate, will be perfectly content to go with the main flow of the narrative and to pass by the endnotes. Either way, I will be grateful for your company.

Notes

1. See "Nones on the Rise," *Pew Forum on Religion and the Public Life*, October 9, 2012, http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/ (consulted February 14, 2013): "A new survey by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted jointly with the PBS television program Religion & Ethics News Weekly, finds that many of the country's 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as 'spiritual' but not 'religious' (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor." For a thorough analysis of such trends, see Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

2. See Peter Berger, "The Religiously Unaffiliated in America" (blog post), March 21, 2012, http://www.the-american-interest.com/berger/2012/03/21/the-religiously-unaffiliated-in-america (consulted January 15, 2013): "The bulk of the 'nones' probably consist of a mix of two categories of unaffiliated believers—in the words of the British sociologist Grace Davie, people who 'believe without belonging.' There are those who have put together an idiosyncratic personal creed, putting together bits and pieces of their own tradition with other components. Robert Wuthnow, the most productive and insightful sociologist of American religion, has called this 'patchwork religion.' This includes the kind of people who will say 'I am Catholic, *but* . . .,' followed by a list of

items where they differ from the teachings of the church. The other category are the children—by now, grandchildren—of the counter-culture. They will most often say, 'I am spiritual, not religious.' The 'spirituality' is typically an expression of what Colin Campbell, another British sociologist, has called 'Easternization'—an invasion of Western civilization by beliefs and practices from Asia. A few of these are organized, for instance by the various Buddhist schools. But most are diffused in an informal manner—such as belief in reincarnation or the spiritual continuity between humans and nature, and practices like yoga or martial arts."

3. The best single scholarly treatment of the multifaceted faith(s) of these seekers is probably the widely read study by Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). While very much aware of the sometimes superficial, "super-market" character of the seeker's quest (as implied by Peter Berger; see the previous note), Wuthnow also identifies a deeper authenticity in the quest of many seekers (3): "A traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places has given way to a new spirituality of seeking—that people have been losing faith in a metaphysic that can make them feel at home in the universe and that they increasingly negotiate among competing notions of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom." And (4): "A spirituality of seeking is tabernacle religion, the faith of pilgrims and sojourners; it clings to the Diaspora and to the prophets and judges, rather than to priests and kings. . . . The one is symbolized by the secure life of the monastery, the cloister, the shtetl, the other by peregination as a spiritual ideal."

4. In my judgment, the popular works of the highly sophisticated and knowledgeable Catholic Elizabeth A. Johnson are exemplary in this respect. She knows how to give voice to the classical Christian narrative in a way that is both substantive *and* responsive to the questions of many seekers. See, for example, her religious bestseller *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology (*New York: Crossroad, 1990). In the arena of pastoral praxis, a variety of "seeker sensitive" congregations have been launched in recent decades, the best known of them perhaps being Willowcreek Community Church, an independent Protestant megachurch in South Barrington, Illinois, near Chicago. Founded in 1975 by the Rev. William Hybels, the church has been averaging a weekly worship attendance of some twenty-four thousand in recent years. Hybels has championed a two-stage approach to reaching out to seekers: first, often dramatic, professionally choreographed, and highly personalized "seeker sensitive" worship services, and second, a carefully organized ministry of small groups geared to instruct and nurture the seekers who are attracted to its worship services. Many other, smaller "seeker sensitive" congregations have also been developed. A good example of the latter is the "Spirit Garage" in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which meets not in a traditional church building but in the "Music Box Theater." It advertises itself as a church yet "not as an organization, institution, or place" but, rather, as a gathering of "people following Jesus." Visitors report that the Spirit Garage is a kind of "funky" place, with "hip music," issue-oriented sermons, and a worshiping congregation of great diversity. Deeply buried in its website is the information that this church maintains ties to the five-million-member mainline denomination the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), insofar as its pastor is ordained in the ELCA, and that its ministry is sponsored financially by Bethlehem Lutheran Church of South Minneapolis (an affluent ELCA congregation).

5. See note 1, above.

6. I trace historic Christianity's sometimes problematic attitudes toward nature in my book *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985).

7. I review these developments in Christian ecological theology and ecojustice ethics in my book *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 6–15.

8. The painting is also sometimes, albeit confusedly, referred to as "St. Francis in the Desert."

9. From Francis of Assisi, the Canticle of Brother Sun: "All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made, / And first my lord Brother Sun, / Who brings the day; and the light you give to us through him. / How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendour! / Of you,

Most High, he bears the likeness." The Canticle here is translated by Eloi Leclerc, *The Canticle of Creatures—Symbols of Union: An Analysis of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), xvii.

10. For more about the meanings implicit in what I call "the Francis event," see my discussion in *The Travail of Nature*, 106–19. For an insightful interpretation of the Canticle of Brother Sun, see the discussion by Leclerc, *The Canticle of Creatures*, especially vii–xi. For a fresh treatment of Francis's life, see Augustine Thompson, *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012). For insight into possible symbolic meanings of the Bellini painting itself (e.g., the city at the horizon possibly representing, for Bellini, the heavenly Jerusalem), see H. W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *History of Art*, 6th ed. (New York: Henry M. Abrams, 2001), 427–28.

11. Whatever else it might mean, the skull on the lectern behind Francis may well have been intended by Bellini to allude to the traditional baptismal theme—here accented by the stigmata reference—of dying with Christ in order to rise again with Christ.

12. Thompson, *Francis of Assisi,* 61, states the matter quite sharply: "The locus of Francis's 'mysticism,' his belief that he could have direct contact with God, was in the Mass, not in nature or even in service to the poor." But that, I think, is to *overstate* the point. The Mass and all that it implies, especially the humiliation of the incarnate Son of God, surely *is* a locus of Francis's mysticism, but Francis's encounter with the world of nature is *also* a locus of his mysticism. Francis's mysticism was bifocal, as the Bellini painting suggests. See also the remarks of LeClerc, *The Canticle of Creatures*, xii, commenting on the vision espoused by that historic poem:

> There can be no question . . . of playing down the properly cosmic, realistic aspect of the text. To do so would be to go counter to everything we know about Francis's attitude to creatures. His love for them was real, deep, and religious. In his eyes, each of them in its own way and by its very being was a manifestation of the power or the beauty or the goodness of the Most High, and the manifestation sometimes caused him to fall into ecstacy. There can be no doubt that Francis experienced the sacred in the cosmos and entered into communion with God through the medium of created things and indeed in the very depth of created things. It is this aspect of his religious experience that the *Canticle of Brother Sun* expresses.Real though it is, however, this aspect of his experience cannot be separated from another: his union with God along the lowly ways established by the incarnation of the Most High Son of God. In fact, all that is original in Francis' religious experience derives from the synthesis he effected between an interior and very personal evangelical mysticism and an ardent cosmic mysticism. Francis unites, in a wonderful way, a life of union with the person of Christ and the profound religious feeling [which] pantheistic religions entertain toward the cosmos. He unites the Sun and the Cross.

This bifocal spirituality (my term) of Francis is strikingly reflected *in Francis's own language*, as LeClerc points out (*The Canticle of the Creatures*, 76). Throughout his career, Francis was preoccupied with a campaign to instill ecclesial respect for the reserved elements of the Mass, for him, the Body and Blood of Christ. He regularly calls the place for that reservation "precious." He uses the same term several times in *The Canticle of Brother Sun* to refer to various creatures, whom he is calling to praise God. As LeClerc comments: "In Francis' writings, the 'precious' quality of things emerges in close relation with a sacred reality. . . . In using the adjective 'precious' in his Canticle and applying it to the moon and the stars, Francis is giving these cosmic elements a religious value and telling us that for him these cosmic elements have power to express the sacred or constitute a language for uttering the sacred."

13. *Brother Earth: Nature, God, and Ecology in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1970); *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985); *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). I recount the story of these publications in my theological autobiography: "Ecology, Justice, Liturgy," in *Theologians in Their Own Words,* ed. Derek R. Nelson, Joshua M. Moritz, and Ted Peters (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 217–32.

14. Later in this book, I will discuss at some length in what sense it is possible to affirm a postpatriarchal understanding of the Trinity, particularly of God the Father.

15. In my book *The Travail of Nature*, I identify two major trends in historic Christian thought about nature, what I call "the spiritual motif" and "the ecological motif." In worldviews shaped by the former, nature tends to be left behind in the quest for God. In worldviews shaped by the latter, nature is always at the heart of things: God is to be found in, with, and under nature. My discussion in this book takes the critical importance of the ecological motif in Christian life and thought for granted. The spirituality I am talking about in this book is down-to-earth; it is ecological. It is a spirituality that has eschewed "the spiritual motif" of rising above nature as I described that motif in *The Travail of Nature.*

16. Works on nature and spirituality abound, many bookshelves of them, written from theological, metaphysical, ecological, literary, historical, phenomenological, interreligious, and many other perspectives. But books that approach this theme *self-consciously from the particular angle of the classical Christian tradition* are relatively rare. Among the best of the latter is Steven Chase's richly rewarding study *Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). This work and my own here might be read as complementary explorations, perhaps as friendly amendments to each other. See, further, Steven Chase's companion volume, *A Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

17. Jane Kenyon, quoted in Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), xiii. Paulsell's book is a good place to begin focused spiritual reflections about the meaning of the human body.

18. For an entrance into this discussion, see the comprehensive study by Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), and the literature to which Bartholomew refers. More generally, see Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). For the increasingly popular "agrarian" understanding of the theology of place, see Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and for my own take on that approach, see my review of Wirzba's book: "Farming for God," *Christian Century* (December 27, 2003), 23–25.

19. In an early writing, the *Soliloquies* (1.2.7), St. Augustine famously stated that he desired to know *only God and the soul*. In later writings, however, Augustine had many good things to say about God and the beauties of the whole creation. In ensuing centuries, during which Augustine's theology became enormously influential, the focus of the early Augustine on God and the soul alone, over against the rest of God's creation, was highly influential. Some, however, above all St. Francis and his followers, like St. Bonaventure, held the inward and the outward spiritual ways together in a mutually reinforcing balance. For them, it was not God and the soul that was the spiritual center, but God and the soul in the midst of the whole creation. For a review of such trends, see Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, chaps. 4–6.

20. Thoreau figured prominently in my 1970 book, *Brother Earth*.

21. Henry David Thoreau, *Walking* (Memphis: Bottom of the Hill Publishing, 2011).

22. Richard Louv, *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005).

23. See Bill McKibben, "Disobedience: Direct Action on Global Warming," *Christian Century* 128, no. 1 (January 11, 2011): 10–11.

24. James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon; in cooperation with the Church's Center for Theology and Public Policy, Washington, DC, 1991).