

Holy Ground: Protestant Ecotheology, Catholic Social Teaching and a New Vision of Creation as the Landed Sacred

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Introduction

Christianity has long been a religion that endows the natural world with sacred meaning. Everyday, 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 cross made out of wood—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 one of us, a mortal, breathing life-form who experiences the joy and suffering of life on earth. And Christianity's primary sacred document, the Bible, is suffused with rich, ecological imagery that stretches from the Cosmic Potter in Genesis who fashions Adam from the dust of the ground to the tree of life in Revelation that yields its fruit to all of 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 this essay 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. (Incidentally, I will use here the female pronoun to name the Spirit; there is good precedence for this usage in the Bible and ancient Christian tradition.¹) I suggest that the Spirit reveals herself in

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¹ As I perform a retrieval of the Spirit's earthen identity in this article, I also hope to recover the Spirit's female identity. As God's indwelling, corporeal presence within the created order, the Spirit is variously identified with feminine and maternal character-

the biblical literatures as a physical, earthly being who labors to sustain humankind and otherkind in solidarity with one another, and that the natural world—the body of God, as it were—is best understood as the primary mode of God’s presence among us today.² But if we say that the earth is the body of the Spirit we encounter daily, and if God’s earthen body in our time continues to undergo deep environmental injury and waste, then does not God in Godself also experience pain and deprivation? Since God and the earth, Spirit and nature, share a common reality, it follows that the loss and degradation of the earth means loss and degradation for God as well. To make this point I develop a case study of the Crum Creek (a local watershed near my home and workplace) as a Spirit-filled (albeit degraded) sacred place because it continues to function as a vital if threatened habitat for a wide variety of native species and their young.

My case is that without a deeply felt *spiritual* connection to the earth as the enfleshment of God’s presence, it will be 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 has been made in contemporary Protestant ecological theologies that stress environmentally responsible ethical action on behalf of the created order. Similarly post-Vatican II papal encyclicals and bishops’ pastorals emphasize the sacramental character of the created order as the basis for environmentally sound stewardship of earth community.

But a residual *anthropocentric* bias in Catholic and Protestant thought—namely, that the end of creation is human flourishing—has

istics in the biblical witness. In the Bible the Spirit is envisioned as God’s helping, nurturing, inspiring, and birthing presence in creation. The mother Spirit Bird in the opening creation song of Genesis, like a giant hen sitting on her cosmic nest egg, hovers over the earth and brings all things into life and fruition. In turn, this same hovering Spirit Bird, as a dove that alights on Jesus as he comes up through the waters of his baptism, appears in all four of the Gospels’ baptismal accounts to signal God’s approval of Jesus’ public work. On the historical and contemporary expression of feminine imagery for the Spirit, see Harvey, Susan Ashbrook. “Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition.” *Saint Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 37 (1993): 111-40. Also regarding feminine language for the Spirit, see Kinkel, Gary Steven. *Our Dear Mother the Spirit: An Investigation of Count Zinzendorf’s Theology and Praxis*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990, and Johnson, Elizabeth A. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York: Crossroad, 1992. 128-31.

² All things are enfleshments of God’s being and reality in this model of the natural world as God’s body. See McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993, and Jantzen, Grace M. *God’s World, God’s Body*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1984.

prevented a full biocentric turn to ascribing holiness or sacred value to the created order. In the earthen theology proposed here, Christianity's "animist" identity is reawakened through the ancient ideas of incarnation and Spirit—the biblical teachings that while God is *beyond* all things, God, moreover, is radically enfleshed *within* all things. Reawakening Christianity's animist identity is a move that is both consistent with, and a step beyond, the emerging moral and sacramental consensus in ecumenical Christian thought. But this step beyond is a necessary step in harnessing the great potential of Christian faith to address the current environmental crisis. Apart from a thorough-going deep green reawakening of Christianity's central teachings, it will be impossible for many persons to experience any longer a spiritually and emotionally charged connection to the land that is our common home and common destiny. And without this connection, I fear that the prospects of saving our planet, and thereby saving ourselves, are not good.³

The Carnal Spirit

While I contend that Christianity's primordial identity is fundamentally nature-centered and body-loving, it is no secret that this thesis has historically been at odds with a residual Platonist tendency within Christian theology to valorize "spirit" or "mind" as superior to "matter" or "body." Many of the church's most gifted and influential early thinkers were enamored with Plato's controlling philosophical metaphors of the body as the "prison house" or the "tomb" of the soul. The fulfillment of human existence, according to Plato, is to release oneself—one's soul—from bondage to involuntary, bodily appetites in order to cultivate a life in harmony with one's spiritual, intellectual nature.⁴ Origen, the third-century Christian Platonist, literally interpreted Jesus' blessing regarding those who "have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:2), and at age twenty had himself castrated. As a virgin for Christ no longer dominated by his sexual and physical drives, Origen, in his mind, became a perfect vessel for the display of the power of Christ over bodily temptations.⁵

In the Christian West, Augustine is arguably most responsible for the hierarchical division between spirit and nature. Augustine maintains

³ See an expansion of this thesis in my *Finding God in the Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, Nature*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005, from which some of the material in this essay is adapted.

⁴ Plato, *Timaeus* 42-49, 89-92.

⁵ Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. 160-89.

that human beings are ruled by carnal desire—*concupiscence*—as a result of Adam’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. Adam’s sin is transferred to his offspring—the human race—through erotic desire that leads to sexual intercourse and the birth of children. In their fleshly bodies, according to Augustine, infants are tainted with “original sin” communicated to them through their biological parents’ sexual intercourse. Physical weakness and sexual desire are signs that the bodily, material world is under God’s judgment. Thus, without the infusion of supernatural grace, all of creation—as depraved and corrupted—is no longer amenable to the influence of the Spirit.⁶ This long tradition of hierarchical and antagonistic division between spirit and matter continues into our own time—an era, often in the name of religion, marked by deep anxiety about and hostility toward human sexuality, the body, and the natural world.

Nevertheless, the biblical descriptions of the Holy Spirit do not square with this oppositional understanding of spirit and flesh. Spirit language and imagery in scriptural sources and much of church history brings together God and the earth, the spiritual and the natural, mind and matter, but this message is often missed. Rather than prioritizing the spiritual over the earthly, the scriptural texts figure the Spirit as a carnal, creaturely *life-form* always already interpenetrated by the material world. Granted, the term “Spirit” does conjure the image of a ghostly, shadowy nonentity in both the popular and high thinking of the Christian West. But the biblical texts stand as a stunning counter-testimony to the conventional mind-set that opposes spirit and flesh. Indeed, the Bible is awash with rich imagery of the Spirit borrowed directly from the natural world. The four traditional elements of natural, embodied life—*earth, air, water, and fire*—are constitutive of the Spirit’s biblical reality as an enfleshed being who ministers to the whole creation God has made for the refreshment and joy of all beings. In the Bible, the Spirit is not a wraithlike entity separated from matter, but a living being, like all other created things, made up of the four cardinal substances that compose the physical universe.⁷

⁶ Augustine, *The Confessions* 7-8. Also see Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969. 158-81, 340-97, and Pagels, Elaine. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*. New York: Random House, 1988. 98-154.

⁷ The hope for a recovery of Christian love and passion for flesh and the body is to go back to the future, to retrieve the Bible’s fecund earth symbols for God as the beginning of a new ecological Christianity. Deep strains within Christian spirituality are marked by indifference (or even hostility) to “this world” in favor of “the world to come.” But not all Christian thinkers have suffered from this debilitating dualism. In the thirteenth century CE, St. Francis of Assisi celebrated the four cardinal elements, along with

Numerous biblical passages attest to the foundational role of the four basic elements regarding the earthen identity of the Spirit.

- (1) As *earth* the Spirit is both the *divine bird*, often a dove, with an olive branch in her mouth, who brings peace and renewal to a broken and divided world (Genesis 8:11; Matthew 3:16; John 1:32), 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 (Galatians 5:15-26). Pictured as a bird on the wing or a flowering tree, the 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 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.
- (2) As *air* the Spirit is both the *vivifying breath* who animates all living things (Genesis 1:2; Psalms 104:29-30) and the *prophetic wind* who brings salvation and new life to those she indwells (Judges 6:34; John 3:6-8; Acts 2:1-4). The nouns for Spirit in the biblical texts—*rûach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek—mean “breath” or “air” or “wind.” Literally, the Spirit is pneumatic, a powerful air-driven reality analogous to a pneumatic drill or pump. The Spirit is God’s all-encompassing, aerial presence in the life-giving atmosphere who envelopes and sustains the whole earth; as such, the Spirit escapes the horizon of human activity and cannot be contained by human constraints. The Spirit is divine wind—the breath of God—who blows where she wills (John 3:8)—driven by her own elemental power and independent from human attempts to control her—refreshing and renewing all broken members of the created order.
- (3) As *living water* the Spirit quickens and refreshes all who drink from her eternal springs (John 3:1-15, 4:14, 7:37-38). As physical and spiritual sustenance, the Spirit is the liquid God who imbues

human beings and animal beings, as members of the same cosmic family parented by a caring creator God. St. Francis’s poetry is suffused with biophilic earth imagery. “Be praised my lord for Brother Wind and for the air and cloudy days/Be praised my lord for Sister Water because she shows great use and humbleness in herself and preciousness and depth/Be praised my lord for Brother Fire through whom you light all nights upon the earth/Be praised my lord because our sister Mother Earth sustains and rules us and raises food to feed us” (St. Francis of Assisi. “Be Praised My Lord with All Your Creatures.” *Earth Prayers: From Around the World*. Eds. Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991. 226-27).

all life-sustaining bodily fluids—blood, mucus, milk, sweat, urine—with her flowing divine presence and power. Moreover, the Water God flows and circulates within the soaking rains, dewy mists, thermal springs, seeping mudholes, ancient headwaters, swampy wetlands, and teeming oceans that constitute the hydrospheric earth we all inhabit. The Spirit as water makes possible the wonderful juiciness and succulence of life as we experience it on a liquid planet sustained by nurturing flow patterns.

- (4) Finally, as *fire* the Spirit is the *bright flame* who alternately judges evildoers and ignites the prophetic mission of the early church (Matthew 3:11-12; Acts 2:1-4). 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. Early followers of Jesus were filled with the Spirit, symbolized by "tongues of fire [that were] distributed and resting on each one" of the members of the primitive church (Acts 2:3). 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.

Like the other natural elements, fire should also be understood as functioning in the service of maintaining healthy earth relations. Fire is necessary for the maintenance of planetary life: as furnace heat, fire makes food preparation possible; as wildfire in forested and rural areas, fire revivifies long-dormant seed cultures necessary for biodiverse ecosystems; and when harnessed in the form of solar power, fire from the sun makes possible safe energy production not dependent on fossil-fuel sources. The burning God is the God who has the power to incinerate and make alive all of the elements of the lifeweb essential for the sustenance of our gifted ecosystem.

God as Spirit is biblically defined according to the tropes of earth, wind, water, and fire. In these scriptural texts the Spirit is figured as a potency in nature who engenders life and healing throughout the biotic order. The earth's bodies of water, communities of plants and animals, and eruptions of fire and wind are not only *symbols* of the Spirit—as important as this nature symbolism is—but share in the Spirit's very *nature* as the Spirit is continually enfleshed and embodied through natural landscapes and biological populations. Neither ghostly nor bodiless, the Spirit reveals herself in the biblical literatures as an earthly life-form who labors to create and sustain humankind and otherkind in solidarity with one another.

To refer to the Spirit as “life-form” is to signal the Spirit’s identity as a living being, a being whose nature is the same as all other participants in the biotic and abiotic environments that make up our planet home. Running rivers, prairie fires, coral reefs, schools of blue whales, equatorial forests—the Spirit both shares the same nature of other life-forms and is the animating force that enlivens all members of the lifeweb. As the breath of life who moves over the face of the deep in Genesis, the circling dove in the Gospels who seals Jesus’ baptism, or the Pentecostal tongues of fire in Acts, the Spirit does not exist apart from natural phenomena as a separate, heavenly reality externally related to the created order. Rather, *all* of nature in its fullness and variety is the realization of the Spirit’s work in the world. The 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 as Spirit is living in the ground, swimming through the oceans, circulating in the atmosphere; God is always afoot and underfoot as the quickening life force who yearns to bring all denizens of this sacred earth into fruition and well-being.

Finding God in the Crum Creek

I turn now to an analysis of the Crum Creek watershed, at the edge of the Swarthmore College campus near my home and work, as a case study to illustrate my overall thesis concerning deep green theology. The Crum Creek winds through a thirty-eight-square-mile area of land on the western edge of suburban Philadelphia. It is a network of streams, wetlands, and aquifers that supplies two hundred thousand households and businesses with drinking water as well as being a discharge site for wastewater effluent and a natural floodway for storm water events. The watershed is a scenic retreat for persons in the Philadelphia area who need a place of refuge from the strains and stresses of urban life. And it is an important habitat for many native plants and animals.

A variety of species of wildlife relies on the Crum Creek watershed for food and raising their young. Scarlet tanagers migrate from Colombia and Bolivia to lay their eggs in the old-growth forests surrounding the creek area. Spotted and red-backed salamanders are two of the twelve or so species of amphibians that live within and along the banks of the creek and its tributaries. Monarch butterflies migrate from Mexico to the open meadows of the watershed area, where they roost to feed on milkweed plants and lay their eggs. Ancient southern red oaks survive in a section of the Crum Woods near the Swarthmore campus in an aboriginal forest relatively undisturbed by white settlement. American

eels migrate downstream through the creek every fall to lay their eggs in the Sargasso Sea near Bermuda; in turn, their offspring then swim upstream to mature in the same creek area where their parents began their own journeys out to sea. And showy, large-flowered trillium wildflowers fade from white to pink each year in the deep, rich woods of the watershed.⁸

The Crum Creek is my favorite site for passive recreation and easy walking meditation. Living in a world awash in parking lots and strip malls, I find it healing and restorative to be able to take refuge in the quiet of the woods. Henry David Thoreau writes about the art of getting lost, the vertiginous pleasure of abandoning oneself to a natural place without the artificial supports of urban maps and street signs. “Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves,” says Thoreau. Today many of us travel with cell phones and global positioning devices so that no one need go missing and become confused about where they are. But in taming wild places and making them the quantifiable objects of our measurement and control, we have done harm to our basic humanity, our basic animal nature. We are animal beings at our core. Our need for sleep, hunger for food, drive for companionship, and desire for sex are telling signs of our carnal natures. To be sure, we are animals that are self-aware and self-conscious, animals whose conscience can burn with shame and guilt, animals who create art, engage in science, and produce grand mythologies that map the cosmos and set forth the roles each of us should play. But we are animals all the same.

To be divorced from our fleshly, bodily natures—not to see and hear the mad rush of a swollen river in the early spring or the smell of moist leaf litter in the autumn in the woods around us—is to be cut off from the vital tapsprings that make us who we are. We live and work in fixed-glass, temperature-controlled buildings sealed off from the natural world; we transport ourselves in fossil-fuel machines that require ever-widening incursions into undisturbed habitats; we eat processed food that has been genetically manipulated, irradiated, and then sealed in airtight packaging in order to preserve its interminable shelf life. We

⁸ I have drawn my knowledge about the Crum Creek watershed from Latham, Roger. “The Crum Woods in Peril: Toward Reversing the Decline of an Irreplaceable Resource for Learning, Research, Recreation and Reflection.” <http://www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/Biology/bio_professors/latham/crumwoods.html>; “Crum Creek Watershed: A Protection Guide.” Chester-Ridley-Crum Watersheds Association pamphlet; and “Crum Creek 1995.” Report by the Advanced Research Biology Students of Conestoga High School, Pennsylvania, under the direction of Norman E. Marriner.

have replaced lives lived in sustainable harmony with the rhythms and vitalities of the natural order with soul-deadening, consumption-intensive lifestyles that leave us emotionally depleted and spiritually empty. We need untamed places to return us to our animal identities, and I am deeply grateful for the role the Crum Woods plays in my own return to the wildness within me.

But in spite of its natural beauty and seeming health, all is not well with the Crum Creek. There are many threats to the biodiversity and well-being of the creek area. Overall development pressures pose the largest perils to the integrity of the watershed. In the upper portion of the creek area, housing construction, shopping centers, office parks, and parking lots have fragmented natural habitats and increased the amount of paved areas, leading to storm water runoff problems. In the lower portion of the creek near Swarthmore College, continued development along the edges of the watershed has created the same sorts of problems. Within Delaware County, the suburban area that includes Swarthmore College just west of Philadelphia, the Crum Woods includes the last remaining old-growth forest in the county, with remaining strands of native trees and deep-woods habitat for threatened and endangered species of plants and animals. This wealth of wildlife habitat—including, as we have seen, a southern red oak forest, spotted salamander breeding ponds, scarlet tanager nesting grounds, and migrating American eel populations, among others—relies on the protected forest interior to survive. The residential and institutional growth trajectory in and around the woods may further shrink the rich heartland of the forest that supports these and other plant and animal populations. By cutting into the woods, these projects make more compact the woodland core and thereby diminishes its strength and vitality. The shrinking of this deep-woods core renders forest-interior plant and animal life more vulnerable to temperature and weather changes and the invasion of exotic species.

The Crum Creek as the Wounded Sacred

Degraded but still robust, wounded but still alive—the Crum Creek watershed is an impaired wildlife area that continues to supply water, food, and other basic elements to the many communities, human and nonhuman, that flourish alongside and within its banks and streams. The Crum Creek suffers regular abuse from suburban storm water runoff, sewage discharges, dams and other stream impediments that create low flow conditions, and the cutting down of perimeter forest that supports interior habitat networks for threatened plants and animals.

But to me the Crum Woods is a sacred place, a place where I am nourished and affirmed in my religious quest, a place where I find God.

Does it make sense to say that the Crum Creek is a *sacred place*?

Today our common discourse has expanded to make almost anything we do and believe in sacred. Special periods spent with families is sacred time. The important responsibilities assumed by law enforcement officers or child care workers is a sacred trust. And almost any place one might venture—from a graveyard to a churchyard, from a memorable site in one's childhood to a battle field or even a football stadium—can be a candidate for a sacred place. But if anything or any place can be sacred, then what is not sacred? If the term is so elastic as to include virtually any activity or place we might imagine, then does the term any longer carry any meaningful significance?

I grant that to honor the Crum watershed as a sacred place appears, at first glance, to continue to expand the use of this term to include locales that might not obviously appear to be sacred sites. The Crum Creek is not a built religious structure like a church or a temple. It is not a time-honored legacy site such as a war memorial or historic battleground. It is not even a widely recognized natural place of extraordinary beauty and grandeur, such as the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone National Park. Nevertheless, the Crum watershed is a living system that supports an astonishing wealth of native wildlife, and insofar as it continues to function as a vital habitat for a variety of species and their young, it is a sacred place. Health and vitality are the highest ideals that make life on Mother Earth possible and worth living. Plant and animal well-being in harmony with natural systems is the supreme value that supports human and nonhuman flourishing on our fragile planet. A place where God especially dwells, a place that is sacred, is a place where nature subsists in harmony with diverse ecosystems. God as Spirit inhabits the biotic support systems on which all life depends, invigorating these systems with divine energy and compassion. The Crum Creek is not a pristine watershed; it will not win any virgin forest or clean water awards. But it is a site for the landed sacred, a place that God inhabits because it is a small, and increasingly rare, patch of earth and river in harmony with itself that supports the well-being of its living inhabitants.

Wherever there are places left on earth where natural ecosystems are in balance with their surroundings, there is God's presence. God is the giver of life, the sustainer of all that is good, the benevolent power in the universe who ensures the health and vitality of all living things. The

Crum Creek watershed—battered and degraded though it may be—continues to function as a balanced and self-sustaining network of life-giving habitat for plant, animal, and human well-being. The life-giving role the Crum Creek performs is divine in the truest sense of the word because it describes precisely the role God performs in and through the earth: to give life, to make all beings come into fruition, to sustain the zest and vigor of creation. In this sense, the Crum Creek and God are one because they are both sources of life and health for earthen beings. To say, then, that the Crum watershed is a sacred place does not debase the meaning of the word “sacred” by designating just any such place as sacred or religious based on personal whim or fancy. Rather, it is to revere and honor this place of God’s indwelling as one of the remaining life-giving habitats on our planet that make our existence, indeed the existence of all of us, possible at all.

The Crum Creek is sacred, indeed, but the Crum Creek survives today as the *wounded sacred*.

Envisioning Spirit and the Crum habitat as one opposes the classical theological idea of God as unchangeable and apathetic in the face of the suffering and turmoil within creation that God birthed into existence. God’s Spirit is not a distant abstraction but a living being who subsists in and through the natural world. Because God as Earth Spirit lives in the ground and circulates in water and wind, God suffers deeply the loss and abuse of our biological heritage through our continued assaults on our planet home. God as Spirit is pained by ongoing eco-squalor; God as Spirit undergoes deprivation and trauma through the stripping away of earth’s bounty. As the earth heats up and melting polar ice fields flood shore communities and indigenous habitats, *God suffers*; as global economic imbalance imperils family stability and intensifies the quest for arable land in native forests, *God suffers*; as coral reefs bleach into decay and whole ecosystems of fish and marine life die off, *God suffers*; and as stream quality and wildlife habitats endure further degradation in the Crum watershed, *God suffers*. When we plunder and lay waste to the earth, the Spirit suffers as God’s presence on a planet that is enduring degradation of natural resources and rapid species extinction. The Spirit is the injured sacred, the enfleshed reality of the divine life who grieves over what may become a lost planet, at least for human habitation. As the Spirit is the suffering God, so also is the body, so to speak, of the Spirit’s worldly presence, the earth itself, the wounded sacred. Together in a common passion and common destiny, the Spirit of God and an earth scarred by human greed body forth the wounded sacred in our time.

In the green Spirit perspective suggested here, God's vulnerability as one of us and damage to the Crum watershed are one and the same reality. Even today, the Crum Woods, a small fragment of aboriginal forest still functioning as a relatively hearty ecosystem on the edge of urban Philadelphia, is one of many surviving networks of life-giving habitat that show forth God's bounty and compassion in the earth. But the Crum Creek also displays the Spirit of God's deep and abiding suffering in our present time as well. As toxins from ruptured sewer lines and storm water leech into the creek, as the edges of the forest are cut down to make way for more suburban sprawl and commercial and institutional growth, God as Spirit experiences the loss and depredation of this delicate watershed in the depths of Godself. God is harmed by what we do. God is injured by the ways in which we despoil the natural systems that have supported life in many bioregions, including the Crum Woods, for hundreds of thousands of years. Spirit in love with the land—God in friendship with this small strip of Pennsylvania greenway—are codetermined, fellow sufferers in a unified effort to bring sustainable well-being to earth community. The Crum Creek is a small but important member of the Spirit's earthen body; as is all of creation, this forest fragment is part of the body of God's material presence. When the Crum Creek suffers, God suffers as well, reminding all of us to travel lightly on the earth as we participate in the evolution of particular ecosystems, including the evolution of this particular watershed.

The Anxiety About Idolatry in John Cobb's Ecotheology

In traditional Christian thought only God is sacred. God alone is supremely absolute and sovereign over the whole created order. All other beings, while valuable as products of God's creative love and bearers of God's image, only have value and worth relative to God. The dominance of this model is entirely understandable given the important theological images in the Bible and Christian liturgy that focus on God as Lord, King, Sovereign, Ruler, Monarch, and Judge. From a monarchical vantage point the biblical message is clear: God is sovereign, just, and good, and all of God's creaturely subjects—plants and trees, human beings and other beings, ocean, land, and sky—have value and goodness only derivatively in relation to the supreme life source of God in Godself.

John B. Cobb Jr., who, along with Joseph A. Sittler, is arguably the father of Christian environmental theology, has consistently rejected this feudal view of God and the world. His 1972 book *Is it Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, written in the wake of first-wave environmental

awareness during the social justice movements of the 1960s, is a searching indictment, on the one hand, of how Christian kingly theology has paved the way for ecological destruction and, on the other, a visionary proposal for an earth-friendly theological agenda.⁹ This path-breaking book was followed, along with other works written by Cobb, by *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, coauthored with Herman E. Daly, which further refines Cobb's ecological vision in dialogue with process theology, natural science, and holistic economics.¹⁰ Cobb's process theology is an exercise in panentheism: God and the world are internally related realities brought together in a dynamic process of mutual transformation.¹¹ Cobb's interdependent model of the God-world relationship is the grounds of his criticism of historic Christianity's myopic focus on the salvation of human beings to the exclusion of concern for the well-being of nonhuman plant and animal communities. This anthropocentric bias has blinded Christianity to the degradation of the biosphere and the suffering of individual creatures; a new vision of Christianity in harmony with nature is the demand of our time. Cobb's move, then, to a thoroughgoing green Christianity predicated on ascribing sacred value to earth community would seem to be the natural trajectory of his thought. And in certain important respects, Cobb does share basic assumptions with this orientation. All beings, including human beings, are radically and mutually interdependent on natural systems for their well-being: for human beings to destroy wantonly plant and animal life is to threaten and diminish the life quality of all of us, human and nonhuman alike.

But in spite of these core areas of agreement, Cobb also carefully distinguishes his project from that of the religious ecology suggested here. In particular, Cobb, while investing nature with spiritual power and sacramental meaning, disagrees with the tendency in nature-based religion to honor the natural world as sacred *in itself*. While God is in the world and benevolent toward creation, God alone is sacred. It is a dangerous misnomer, even idolatrous, to confuse the Creator and the creation and to venerate the earth as sacred along with God. In a word, God alone is holy. Cobb writes:

⁹ Cobb Jr., John B. *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*. Berkeley: Bruce, 1972.

¹⁰ Cobb Jr., John B. and Herman E. Daly. *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

¹¹ Among his other writings that bring together process philosophy, especially the work of Alfred North Whitehead, and Christian theology, see Cobb's *A Christian Natural Theology Based on the Thought of Alfred North Whitehead*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965.

Nevertheless, [the sacredness of all creatures] language is, from a historic Protestant perspective, dangerously misleading. Speaking rigorously, the line between the sacred and the profane is better drawn between God and creatures. To place any creatures on the sacred side of the line is to be in danger of idolatry. For many Protestants, including process theologians, the right way to speak is incarnational, immanent, or sacramental. God is present in the world—in every creature. But no creature is divine. Every creature has intrinsic value, but to call it sacred is in danger of attributing to it absolute value. That is wrong.¹²

Cobb's case against sacred land theology is twofold. His first objection is theological: such theology wrongly blurs the line of distinction needed to separate beings of relative value from the divine being itself, the bearer of absolute value. The specter of idolatry haunts Cobb's writings about the environment. Unless the borderland that divides Creator and creation is carefully policed, there is the danger that the value of a sacralized earth will be purchased at the price of denying the transcendence of God. Cobb is not simply speaking about the generic Protestant concern with the threat of idolatry outside of process thought; rather, he makes clear in the above quote and elsewhere that process theology shares with its Protestant conversation-partners the anxiety about idolatry in omnisacred earth theologies. Idolatry for Cobb is the confusion of realms of reality that need to be kept apart; thus his theology operates within a binary, either-or logical field: one worships either God or nature but not both. Since Christianity, in Cobb's perspective, is not an animist religion that invests the natural world with sacred, absolute value, one should worship God alone as sacred. While nature *is* charged with God's presence, according to Cobb, it does not follow that nature *itself* is a divine reality alongside or on a par with God and thereby an object worthy of our devotion and worship. To call the created order sacred, therefore, is dangerous and idolatrous: it is to run the risk of deifying and revering the earth as equal in worth and value to God. To do this is to displace God's unique role as humankind's proper object of worship and center of absolute, transcendent value.

Cobb's second objection to deep green Christianity is practical: unless one can refer to a being of absolute value, judgments of relative value are impossible to make. If all beings—everything from megafauna such

¹² Cobb Jr., John B. "Protestant Theology and Deep Ecology." *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*. Eds. David Landhis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001: 223. Other environmental theologians make a similar point. James A. Nash says that while "only the Creator is worthy of worship, all God's creatures are worthy of moral consideration," in *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1991: 96.

as human beings and blue whales to microflora such as mold spores and green algae—are sacred, if everything is equal in value and worth, then on what basis can decisions be made about what should be saved and protected and what can be used and destroyed? Without some hierarchical system that grades the relative value of different life-forms, there is no coherent foundation on which to base preservation of species, resource allocations, food production, biomedical research, and so forth. Cobb writes that one “cannot give up the affirmation of gradations of value. All creatures have intrinsic value, but some have greater intrinsic value than others. That is to say, the inner life of some creatures is more complex, deeper, and richer than that of others.”¹³ Or, as he says at another point, “We believe there is more intrinsic value in a human being than in a mosquito or a virus.”¹⁴ For Cobb, God alone is sacred and the highest expression of absolute value; after God, humans, as beings of complex rationality and rich experience, are next in value in this ordering hierarchy; after humans, other communities of animals and plants are graded according to the depths of their cognitive functions and range of feelings and abilities. Without this sort of pecking order, moral decision making is impossible. For Cobb, extreme green spirituality is well-meaning but wrongheaded. By affirming the sacredness of all creation, land-based theology plunges us into a night in which all things are black and there is no way to distinguish between which use patterns are healthy and sustainable and which are not.¹⁵

¹³ Cobb, “Protestant Theology and Deep Ecology,” 224.

¹⁴ Cobb and Daly, *For the Common Good*, 384.

¹⁵ Most religious environmental authors agree with Cobb that deep green Christianity goes too far in erasing the line of distinction they aver separates humankind from otherkind. For such thinkers it is inconceivable, in terms of both value and ethics, to imagine a world in which human beings are not both fundamentally different from and in some basic sense superior to other life-forms. In an otherwise insightful plea for Christian ecotheology, Steven Bouma-Prediger argues that “insofar as [deep ecology] proponents claim that all organisms have equal value and worth, it is unclear how to adjudicate competing interests or goods. . . . How can one consistently put into practice such a position? . . . [In] acting we presuppose a [human-centered] scale or hierarchy of values. Better to be honest about what that axiological scale is than to pretend that all organisms are of equal value” (*For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001. 132). My suggestion is otherwise: that we act honestly, indeed, by weaning ourselves away from this traditional humanist value scale. We are all equal—all living beings and other entities in the biosphere—and we all depend upon one another for meeting our vital needs in the food web. Decisions about resource allocations should focus on how best to preserve the integrity of this web through sustainable predation patterns without appealing to a value hierarchy with human needs at the top of the hierarchy. Our needs do not trump the needs of other communities of beings. Or, to put it another way, all of our needs come first because we all depend upon each other for our daily survival. When we put

The Polemic Against Ecocentrism in Catholic Social Teaching

Pope John Paul II and a variety of national conferences of bishops 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 in celebration of the World Day of Peace, John Paul II issued "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility";¹⁶ a year later the United States bishops promulgated "Renewing the Earth" as a response to the crisis.¹⁷ These statements and others emphasize the goodness of all 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. Akin to the monarchical model of God noted earlier, Catholic teaching maintains that while God is ultimately sovereign overall, human beings, as God's unique image-bearers, are mandated to care for the integrity of the natural world. This divine ordering of creation was destroyed, however, by human sin, and creation has suffered as a result of human beings' continued decisions to not live in harmony with the Creator's plan. John Paul and the bishops, therefore, regard the environmental crisis at its central core as a moral crisis. The degradation of earth community—the statements' highlight global warming, urban poverty, industrial waste, and the unchecked use of toxic chemicals—is a direct result of the greed and arrogance that plagues the human heart. Violation of basic respect for life—willful ignorance of the integrity of creation—has driven humankind to the precipice of self-destruction.

Similar to Cobb's designation of human beings as bearers of greater value than other beings, Catholic social thought emphasizes the prior-

our desires first, what we forget is that what we truly need is the preservation of a series of interdependent, healthy green belts across the planet for our, and our biological neighbors', present and future sustenance. Environmental ethical decisions should not be made with primary reference to human needs, but in consideration of the health of entire ecosystems and their residential populations of plants and animals. Biocentric rather than anthropocentric criteria, ironically and wonderfully, ensure the good life for all of us. A robust and healthy food web is the primary value that should guide resource allocation decisions; this value, not Cobb's and Bouma-Prediger's benign humanism, is the core value upon which human health, and the health of all other beings, is best secured.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II. "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation." *Vatican Web site*. <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace_en.html>.

¹⁷ U.S. Catholic Bishops. "Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching." United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Web site. <<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/bishopsstatement.htm>>.

ity of human welfare as the bedrock norm for maintaining the well-being of creation. Analogous to Cobb's quasi-anthropocentric assignment of maximal value to human beings as the basis for discriminating decisions about resource allocation and the like, the pope and bishops contend 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 seems to be that once the needs of the human community are secured then members of this community will be empowered to reach out in justice and compassion to the wider biotic community. In his 1990 World Peace address, John Paul makes 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."¹⁸ Quoting this comment, the 1991 U.S. bishops' statement explicitly endorses this sentiment. And again, at the same World Day of Peace occasion, but now in 1999, John Paul makes a similar point: "Placing human well-being 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."¹⁹ It is understandable why the Pope and bishops place human dignity at the center of environmental well-being. On apparent biblical grounds and in light of the sorry, environmentally degraded states of most contemporary human populations, especially in the global South, it is natural to posit the restoration of human dignity in family, work and society as the keystone value necessary for the building of a morally just social and ecological order. The hope is that once the center is firmly fixed—once human dignity is secured as the center of Christian ethics—it will follow that consistent concern for the welfare of the natural world will naturally flow outwards from this central place. Making human flourishing the center of environmental concern will have a green halo effect on other beings.

Also analogous to Cobb's fear that radical spiritual ecology will degenerate into idolatry, 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 all distinctions between humankind and otherkind by way of a radical earth-centered ethic that posits all created beings as bearers of inherent and

¹⁸ Pope John Paul II. "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation."

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II. "Respect for Human Rights: The Secret of True Peace." Quoted in Hart, John. *What Are They Saying About Environmental Theology?* New York: Paulist, 2004: 14.

equal value and worth. The Vatican's silencing of Matthew Fox in 1988, and his eventual expulsion from the Dominican Order, is a sign of this anxiety. This concern with thoroughgoing creation spirituality is given full expression in the bishop's 1991 pastoral statement:

Our Catholic faith continues to affirm the goodness of the natural world. The sacramental life of the Church depends on created goods: water, oil, bread, and wine. Likewise, the Western mystical tradition has taught Christians how to find God's dwelling in created things and laboring and loving through them.

Nonetheless, Christian theology also affirms the limits of all God's creatures. God, the Source of all that is, is actively present in all creation, but God also surpasses all created things

An ordered love for creation, therefore, is ecological without being ecocentric. We can and must care for the earth without mistaking it for the ultimate object of our devotion.²⁰

This statement clarifies the difference between ecological theology, which preserves the hierarchical order that separates Creator and creation, and ecocentric theology, which putatively undermines this order and thereby runs the risk of overly venerating nature as an object of worship. Much of mainstream Protestant and Catholic theology operates with considerable anxiety about Christianity, in dialogue with non-religious environmentalism, disintegrating into a Neopagan reverence for earthen well-being that blurs the ontological distinctions between God, humankind, and otherkind, the great chain of being, that it deems necessary for a proper and ordered relationship with creation. As we saw with Cobb, the charge against deep green theology is idolatry, that is, bestowing undue reverence on the creation which diminishes God's status as the supreme bearer of absolute value. But how well grounded is this charge?

Conclusion

In my judgment, the principal problem with mainstream Protestant and Catholic thinking about nature is the unique status assigned to human beings within the created order. This residual anthropocentrism blinds the majority perspective from any sustained attention to the privileged role of the predator-prey relationship as understood within contemporary conservation biology. From the angle of vision provided by conservation science, value is inherent in the vitality of the

²⁰ U.S. Catholic Bishops, "Renewing the Earth."

food web, the natural life process of bio-communal eating and being eaten; it is not a characteristic of this or that life-form over and against other life-forms.²¹ In conversation with conservation biology from a religious perspective, my case is that the proper task of Christian eco-theology is to ensure the health and dynamism of the life cycle rather than protect the interests of value-added beings (i.e., human beings) either because their inner life is supposedly more complex than other beings (*pace* Cobb) or because they appear to have pride of place within the biblical creation story (*pace* Catholic social thought).

This shift in perspective has *practical* implications for natural resource management as well. Earthen Spirit theology is uniquely suited to make highly nuanced practical judgments about ecological use and value, but it does so in biocentric rather than anthropocentric terms. Such judgments are made not in relation to the putative supreme value of human beings but on the basis of maintaining healthy predator-prey relationships within the food web. All energy in the natural world is obtained and transmitted through a series of predatory and mutualistic relationships among different and interconnected living things. Aldo Leopold, the early twentieth century Wisconsin conservationist and forest advocate, alternately refers to this flow of energy according to highly organized systems of biotic and abiotic relationships as the food chain, the energy cycle, or the land pyramid:

Plants absorb energy from the sun. This energy flows through a circuit called the biota, which may be represented by a pyramid consisting of layers. The bottom layer is the soil. A plant layer rests on the soil, an insect layer on the plants, a bird and rodent layer on the insects, and so on up through various animal groups to the apex layer, which consists of the larger carnivores.

The lines of dependency for food and other services are called food chains. Thus soil-oak-deer-Indian is a chain that has now been largely converted to soil-corn-cow-farmer. Each species, including ourselves, is a link in many chains. The deer eats a hundred plants other than oak, and the cow a hundred plants other than corn. Both, then, are links in a hundred chains. The pyramid is a tangle of chains so complex as to seem disorderly, yet the stability of the system proves it to be a highly organized structure. Its functioning depends on the co-operation and competition of its diverse parts.²²

Green theology can learn a lot from conservation biology about the food web. Scientifically speaking, in the natural order, everyone is food

²¹ On this point see Primack, Richard R. *A Primer of Conservation Biology*. 2d ed. Sunderland, Mass.: Sinauer Associates, 2000: 8-62.

²² Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Ballantine, 1970: 252-53.

for everyone else. Human beings, for example, both eat and then are eaten by fungi, bacteria, and often insects and other anthropods as well. Everyone is predator and prey in relation to other living things. All of us, from the smallest bug to the largest carnivore, rely on this complicated flow mechanism for our daily bread. Moreover, all beings play an equal and vital role in maintaining the integrity of the energy cycle; no one member of this integrated plant and animal community is any more important in sustaining the cycle than any other member. Theologically speaking, then, judgments about value should be based on keeping open the living channels of energy that make life possible. This is the point Leopold makes in his general maxim for a land ethic: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”²³ Value accrues to the health and vitality of the food web; it is not a property of particular organisms—in other words, more complex creatures do not get more intrinsic value than less complex creatures.

Cobb is very articulate about the role biotic interdependence plays in the life cycle even as the Pope and bishops make clear that both biological and sacramental well-being depend on the health and goodness of creation.²⁴ But their mutual fears about ascribing sacredness to nature, and their human-centered value-systems, blunt a full turn toward the biocentric theology adumbrated here. Cobb’s emphasis on subjective experience as the criterion for making comparative value judgments—and the Pope’s placement of human well-being at the center of Christian ethics—undercuts the power of the food-web model to make clear that *real* value inheres in the integrity and well-being of the web itself. In sum, good eating, rather than human needs *per se*, is the proper center of value. Likewise, human dignity and well-being, 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 the needs of individual human participants. As humans, according to this “web first” model of reality, we should simply see ourselves as equal citizens of the biotic order—we do not possess more value than other beings. Some critics regard this subordination of human concerns to the wel-

²³ Ibid. 262.

²⁴ See, for example, Cobb and Daly. *For the Common Good*. 382-406, and compare U.S. Catholic Bishops. “Renewing the Earth.”

fare of the whole as a type of misanthropic thinking, even a kind of ecofascism in which human interests are now located in (or subordinated to) the wider orbit of ecosystemic interests. But the point is not that human happiness is unimportant in deep green theology but rather that, without the well-being of the whole as the paramount concern, attention to human needs and interests is not possible. To put the point bluntly, 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.

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 that dare not speak its name? From the perspective of classical theology, I understand the nature of the criticisms of deep green theology as potentially idolatrous. But I have sought to show here that 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, that 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, therefore, inheres in the God-given capacity of native plants and animals to stock and replenish the food web on which we all depend; value inheres in the dynamism and elasticity of the energy cycle that makes our lives and the lives of other created beings endlessly rich and potent with new possibilities. 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. God is not a dispassionate and distant potentate who exercises dominion over the universe from some far-removed place. Rather, in and through this planet that is our common home, God is earnestly working with us to heal the earth, but, as we have seen, God also suffers deeply from the agony of this unlifted burden. For this reason I have said that the *earthen* Spirit who infuses all things with her benevolent presence is also the *wounded* Spirit who implores us, in groans too deep for words, to practice heartfelt sustainable living in harmony with the natural world around 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 reenvision 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. For me it is not idolatry to enjoy the Crum Creek, degraded though it may be, as a sacred place that plays a crucial role in maintaining the health and well-being of humankind and otherkind in eastern Pennsylvania. God as Spirit is the gift of life to all creation, and where life is birthed and cared for, there God is present, and there God is to be celebrated. God is holy, and by extension all that God has made participates in that holiness. Thus, when we labor to protect and nurture the good creation God has made, 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.

Earthen theology envisions God as present in all things and the source of our attempt to develop caring relationships with other life-forms. Discovering the natural world as holy ground has the potential to vivify our primordial sense of belonging to the lifeweb that our kind and otherkind needs for daily sustenance and future well-being. This perspective signals a biophilic revaluation *and* continuation of characteristic Christian themes. Christians speak of the embodiment of God in Jesus two thousand 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 Spirit and earth and develop green lifestyles in response to this kinship.