Fragments Of The Spirit: Nature, Violence, And The Renewal Of Creation

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Introduction

Many people now sense that we live in the “age of the Spirit,” a time in which a fragile connection with the earth and one another is being felt in friendship with a power anterior to ourselves. The medieval mystic Joachim of Fiore prophesied that humankind has lived through the periods of the Father and the Son and has now entered the age of the Spirit. Karl Barth remarked at the end of his life that the Holy Spirit is the proper focus for a theology that is right for the present situation. And practitioners of nature-based religion, from native peoples to modern neopagans, claim that a reverence for the Spirit in all life-forms, from people and animals to trees and watersheds, is the most promising response to the threat of global ecological collapse at the end of the twentieth century.

This book interrogates the nature of the Spirit in relation to recent work in theology, philosophy, critical theory, and environmental studies. My orienting thesis is that the Spirit is the power of life-giving breath \( (rūāh) \) within the cosmos who continually works to transform and renew all forms of life—both human and nonhuman. The Nicene Creed in 325 C.E. named the Spirit as “the Lord, the Giver of Life”; the purpose of this book is to contemporize this ancient appellation by reenvisioning the Holy Spirit as God’s invigorating presence within the society of all living beings. This life-centered model of the Spirit expands the understanding of the Spirit beyond its \textit{intratrinitarian} role (traditionally expressed as the bond of unity between the Father and the Son) to include the Spirit’s \textit{cosmic} role as the power of healing and renewal within all creation. To facilitate this exposition, I seek to establish a conversation about the Spirit among a group of contemporary religious thinkers (Søren Kierkegaard, Paul Ricoeur, Schubert Ogden, René Girard, Jürgen Moltmann,
Ronald Thiemann, Richard Swinburne) and a number of representative postmodern theorists (Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Levinas, Richard Rorty). The book is divided into seven chapters, with each chapter taking up a theme—postmodernism, metaphysics, truth, violence, nature, and evil—that is central to the contemporary discussion.

ECOLOGICAL PNEUMATOLOGY

My methodological approach is rhetorical rather than philosophical. No attempt to prove the reality of the Spirit is offered here; instead the focus is on recovering and constructing imaginative discourses about the Spirit that are transformative for earth-identified communities who have risked following the Spirit’s inner promptings. In labeling my approach “rhetorical” I seek to examine the problem of the Spirit in a manner that is self-reflexively aware of my own commitments and passions. I will not defend a model of the Spirit through appeals to unbiased and value-free modes of argumentation; instead, I will offer a very particular and concrete theology of the Spirit that uses imaginative-symbolic discourses as well as argumentative-propositional analyses.

My position is that the Spirit is best understood not as a metaphysical entity but as a healing life-force that engenders human flourishing as well as the welfare of the planet. I label this approach “ecological pneumatology” in order to distinguish it from metaphysically based notions of the Spirit characteristic of normative Western thought. I want this distinction to relocate understandings of the Spirit outside the philosophical question of being and squarely within a nature-based desire for the integrity and health of all life-forms—human and nonhuman. This model understands the Spirit not as divine intellect or the principle of consciousness but as a healing and subversive life-form—as water, light, dove, mother, fire, breath, and wind—on the basis of different biblical and literary figurations of the Spirit in nature. Philosophers of consciousness (for example, G. W. F. Hegel) have bequeathed to contemporary theology a metaphysically burdened idea of the Spirit that has little purchase on the role of the Spirit in creation as the power of unity between all natural kinds. The wager of this book is that a rhetorical understanding of the Spirit (beyond the categories of being) can provide resources for confronting the cultural and environmental violence that marks our time.

My basic source for a life-centered portrait of the Spirit is the Bible. I use
the scriptures to craft a postmetaphysical model of the Spirit in the struggle for social justice and ecological renewal. I note, however, that since the Bible is conflicted about its depictions of the divine life—God is alternately portrayed as healing and life-giving, on the one hand, and as capricious and judgmental, on the other—a biblically informed pneumatology must guard against an overly positive and one-sided view of the Spirit's ministry of renewal and reconciliation. Throughout the Gospels, for example, the Spirit is figured as empowering Jesus' followers to live in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. But this is not the whole story when it comes to the Spirit in the Bible. In Acts, for example, the Spirit is portrayed in a different light as a terrifying judge who condemns to death two renegade disciples, Ananias and Sapphira, for their lying and disobedience. A well-rounded understanding of the Spirit for our time must account for the Spirit's Janus-faced role as both healing and exacerbating the plight of victims within the stories of the Bible. Unfortunately, however, the virtual absence of discussion about this double-edged portrait of the Holy Spirit in the current literature is symptomatic, I fear, of a studied ignorance concerning the "dark side" of the divine life within contemporary theology.

The idea of the Spirit has existed in the borderlands of the academy since Hegel's masterful but flawed attempts to subsume all philosophical inquiry under this rubric. Recent studies of the nature of Spirit (or spirit) have reawakened Hegel's concern, but both conventional usage of and residual philosophical prejudice against spirit-language have prevented an overturning of the traditional biases. The idea of the Spirit has existed in the borderlands of the academy since Hegel's masterful but flawed attempts to subsume all philosophical inquiry under this rubric. Recent studies of the nature of Spirit (or spirit) have reawakened Hegel's concern, but both conventional usage of and residual philosophical prejudice against spirit-language have prevented an overturning of the traditional biases.  

1. The exceptions to this trend are the work of feminist biblical and theological scholarship, and post-Holocaust Jewish thought. See, for example, Phyllis Trible, Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); and Arthur Cohen, The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust (New York: Crossroad, 1988). In both cases, these analysts have critiqued the biblical God of terror and abandonment as a deity whose credibility must be radically questioned in a violent and unfeeling universe. This suspicion toward the God of the Bible has had little impact on contemporary Christian theology, however. My hunch is that the theological silence on this point is an index to the uneasy conscience many Christian thinkers feel over the embarrassing malevolence characteristic of the divine life within the Bible.

concept of ‘spirit’ has for the most part been fraught with difficulties, conveying something vapid and dualistic, implying a separation of and a hierarchy between the mental and the physical, the soul and the body, the human and the natural, the male and the female, the holy and the profane.” Discourse about spirit remains saddled with ethereal and pejorative connotations, conjuring images of ghosts, phantoms, and other incorporeal forces; of vaporous clouds and gaseous substances; of whatever is airy, immaterial, invisible, non-substantial, bloodless, bodiless, passionless, and unearthly.

A nature-based pneumatology challenges these conventional assumptions by figuring the Spirit, in the economies of confronting violence and healing the earth, as a living embodied being who works for healthy communities within our shared planet home. An ecological pneumatology that is right for the current crisis will recapture the disorienting freedom of the Spirit as a wild and insurgent natural force in the healing of human persons’ violence toward nature and one another. As the divine wind in Genesis, the dove in the Gospels, or the tongues of flame in Acts, the Spirit reveals herself in the biblical literatures as a *life-form* who labors to create, sustain, and renew humans and otherkind in solidarity with one another. An earth-based understanding of the Spirit will not domesticate the Spirit by locating her activity simply alongside nature; rather, nature itself in all its variety and diversity will be construed as the primary mode of being for the Spirit’s work in the world. In this framework, the earth’s waters and winds and birds and fires will be regarded not merely as *symbols* of the Spirit, but rather as sharing in her very *being* as the Spirit is enfleshed and embodied through natural organisms and processes.

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4. A note on some issues of style. I have capitalized “Spirit” throughout in order to distinguish the divine personality (Holy Spirit or Spirit of the Lord) from other similar spirit-term significations (spirit of the times, public spirit, and so forth). I also use the female pronoun for the Spirit in order rhetorically to realize aspects of the transgressive freedom the Spirit promises, including the freedom to complicate and confuse her/his/its gender. This complication is not original to me; the term for Spirit in Hebrew is feminine (*ruah*), neuter in Greek (*pneuma*), and
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Part of the burden of this book will be to demonstrate that the Spirit is the power of revolutionary transgression. I believe that the Spirit forges unity among enemies and opposites by eradicating the dysfunctional differences that define personal and communal identity. Like a purgative fire, the Spirit empowers her followers to disrupt many of the classification systems and secure structures that have ensured stable social identity since time immemorial. Most societies fear a loss of hierarchy and distinctions; they live by separations and divisions and fear intermixing of opposites at all costs. Stable societies fear change and often persecute the "dangerous" person or groups "responsible" for disrupting the normal order and rendering indeterminate and undefinable the structures that have been culturally sacrosanct since illo tempore. "Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others." 5

Some persons, however, feel prompted by the Spirit to violate and crisscross the time-honored limits that unjustly separate and define many social groups even though such transgressions unleash the nightmare of non-differentiation among societies that rely on guaranteed boundaries for their internal cohesion. In this vein, René Girard maintains that it is not the preservation of cultural differences and classifications but their eradication that leads to social chaos. Fundamental challenges to the cultural order dissolve the critical distinctions that societies rely on for organizing their social space. 6 Girard argues that any change in the hierarchical systems of difference between, for example, the pure and the impure, or the normal and the abnormal, upsets social equilibrium and inevitably results in violent attempts to reinscribe the differences and restore order. Many who follow the Spirit, however, are intentional about challenging the social order's false and debilitating systems of difference—even at great cost to themselves. For these risk-takers, to follow the Spirit's promptings is to enact category-confusing values and

masculine in Latin (spiritus) and its derivative Romance languages. On the history of woman-identified language for the Spirit, see Gary Steven Kinkel, Our Dear Mother the Spirit: An Investigation of Count Zinzendorf's Theology and Praxis (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990); and Johnson, She Who Is, 128-31. Finally, I refer to divine, human, and nonhuman realities simultaneously as "life-forms" or "natural beings" in order to signal the value of construing all entities as interdependent members of a common biotic community.


life-styles that challenge and undermine the dominant order. To follow the Spirit’s revolutionary promptings is to risk living a liminal existence vulnerable to attack by mainstream members of society who bitterly resist the mixing of opposites and the crossing of cultural boundaries.

From the perspective of ecological pneumatology, persons who are bearers of the Spirit’s nature-based desire for the integrity of all biotic populations blur the human/nonhuman distinction and thereby engender what Girard calls a “muddy mass” or Kristeva a “transitional swarming” that undermines the taxonomic hierarchies of anthropocentric thought and practice.7 Responding to the subversive earth-love of the Spirit, prophets of biocentrism challenge our regnant sense of biological order in the name of biotic equality: all natural entities possess equal value and worth and should be allowed to exercise their full potential with minimal human interference. Followers of the Spirit challenge the received system of distinctions that classify some life-forms as valuable, pure, and sacred and others as worthless, unclean, and profane. Inevitably, however, persons who question the normative pattern are labeled dangerous outsiders and threats to social, even cosmic, order. They are vulnerable to the charge of sowing confusion and disorder by dismantling the common assumptions and forms of social organization that support and maintain human dominance over other living things. But I argue here that the Spirit’s distinctive work is to do just that: namely, blur customary boundaries, challenge life-denying taxonomies, promote unity among all species, and thereby set free new patterns of reciprocity and cobelonging in spite of the danger to the web of beliefs and institutions that have bound human societies together for generations.

In historic Christian thought the work of the Holy Spirit has always been understood in terms of communion, mutuality, and the overcoming of divisions. The early Latin fathers conceived of the Spirit in the bosom of the Trinity as the divine power that unites the Father and the Son in a bond of mutual love. Basil of Caesarea wrote that the Holy Spirit is the agent of inseparable union within the Trinity. The Spirit labors alongside the Creator and the Redeemer as the Perfector who strengthens and completes the divine work of salvation in the world.8 Similarly, Augustine analyzed the role of the Spirit in terms of the *vinculum caritatis* or the *vinculum Trinitatis*, the communion

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8. Basil of Caesarea *De Spiritu Sancto* bk. 16.
that binds the other two members of the Godhead together in dynamic
unity. The Spirit enables the mutual indwelling of each divine person in the
other. Moreover, as the bond of peace and love universal, the Spirit is the
power of relation not only between the other members of the Trinity but also
between God and the whole creation.

Later medieval iconographers make a similar point but in a pictorial
medium. The doctrine of the Spirit as the *vinculum caritatis* is graphically set
forth in the trinitarian miniatures of the medieval *Rothschild Canticles*, in
which the Spirit is pictured as a giant encircling “dove” whose wings enfold
the Father and Son, and whose large talons and tail provide points of intersec­
tion for all three figures. In the *Canticles* the Spirit is represented less like the
domesticated birds or pigeons of traditional church art than like the wild rap­
tors of the mountain wildernesses. The Spirit-Bird in the *Canticles* spins and
twirls the other two members of the Godhead into amorous and novel com­
binations and permutations. As the *Canticles* progress, each life-form within
the Trinity loses its separate identity in a blur of erotic passion and movement
and color. As the Trinity twists and turns into surprising recombinations, the
human Father and Son smile and twirl and dance around the aviary Spirit,
symbolizing the union of each figure in the sacred bird—as well as the union
of all life-forms in a common biotic order.°

According to the patristic authors and later medieval art, the Spirit ensures
the interrelationship of each divine person in perichoretic harmony." Likewise
in the economies of creation and salvation, the Spirit is regarded as “the
Lord, the Giver of Life” (so the Creed), who as wind or dove or *charism* is the
power of innovation and fecundity in creation. The Spirit’s goal is to trans­
form and renew all life-forms by healing pain and division within communi­
ties that have broken apart. Eternally giving of herself, the Spirit is the
life-restoring breath of God who mediates differences with an eye toward
mutuality and reciprocity. Thus, as the Spirit exists perichoretically within
the Godhead to foster communion between the divine persons, so the Spirit

9. Augustine *De Trinitate* bk. 15.
10. For reproductions and commentary, see Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canti­
cles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland Circa 1300* (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 1990), 118-42. I am grateful to Ellen Ross for directing my attention to this volume.
11. *Perichoresis* is the doctrine that teaches the coinherence of each member of the Trinity
in each other. For a fuller discussion of this term and its relevance to contemporary theology,
see Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco:
comes to us “with healing in its wings” (Malachi 4:2) in order to restore unity and cooperation between all living things.

OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT

This book is made up of two parts. After chapter 1, where I make a case for the rhetorical nature of theology in a postmodern culture, Part One is broadly methodological and consists of an initial articulation of God as Spirit beyond the philosophical categories of metaphysics and empiricism. My overriding concern is to defend a performative understanding of theological truth-claims in which the ascription of “truth” to a belief or practice in religion is deemed valid whenever the belief or practice enables commitment to the welfare of the other. I ask, Can a recovery of the idea of Spirit avoid the impasse of understanding truth either in terms of the metaphysical quest for absolutes or in terms of the historicist judgment that all claims to truth are exercises in personal preference and nothing more? My question is whether one can responsibly wager belief in the Spirit even though the reality of the Spirit is neither a deliverance of universal reason, on the one hand, nor a defensible idea within neoempiricist philosophy, on the other.

In chapter 2, I consider how some analysts seek to reestablish theological reflection on the basis of a metaphysics of human subjectivity (for example, Schubert Ogden), while others maintain that it is impossible to talk about transcendence (and notions like Spirit) after the death of the metaphysically certain God of Christian theism (for example, Richard Rorty). In the space between these two approaches, I use in chapter 3 Wittgenstein’s, Levinas’s, and Kierkegaard’s practice-based philosophies as models for tracing the interior work of the Spirit in the journey toward self-understanding and other-regard. Insofar as the Spirit in biblical literature is said to “blow where it wills,” the Spirit is a never guaranteed but always potential aid in working toward the “performance of the truth,” that is, caring for the self and other life-forms.

The book’s major transition occurs between Parts One and Two, where my interest shifts from a general study of claims to truth in theology to a concrete analysis of a body of particular claims concerning the role of the Spirit in the current situation. Specifically, Part Two moves to a substantive analysis of the problem of violence in contemporary culture from the perspective of a non-sacrificial and earth-centered notion of the Spirit. The topics that are studied in each chapter of Part Two—violence against other people (chapter 4), vio-
lence against the earth (chapter 5), and the problem of divine violence in the Bible (chapter 6)—form a theological triptych that is centered by a life-affirming portrait of the Spirit.

Chapter 4 analyzes René Girard’s theory concerning the foundation and unity of culture and religion in the play between desire and violence. Girard maintains that the basic human drive to own or imitate what the other person has or is—what he calls “mimetic desire”—inevitably threatens to tear apart a society by fomenting unchecked rivalry between individuals and groups. Eventually, however, the threat of cultural disorder is contained by the society’s invention of a “scapegoat” who is said to be the cause of its problems. Convenient scapegoats are those individuals (Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr.) or groups (poor people of color, persons with AIDS) that are perceived to be a “threat” to the society’s collective identity because they are marginal to and different from its sense of hierarchy and order. Since violence toward the outsider initially checks the corrosion of mimetic rivalry by reuniting (at least temporarily) warring factions under a common sacrificial vision, such violence is a permanent fixture of all world cultures.

Girard’s pessimistic thesis is balanced by his writings about the Spirit, the God of Victims, who in the Bible advocates on behalf of the scapegoats who are unjustly accused of creating social chaos. In the Christian Gospels the Spirit empowers Jesus and others to risk lives of nonviolent compassion for the other in opposition to the culture’s structures of domination. I suggest that this construal of the Spirit as the defender of victims contains critical moral and spiritual resources for responding to the needs of oppressed communities in today’s world.

Biblical religion postulates the Spirit as the dynamic life-giving force within the universe. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth . . . and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters” (Genesis 1:1, 2). In chapter 5, I suggest that whereas historic Western religious thought defined nature as the object of humankind’s domination and control, ecological pneumatology construes humankind and otherkind as members of a common ecosystem in which no one species (including the human species) is more valuable and worthy of protection than another. Since all life-forms possess intrinsic worth as embodiments of the Creator Spirit, the traditional idea of Christian “stewardship” of nature must be challenged in the contemporary setting. I consider the nonanthropocentric theologies in the Genesis creation story, the book of Job, and John Muir’s writings as alternatives to the ideal of so-called “resource conservation” (that is, managing nature as a consumable “resource” to meet human needs) within mainstream religious envi-
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ronmentalism. This earth-centered approach figures all beings as temporary sojourners within fragile bioregions; it avoids defining human beings as stewards who have the right to arrogate to themselves the role of adjudicating how the earth and its bounty are to be used and developed.

Chapter 4 makes reference to the corrosive effects of interpersonal mimetic violence, while chapter 5 addresses the legacy of earth violence. In chapter 6, I turn again to the problem of violence, but now by way of analyzing the problem of evil in biblical wisdom discourse. I argue that biblical wisdom provides a “therapeutic” resource for confronting the question of how evil flourishes in a world purportedly under the governance of a good God. Christian theology has generally offered two responses to the problem of evil: either evil is rationalized as a necessary condition for moral growth and maturity, or it is devalued as a momentary aberration within God’s master plan of reconciling all things to the divine order. I use Richard Swinburne’s work as an expression of the first tack, and Ronald Thiemann’s for the second approach. I maintain in dialogue with Paul Ricoeur and some post-Holocaust theologians (such as Arthur Cohen) that the tenacity of certain forms of recalcitrant violence and evil is not adequately addressed by the two standard approaches. Instead of a philosophical solution to the problem of unjust suffering, I offer a practical response to evil in terms of catharsis, anger, protest, and irony. This response is drawn from the vocabulary of biblical wisdom writings in which the figure of the agonistic contestant—the one who struggles with and against God—is retrieved in the face of the absurdity of unmerited violence and suffering. While the Spirit is generally not explicitly thematized in biblical wisdom discourse, I suggest that a “sapiential sensibility” is an important resource for recovering the presence of the Spirit in a world fragmented by gratuitous evil.

The Spirit is the divine healer who consistently insinuates herself into situations where renewal and rehabilitation are chronically needed. By empowering the erasure of false boundaries between self and other, the Spirit seeks to overcome the systematic distortions that define contemporary culture. As the breath of God who animates all life, the Spirit becomes present in the spaces opened up between persons who risk themselves for the other. “Spirit is not in the I but between I and You. It is not like the blood that circulates in you but like the air in which you breathe.”

the Spirit is an *emergent* reality. The Spirit is not a static entity but a potential modality of divine presence that becomes actual in the co-partnerships of persons with one another and other life-forms. In general, the Spirit does not gate-crash into reality but rather becomes present whenever persons create mutually open spaces for the Spirit to inhabit. These open spaces are generated by persons who intentionally nurture a bound(ary)less desire for the integrity of the other person and the other life-form. In this gesture of openness, the ego boundaries a person uses to insulate herself from others break down, and the self passes over, as it were, into the reality of the other. Outside approved cultural limits and in-spir(it)ed in the margins of dynamic openness to the other, one gives of oneself to the other in an attitude of reciprocity, coparticipation, and joy.