Finding God In The Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, Nature

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The River God

The palpable experience of God in the earth is one of my earliest childhood memories. As a boy, my family often traveled from Los Angeles, where I grew up, to coastal Mississippi, the site of my mother’s homestead. Along the shores of the Singing River near Biloxi, Mississippi, my mother told me the story of the Pascagoula Indians who inhabited the banks of the river many generations ago, and the story of my great-grandmother, Frances Hawkins, a Seminole woman who migrated to the Mississippi Gulf Coast probably sometime in the 1890s. Little is known about her, but my grandmother, Winona, used to carry with her a dog-eared photograph of her mother in tribal garb. Throughout my childhood, the story of my great-grandmother’s travels to Mississippi was intermixed with the other Native American story told to me by my mother and aunt about the early conflict between the Biloxi and Pascagoula Indians. Through this story, I experienced the power and mystery of Earth God present within the ebb and flow of the Singing River.

According to ancient legend, the two Indian communities had peacefully coexisted along the banks of the Singing River generation after generation. The Biloxi Indians, however, were a warrior clan while the Pascagoula peoples were more peace-loving. A mutual détente had held between both groups since earliest memory. This nonaggression pact entailed the proviso that the Biloxi would never attack the Pascagoula as long as no intermarriage between the two peoples took place. But the pact became threatened by the fledgling relationship between a young man of the Pascagoula families and a young woman of the Biloxi clan. Star-crossed lovers, the boy and girl’s growing affection toward each other threatened to disturb the peace and stability that existed between the two communities. Fearful of an attack by the Biloxi on their population, and not willing to take up arms against their
neighbors, the Pascagoula opted for a united course of action to prevent a massacre. They decided to put themselves to death. And they did so, according to the legend, walking single file into the dark waters of the Singing River—and singing a mournful, tribal song in the process.

As a child I was fascinated and troubled by this account. But what I found particularly compelling about this story was my mother’s claim that the song sung long ago by the Pascagoula could still be heard in the cadences of the river’s waters. If you swim under the waters of the river and listen hard, you can hear the ancient dirge of the drowning people. My mother explained that while the Singing River is technically the Pascagoula River, most local people refer to it as the Singing River in recognition of the ongoing power of the legend. As a child I believed my mother’s account: I swam in the river and heard the plaintive song of this lost community. In the undulating swish-swish of the water flow, I could hear the distant echo of the Pascagoula’s river music mysteriously preserved in this underwater environment (see plate 1).

As a child swimming in the river, all of my senses were keenly attuned to the possibility of hearing the song of the Pascagoula. In some rough sense, I felt I was encountering God in the river. The river was a site of numinous powers, greater than myself, that both transcended and interpenetrated the everyday world of boyhood activity I normally inhabited. God, I sensed, was in the river, but God was also beyond the river. As an adult reflecting on the theological import of my childhood river experience, I now believe that the ancient tribal music I heard in the river deeps was made possible by God’s presence within the muddy waters. Down in the dark water of the river, God actualized the ancient song and made it a reality to my listening ears. In this sense, as I now realize, my experience went beyond a hearing of the river song, as strange and miraculous as this might be; rather, it entailed an encounter with the divine life who made possible the transmission of the native dirge to my comprehension. I cannot exactly explain this double sensibility I felt at that time—how the hearing of the Indians’ song was felt by me to be an instance of God’s presence. Yet I knew, somehow, that the God I had learned about in my home and church and Sunday school as a child, this same God, now present to me in the river, was mediating to my understanding the death march music of the Pascagoula.

In claiming that the power to hear the river music was generated by the same God witnessed to in the Bible, it may appear that I am co-opting Native American spirituality by subsuming the story of the Pascagoula
under the Christian notion of an all-encompassing God. What I am suggesting, however, is that God—or the Sacred or the Real—is a living and dynamic presence within the natural order who is greater than the theological models of God within any one particular religion, be it Christian or Native American. The spiritualities of biblical communities and America’s Gulf Coast Indians have their own meaning and integrity and should not be collapsed into one another. Nevertheless, in the light of my own Christian upbringing and my hearing of the ancient dirge in the river, it made sense to me then, and it does again now, to understand the significance of these two dimensions of my life as having a common origin, a divine origin. Alternately, God is the same reality witnessed to by the biblical stories and the source of my encounter with the plaintive song still reverberating within the Pascagoula River. This double awareness has led me as an adult to embrace a multicultural vision of Christianity as a distinctive—but not absolute—worldview that draws its strength both from its time-honored scriptures and from its ongoing relationships with other religions and cultures. All that is good and wonderful springs from a common source—a divine source—toward which the world’s religions and cultures strive to understand, and sometimes worship, in their own partial and fragmented ways.

Submerging myself within the waters of the river allowed me, then, to hear the river song and understand that its message sprang from the God of biblical faith. This twofold sensibility should not come as a surprise. Throughout my young life at the time, I had been taught Bible stories in my home and church in which the divine life was regularly figured as a nature deity. I had learned that God fashioned Adam and Eve from the dust of the ground, spoke through Balaam’s donkey, arrested Job’s attention in a whirlwind, used a great whale to send Jonah a message, and appeared as a dove throughout the New Testament. If these stories were true, then, similarly, is it impossible to imagine that God could speak again to an eight-year-old boy through a Mississippi river song?

The pedagogical import of the self-sacrifice of the Gulf Coast Indians was, to my early understanding, very clearly ethical in nature. This is why I thought God was in the river. In my young mind, the divine message embodied in the river music was clear: the preservation of this tribal melody was an undying memorial to the spiritual power and moral integrity of the Pascagoula. In order to prevent bloodshed, the community opted to perish collectively in the dark waters of the river. Tragically, horribly, the Pascagoula laid down their lives in order to prevent an internecine conflict
from destroying their nation and the Biloxi. The model of giving the gift of one's own life so that another might live became the sacred teaching I took away from the river.² Bathed in the music and message of the river, I felt the divine presence in a direct, tangible fashion that I will never forget. I met God in that river and heard God's moral voice speak to me through the ancient song.

But while my boyhood encounter with the religiously charged river bore profound spiritual meaning for me at the time, as I grew older, and later learned to practice Christianity more reflectively, I drifted away from any sustained realizations of God in the natural world. Now I believe I know what I had encountered in the Pascagoula River—the God of Christian faith revealing Godself to me as a river God—but as a teenager and young adult I had become mistrustful of my earlier experiences as exercises in wishful thinking, even delusion. Sadly, as I now realize, this drift was aided and abetted by the historic indifference of Christian practice to, and even its hostility toward, the discovery of God within the environing earth.

In the main, historic Christianity understands the divine life as a Sky God. In nursery rhymes, sermons, hymnody, iconography, and theological teachings, God is pictured as a bodiless, immaterial being who inhabits a timeless, heavenly realm far beyond the vicissitudes of life on earth. Of course, in the person of Jesus, God did become an enfleshed life-form in ancient history. But the incarnation is generally understood as a long-ago, punctiliar event limited to a particular human being, namely, Jesus of Nazareth. Tragically, for many Christians, the incarnation of God in Jesus does not carry the promise that God, in any palpable sense, is continually enfleshed within the natural world as we know it. Rather, for the better part of church history, the divine life and the natural world have been viewed as two separate and distinct orders of being. Occasionally, God may intervene in the natural realm in order to achieve some otherworldly objective—as in the case of sending Jesus to earth in order to redeem humankind from its sins. But occasional divine visitations do not entail the continual presence of God in the earth. Indeed, the majority theological judgment is that any suggestion that God is somehow embedded in the earth smacks of heathenism, Paganism, and idolatry. Whatever else God is, God is not a nature deity captive to the limitations and vagaries of mortal life-forms. God is not bound to the impermanent flux of an ever-changing earth. God cannot be regarded as existing on a continuum with creaturely life-forms. It is for these reasons, according to mainstream
opinion, that biblical religion forbids the fashioning of graven images as representations of the divine life: God is not a bull or a snake or a lion. On the contrary, so the majority argument goes, God abides in an eternally unchanging heavenly realm where bodily suffering and death are no more and every tear is wiped dry for the privileged believer who dwells there.

My experience of the sacred river instilled within me an abiding uneasiness with the majority argument against God in nature. It was here—in the swift current of the river—that I had my first experience of God as a numinous power within a natural landscape. But as I grew older, as I have said, I found it easy enough to discount this experience. What had begun for me as an encounter with God in the underwater cathedral of the river evolved, over time, into a distant memory of a youthful enthusiasm. As a young adult, I questioned whether I really did experience God in the river as a boy. I speculated that I was an impressionable victim of autosuggestion. Based on my mother’s tale, I entered the river primed to hear the music of the Pascagoula and, accordingly, thought I heard the ancient song when, in reality, it was simply the roar of the river’s underwater power that I was hearing. In following through this line of questioning, however, I began to realize that I was making war against my deepest sensibilities. I was doing damage to my soul. If a person cannot trust his or her innermost stirrings, then we are all captive to the voices of others with no ability to plumb our own internal depths and discover therein what we know to be true. As an adult, I resolved to trust my inward certainties and suspend the majority theological conviction that God could not possibly appear and speak profound messages in natural landforms such as the Singing River.

If God long ago spoke through Jesus as the Word of God, is it impossible to imagine that God today could speak again through the muddy waters of a Mississippi coastal river? Alongside Christianity’s time-honored source of revelation—the biblical texts—could God speak again through an alternative medium to a child primed to hear the song of the river? For me, in those early boyhood swims, the God of the biblical testimonies was a river deity who said to me—through the requiem of the Pascagoula—that one should always live one’s life in the service of others—even as the Pascagoula did in their mass migration into the river. I found this ethical message to be in perfect harmony with the biblical teachings. It neither contradicted nor undermined these teachings. It only deepened them. Or perhaps, I now realize, it is the other way around—namely, that the biblical teachings have their peculiar depth and
power in my life because these teachings are fundamentally rooted in earth-centered, spiritually charged events in my formative years, such as swimming in the sacrificial stream of the Singing River.

**Landscapes of the Sacred**

In this book I want to explore the promise of Christianity as an earth-centered, body-loving religion. I want to explore the promise of Christian faith to heal human beings' exploitative environmental habits through its nature-based teachings concerning the enfleshed presence of God in all things. Sadly, we are living at a time when plant and animal species are being wiped out at an unusually rapid rate. Unlike previous mass death events in our planet's evolutionary past, this contemporary “Sixth Great Extinction,” as Niles Eldredge puts it, is being caused by our own rapacious habits. We need a fundamental attitude adjustment in order to address the contemporary crisis, and Christianity has the potential resources for changing hearts and minds for enabling greener lifestyles. Christianity is a treasure trove of rich images and stories about God’s loving the earth and living in the earth that can set free robust, environmentally sustainable ways of being.

For this book, in particular, I want to retrieve a central but neglected Christian theme—the idea of God as carnal Spirit who imbues all things—as the linchpin for forging a green spirituality responsive to the environmental needs of our time. Theologically speaking, I believe that hope for a renewed earth is best founded on belief in God as Earth Spirit, the compassionate, all-encompassing divine force within the biosphere who inhabits earth community and continually works to maintain the integrity of all forms of life. Like the river deity I encountered in the Singing River as a boy, in green spirituality God is the Earth God who indwells the land and invigorates and flows with natural processes—not the invisible Sky God who exists in a heavenly realm far removed from earthly concerns.

In antiquity, early Christians identified the Spirit as coequal with God the Father and God the Son, a constituent member of the divine Trinity, and the supreme and all-encompassing presence of God in the world. But this ancient understanding of the Spirit seems to have little purchase on contemporary religious thought and life. One exception to this general trend is the practice of charismatic and Pentecostal believers who encounter the work of the Spirit in their everyday lives. Through the gifts of the Spirit—speaking in tongues, miracles of healing, and words
of prophecy—members of the Pentecostal movement are baptized in the Holy Spirit and experience directly the tangible energy of the Spirit through different signs and wonders. But many other persons (and I count myself among this number) are not always comfortable with such spectacular exhibits of divine power, and such persons look for God's presence in equally palpable but less demonstrative displays.

Unfortunately, however, this search for God's presence outside Pentecostalism's signs and wonders is often not successful because it cannot locate the more subtle traces of the Spirit's presence in the world around us. The upshot of this fruitless search is that the ancient Christian experience and understanding of the Spirit as God's radical presence in the here and now is lost to many of us. Thus the reality of the Spirit has dropped out of the experience of many Christians. Indeed, many contemporary Christians, if they think about the Holy Spirit at all, now visualize the Spirit as the passive and retiring member of the Godhead, the mysterious and unknown member of the Trinity who, unlike the Father and the Son, lacks personality and definition.

This way of thinking restricts Christianity to being a religion of the Father and the Son and deadens our awareness of the Spirit's critically important work in the world today. To offset this tendency, I propose a nature-based model of the Spirit as the "green face" of God. The Spirit is the divine power who sustains the integrity of the natural world and brings together all of creation into one common biotic family. This earthen doctrine of the Spirit offers hope at a time when the future prospects of the planet are increasingly dim. A new vision of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the earth has the potential both to bring meaningful renewal to many persons and to invigorate public policy discussions about how best to ensure the well-being of all members of our planet home.

For this change to take place, however, the dominant model for understanding the Spirit has to be significantly overhauled. Unfortunately, the vernacular definition of the Spirit as the "Holy Ghost" in common parlance and the historic liturgy of Christianity renders this task especially difficult. Translated from the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts, early English versions of the Bible mistakenly translated the phrase "Holy Spirit" as "Holy Ghost." The clear sense of the original biblical texts is that the Spirit is to be understood as God's visible and benevolent power in the cosmos, not a spook or ghost. The Spirit is not a heavenly phantom—immaterial and unreal (and perhaps a bit scary as well!)—but God's all-pervasive presence and energy within the universe. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit,
God’s power for goodness and healing in the world, has been handed down to us as a shadowy, unearthly apparition, the Holy Ghost. It is not surprising, therefore, that many contemporary persons have little sense of identity with this specter of sorts.7

Understanding the Spirit in ghostly terms makes the Spirit unreal and immaterial. From this perspective, the Spirit is not a bodily, physical reality like the rest of things in creation; it is not of the same nature as other animate and inanimate life-forms on the earth. Thus this ghostly model of the Spirit fuels the standard polarities in Western thought (including Western theology) with which many of us are now familiar: mind versus body, the supernatural versus the natural, God versus nature, and Spirit versus material reality. These oppositions undergird a wide chasm that separates the world of the Spirit and the world of matter, rendering the Spirit an invisible, incorporeal, and, finally, unreal theological fiction.8

The biblical descriptions of the Spirit do not square with this ghostly model. The biblical message seeks to bring together God and the earth, the spiritual and the natural, mind and matter, but this message is often missed. The apostle Paul’s rhetoric of spirit versus flesh, for example, is often mistakenly read as an endorsement of a state of war between God and human passions, but this is not Paul’s point, as I will attempt to demonstrate later on. The vast majority of the biblical texts undercut the oppositional set of terms that legitimizes the split between the spiritual and the material.

In particular, on the topic of the Spirit, not only do the scriptural texts not divorce the spiritual from the earthly, but, moreover, they figure the Spirit as a creaturely life-form interpenetrated by the material world. Indeed, images of the Spirit drawn directly from nature are the defining motif in biblical notions of Spirit. Consider the following metaphors and descriptions of the Spirit within the Bible: the animating breath that brings life and vigor to all things (Genesis 1:2; Psalms 104:29-30); the healing wind that conveys power and a new sense of community to those it indwells (Judges 6:34; John 3:6; Acts 2:1-4); the living water that vivifies and refreshes all who drink from its eternal springs (John 4:14, 7:37-38); the cleansing fire that alternately judges wrongdoers and ignites the prophetic mission of the early church (Acts 2:1-4; Matthew 3:11-12); and the divine dove, a fully embodied earth creature, who births creation into existence, and, with an olive branch in its mouth, brings peace and renewal to a broken and divided world; this same bird God hovers over Jesus at his baptism to inaugurate his public ministry (Genesis 1:1-3, 8:11; Matthew 3:16; John
1:32). The Spirit is an earthen reality who is biblically figured according to the four primitive, cardinal elements—earth, wind, water, fire—that are the key components of embodied life as we know it. In these scriptural texts, the Spirit is pictured as a wholly enfleshed life-form who engenders healing and renewal throughout the abiotic and biotic orders.

As I perform a retrieval of the Spirit’s earthen identity in this book, 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 characteristics 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, broods 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 to signal God’s approval of Jesus’ public work. The maternal, avian Spirit of Genesis and the Gospels is the nursing mother of creation and Jesus’ ministry who protects and sustains the well-being of all things in the cosmic web of life. Early Christian communities in the Middle East consistently spoke of the Spirit as the motherly, regenerative breath and power of God within creation. These early Christians believed that the Hebrew feminine grammatical name of the Spirit—rûach—was a linguistic clue to certain woman-specific characteristics of God as Spirit. As these early Christians rightly understood that God transcends sex and gender, their point was not that God was a female deity, but that it is appropriate alternately to refer to God’s mystery, love, and power in “male” and “female” terms. In this book I will take the liberty of referring to the Spirit as “she” in order to recapture something of the biblical understanding of God as feminine Spirit within the created order.

Far from being ghostly and bodiless, then, the Spirit reveals herself in the biblical literatures as a physical, earthly presence—a life-form both like and unlike all other life-forms—who labors to create and sustain humankind and otherkind in solidarity with one another. As the bird God in Genesis and the Gospels, the life-giving breath of the Psalms, or the tongues of fire in Acts, the Spirit is an earthen being who infuses all things with the power for growth, change, and renewal. Nature itself in all its many manifestations is to be understood as the primary mode of being for the Spirit’s work in the biosphere. In this green model of the Spirit, the earth’s waters, winds, fires, and various life-forms are to be celebrated as
living and tangible expressions of the divine life itself. So if we wonder where God is in the world today we need only go outside our bedroom window. There we will hear a robin sing to its mate, we will observe an ant carry its daily sustenance on its back, we will watch a hosta plant strain toward the sun in the miracle of photosynthesis, and there we will find God in the viscous, fecund, and rich soil of the earth around us.

**The Earthen Bible**

The sensibility of this book is rooted in the deep well of the Bible. I go to that well often in my personal devotions and theological reflection for nurture and renewal. I find the Bible to be a fertile source of sensuous earth imagery that depicts the common kinship between humans and the natural world, one of the driving concerns of this book.

In this book I read the Bible with green eyes. My goal is to recover the startling originality of the scriptures from a self-consciously environmental perspective. I celebrate this biocentric framework for biblical understanding and suggest such a framework opens up new vistas of meaning that have gone unnoticed by previous interpretive approaches. Everyone reads the Bible from one orientation or another; no one comes to the biblical texts innocent of her (or her community’s) own “working canon” or “canon within the canon.” This does not mean that biblical meaning is hostage to unexamined interpretive biases. But insofar as meaning is not “in” the text but rather happens “between” text and reader, my suggestion is that the biblical reader always operates within her own interpretive horizon as the enabling context for understanding new possibilities of meaning.

What does it mean to understand biblical meaning as an event that happens between text and reader? The Bible, as a great classic, is best read in the spirit of a living dialogue between the interpreter and the text itself. Like all of the classics, biblical meaning emerges in the dynamic space between reader and text; it is generated in the to-and-fro movement between the reader’s expectations and the text’s provocations. From this perspective, the Bible should not be viewed as containing an obvious, univocal message that imposes itself on the obedient reader, nor should its meaning be understood as controlled by the privileged reader whose presuppositions determine what the text can and cannot say. Making sense of the Bible should avoid the Charybdis of authoritarian bibli-cism and the Scylla of vulgar deconstruction. Biblical meaning is neither a timeless property of the text that subordinates the subservient reader
to its predetermined message nor the product of the entitled interpreter whose learning and sophistication disallow the possibility that the biblical texts could articulate their own reader-independent voice. Biblical meaning is not in the text, nor is it foisted onto the text by the reader; rather, genuine meaning happens between text and reader in moments of sustained encounter and discernment. Neither a bank of preset ideas nor a blank page that gets filled in by the reader’s imagination, the Bible is a contested site where a living body of stories and symbols comes face-to-face with a reader who is willing to suspend her everyday assumptions and experience life-changing transformations through this encounter.

Textual understanding always operates, therefore, within an animating “hermeneutical circle”; there is no neutral starting point by which a reader begins the interpretive process. This hermeneutical circle need not be a vicious circle, if the reader is intentional about owning her particular set of assumptions and does not purport to follow a purely “objective” (read: presuppositionless) model of textual interpretation. The hermeneutical circle is productive whenever the reader construes the meaning of a particular scriptural passage in the light of her own founding assumptions and then checks the validity of these assumptions against the possible lines of meaning within the text itself. Assumptions are read against the text and in turn the text is understood in reference to the founding assumptions. Thus biblical meaning takes flight within ever-widening circles of interpretation: it is produced by the give-and-take dialogue in which both reader and text are mutually engaged. In the contrapuntal movement between my own organizing framework and the provocations of the text I have found earth-centered reading to be a liberating source of new meaning and understanding.  

I am self-conscious about my earth-centered hermeneutic and believe that such a hermeneutic allows the Bible to speak again from the center of its love and passion for the good creation God has made. God is not distant from our planet, unmoved by earthly concerns, dispassionate and unaffected by the environmental degradation that despoils the bounty and beauty of the created order. Rather, from a green spirituality perspective, we learn that God loves the earth, manifests Godself as an earthen being in the human Jesus and corporeal Spirit, and suffers deeply from the environmental abuse that causes pain and loss to all beings. Of course, there are many other, and equally legitimate, hermeneutical templates, other than a green template, that readers can use to hear the biblical texts’ claims to our attention. For example, a reader, or a larger interpretive
community, might want to understand the biblical texts from a feminist perspective and discern the significant roles women play in biblical stories; or she might use an evangelical hermeneutic to privilege the place individual salvation plays in Paul’s letters; or she might use archaeiological evidence or other historical-critical methods in order to illuminate biblical teachings in the light of the ancient cultural milieu that produced them. All of these hermeneutical approaches are, in principle, productive means by which to sustain vital encounters between reader and text.¹³

Consider one example of a green hermeneutic at work on a particular biblical passage, namely, Jesus’ teaching about the lilies of the field. In this book I focus on the Spirit in biblical literatures, the earthen bird God who renews and sustains all members of the lifeweb in fellowship with one another. But this same hermeneutic could be applied to a deeper understanding of Jesus’ earth-centered mission and message as well. Jesus’ teaching about the lilies of the field in the Sermon on the Mount is a good case in point. In Matthew we read, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all of his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (6:28-29). The simplicity and elegance of this passage is difficult to fathom. Here Jesus says that everyday field lilies, in just being what they are, are more glorious and wonderful than was King Solomon in all his regal splendor and power. Solomon, whose royal court was legendary for its grandeur and magnificence, is deemed less resplendent than the wildflowers that grace the meadows enjoyed by Jesus in his journeys throughout the Israel of his day. In this passage, Jesus, the environmental trickster, reverses the priority we assign to grandiose built structures and favors instead the quiet beauty inherent in the natural order of things. The most spectacular architectural treasures of the ancient world are inferior to the rich colors and textures that shine forth from the highways and byways of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

One of my favorite summer delights is the discovery of Turk’s-cap lilies during nature hikes my family takes in coastal Rhode Island. Beautiful, tall, flowering lilies grow through the crevices of the stone walls we encounter along the wooded path we follow to the ocean from our summer rental cottage. Turk’s-cap lilies are large, native wildflowers with showy, curved-back petals that resemble a style of cap supposedly worn by early Turks; they are spectacular orange flowers with elongated, dangling stamens that bounce in the summer breeze. Across the surface of the rounded petals are reddish-brown spots that nicely contrast with the pure orange color of the petals and the deep green of the stem. The rolling fields alongside whose edges
we encounter these lilies come alive in a riot of color and movement when these floral gifts arrive in Rhode Island every summer.

Could King Solomon’s grand palaces pale in insignificance to these graceful flowers randomly scattered throughout the meadows and woods of coastal New England? Jesus’ teaching about wild lilies is a challenge to our aesthetic conventions and ingrained habits of seeing. How many of us would subordinate the beauty of Michelangelo’s David or the grandeur of the Eiffel Tower to everyday flora in an uncultivated field? How many of us would regard the majesty of the Empire State Building or the charm of the Taj Mahal as inferior to the beauty and wonder of simple flowers along a common roadside? In my experience, however, Jesus is right: catching a glimpse of Turk’s-cap lilies in an open meadow on a summer walk is truly awe-inspiring. If we could learn again, like Jesus, to see the world with green eyes, then we could catch Jesus’ vision of an earth charged with a natural grace and beauty more profound than anything we can imagine. A green world alive with color and fragrance—the restrained elegance of lilies in an open field—is the supernatural food Earth God offers to us to feed our hungry bodies and souls.

Christian Paganism

Another source of vision for this book is contemporary Pagan spirituality. Today many Pagans celebrate the immanence of the sacred in everyday, earthly life through seasonal festivals (Samhain/Halloween and Summer Solstice), rites of passage ceremonies (birthing, croning, and death), magic and witchcraft (vision quests and healing practices), and other rituals of earth celebration and earth healing (“shamanic” drumming and political action on behalf of endangered species and habitats). Neopaganism is a modern earth-centered spirituality that draws much of its vitality and symbolism from pre-Christian ceremonies and belief systems. Like ancient Greek and Roman Pagans, contemporary Neopagans believe that all life is sacred; nature, our life-giving mother, is the place where our common lives are nurtured and where sacred power is revealed to us. The “at home” attitude toward the earth in early Celtic, Teutonic, and Nordic religions, now reactualized by modern-day Pagans, offers a healing alternative to the toxic anti-earth attitudes sacralized by certain emphases in Western monotheistic religions.14

Pagans celebrate nature as hallowed ground, as a sacred community of interconnected beings rather than an exploitable resource designed to
serve human beings’ self-aggrandizing interests. They celebrate nature as all beings’ common home instead of regarding the earth as a passing phenomenon inimical to people’s spiritual growth and in need of future redemption. They regard nature as the bio-spiritual web of life that connects the human and more-than-human worlds rather than an impediment that must be overcome in human beings’ march toward salvation in a disembodied heavenly realm. Neopagans’ celebration of seasonal festivals and earth-based ritual practices are markers of their deep kinship with the natural world and its cyclical processes. For Pagans, the earth is all we have—there is no distant or better world beyond this world—and it is incumbent upon all of us to protect this rich and fragile ecosystem. Nature is the sacred, interconnected matrix that generates all life-forms and allows them to survive and flourish. Nature is not an object under the dominion of its human caretakers, to be used (and sometimes abused) to serve human ends.

Paganism is sometimes confused with Satanism and worship of the devil: evil, sinister beliefs and practices that destroy life rather than nurture life. But Neopagans consider Satanism to be an egoistic, power-hungry religion that exploits Christianity’s polemic against the devil in order to foment dark magic and the harmful manipulation of natural forces. Many Neopagans self-identify as witches in the sense that they are practitioners of a time-honored craft of healing and renewal (so the definition of Neopaganism as the “Craft” or Wicca). But contemporary Pagans are good, not evil, witches, because they practice the ancient arts of healing human beings’ diseased relationships with other persons and other life-forms. Of course, magic and witchcraft can be pressed into the service of evil ends (as is the case with any religious or ritual tradition). However, modern Pagans do not worship Satan and thereby seek to increase their own personal power at the expense of other persons and other life-forms. On the contrary, Neopaganism is an intensely communal religion that celebrates nature’s strengthening, life-giving forces in order to harness these forces to restore the lost balance that at one time defined the natural harmony between humankind and otherkind.

The emphasis in Neopaganism on community-centered, earth-based religious life is a vital resource for developing a green Christian imagination. But there are important differences between the two religions that should not be overlooked. For those Pagans who are theistic, their vision of divinity is pluralistic and immanentist, while orthodox Christianity understands God to be one and fundamentally transcendent. It appears,
therefore, that a rigid line of division separates the two traditions: Pagan­
ism is polytheistic and this-worldly, while Christianity is monotheistic and
otherworldly. But upon closer inspection of the historic and symbolic af­
finities between Christianity and Paganism, it becomes clear that the two
forms of spirituality are not polar opposites.

From its origins two thousand years ago, Christianity matured and
flourished in the fertile soil of Judaism, on the one hand, and the in­
digenous Pagan religions of Greece and Rome, on the other. From the
Jews, Christians learned respect for law, belief in the Bible, and an un­
derstanding of God as a unitary, heavenly Father who rewards the just
and punishes the wicked. From the “mystery religions” of Hellenized and
Roman cultures, Christians learned about the immortality of the soul,
the magic of physical healing, and the redeemer myth of a god who rises
from the dead. But Christianity is not merely an extension of Judaism and
Paganism: Christianity, while indebted to its forbearers, charted its own
original course and developed beliefs and practices independent from its
ancient cultural origins.

While Christianity evolved away from its formative predecessors, it
still bears some fundamental affinities with both of its originary religious
heritages. And while it may appear radically distinct from its root sources,
it continues to carry within itself a deep strain of Pagan this-worldliness
and a vision of God that borders on animism—even while maintaining
its fidelity to Jewish monotheism. Animism is the belief that the sacred
permeates all living things; in Christianity, the belief that God’s Spirit
imbues all creation roots biblical faith in the Pagan animist soil of its
primitive origins. In particular, the animist tendency in Christianity is
apparent in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that God is one
and three, both transcendent to the world and immanent in the world, all
at the same time. The idea of God as Trinity stresses both the unity and
the plurality of the Godhead and also, paradoxically, the notion that God
is both “other” and, at the same time, pervasively “present” in all things
through the Spirit of God. In the Trinity, the Godhead is a unitary rela­
tionship of three persons in one being—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in
which God is both external to the world and fundamentally internal in
the world at the same time. Paradoxically, God is one and not one; God
is transcendent and immanent; God is alternately and at the same time,
without confusion or division, both beyond the world and everywhere
in the world. God in Christianity is both the far-removed “One” and the
ever-present “Many.”
In dialogue with Neopaganism, this dialectic of the One and the Many in historic Christianity opens up a renewed understanding of Christianity’s ecological potential for our own time. If, according to orthodox belief, God is always already both “up there” and yet still “everywhere” at the same time, then Christianity is not opposed to Paganism (even as it is not opposed to Judaism) but a rearticulation of the radically earthen sensibility of Paganism in a new biblical idiom. Christianity is not an anti-body and anti-worldly religion, but rather a holistic spirituality that pictures all planetary life, indeed the whole universe, as infused with God’s presence through the power of the Spirit. The promise of the Trinity, then, is not a new mystical arithmetic by which to cogitate God’s one-in-threeness. The promise of the Trinity, rather, is a deep green, cosmically pluralistic model of God’s immanent indwelling of all earthen life-forms along with the insistence that God, in some sense, also transcends this divine enfleshment in all things. The promise of the Trinity is that God is beyond and in everything and thereby wonderfully present everywhere, infusing all things with the vigor and power of the Spirit. As in Neopaganism, nothing is dead and matter is not inert because all things are charged with the sacred power of the Spirit. All things God has made—Cooper’s hawks, manure worms, ripe asparagus, feral cats, ancient redwoods, everyday pigweed, and Turk’s-cap lilies—are beings or life-forms bodying forth the love and presence of God’s Spirit.

As Christianity needs to heal its relationship with Judaism and overcome centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, so also does it need to repair its relationship with Paganism and overcome its historic antipathy to the body and nature. In this healing, Christianity rediscovers its Pagan roots and becomes what it has always been—a thoroughly biblical and biocentric source of personal and communal well-being. With particular reference to Paganism, this healed relationship allows Christianity to reawaken itself to its belief in God as both “beyond” and “everywhere”—what we might call its “transcendental animist” history and identity. Christianity’s transcendental animist identity consists of a twofold belief that all of nature is infused with God’s presence, on the one hand, and that God is not collapsed into nature without remainder, on the other.

In spite of Christianity’s orienting affinity with Neopaganism, the dialogue between the two traditions has not been constructive to date. Oftentimes, both groups treat each other with suspicion, even hostility. On the Christian side, Carl E. Braaten sharply contrasts “the gospel” and “neopaganism” by defining “the word ‘gospel’ in the broad sense of the
whole message of Jesus Christ” whereas “neopaganism” is a word used [as] a catchall for everything opposed to Christianity.” Braaten continues that in particular he “will use the term ['neopaganism'] to refer to modern variations of the ancient belief of pre-Christian mystery religions that a divine spark or seed is innate in the individual human soul.” The Christian gospel for Braaten stands for the message that every person by nature is broken and in need of redemption, whereas the teaching of Neopaganism, he writes, is that there is something of God in all of us. I do not think the traditional Christian idea that we all need the good news of the Gospel and the Neopagan conviction that the seeds of God’s presence are implanted within all of us are opposing beliefs. But for Braaten there seems to be no middle ground that brings together these two belief systems.

Braaten’s comments are representative of much of conservative and mainstream Christian thinking about the inherent differences between the two traditions. On the Neopagan side, by contrast, Christianity is often identified with witch burning and the general oppression of Pagans. Loretta Orion summarizes this judgment in narrating the “Christian” arson of the earth-loving, nature sanctuary home of Micha de Liuda, a Wiccan practitioner, in Vermont in 1993:

The night of the fire there had been a Christian conclave in a town about twenty minutes from de Liuda’s land; the flier for the event had urged followers to “illuminate the night with Christ’s righteousness.”

In general, then, as many Neopagans are distrustful of Christians as stridently opposed to earth-centered religion, many Christians do not recognize the origins and ongoing vitality of their religion in biblical and Pagan teachings that the earth is holy and that all things are filled with the Spirit—that all things carry an “innate divine seed,” as Carl E. Braaten (disparagingly) puts it. Neopagans are often wary of Christianity as a destructive ideological force intent on emptying the natural world of any signs of sacred presence even as Christians question any earth-passionate belief system that blurs the particularity of their understanding of the Gospel message. That all things, wonderfully and powerfully, are filled with the presence of the divine life is the common feature of both religions, but a feature generally lost in the current acrimonious climate.

It may seem, therefore, that in the light of Paganism’s emphasis on this-worldly theism and Christianity’s belief in a transcendent deity that Neopagans and contemporary Christians have little to say to one another. I have
sought to show, however, that the two communities have much in common in spite of their mutual recriminations and important differences. In particular, with reference to my attempt to reestablish Christianity on the firm ground of its ancient earth-centered teachings, Paganism is crucial for reawakening Christian faith to its deep-seated passion for the integrity and goodness of the earth and the body. The Pagan conviction that the whole earth is sacred rekindles the ancient Christian trinitarian doctrine that God as Spirit imbues all things. In short, therefore, Paganism helps to return Christianity to its earthen beginnings and the best of its ecological insights and potential. Surprisingly and paradoxically, Christianity, which historically waged war against “heathen” fertility and Goddess cultures, can now recognize itself as the bearer of the very earth-centeredness that it initially inveighed against. That Christianity is animism and animism is Christianity is an insight that is now possible as a result of a new, healed relationship between biblical religion, on the one hand, and earth religion, on the other. The Spirit and the earth are one, the Sacred and the planet are one, God and nature are one—so begins a new adventure in the return of Christianity to its green future as a continuation of ancient Pagan earth wisdom.

Deep Ecology

Along with the Bible and Neopaganism, this book has another important source as well—namely, the contemporary environmental philosophy of “deep ecology.” Deep ecology further informs the root metaphors and basic orientation that animate this project. The core insight of deep ecology is that all living things are equal in value and worth and possess the inherent right to grow and flourish. As opposed to “shallow ecology,” which views the natural world as a manageable resource subordinate to human needs and control, in deep ecology the natural world has intrinsic and not merely instrumental value: all life is worthwhile in and of itself independent from its usefulness to the human community. All life is inherently valuable and important whatever its utility might be for furthering human interests.17

Deep ecology flattens out the value hierarchy, intuitive to most of us, that ascribes supreme significance to human beings over and against all other life-forms. It knocks humankind off the top of the “ontological pyramid” that privileges human beings as bearers of more worth and value than other life-forms. In deep ecology, since all things subsist in common kinship with one another, it follows that no one particular species, including
the human species, is more important than any other. Deep ecology, then, is vigorously opposed to anthropocentrism, the worldview that locates human beings at the apex of a Great Chain of Being that begins with God, moves to humankind, and then locates all other life-forms as lower and less significant in the Great Chain. Opposed to anthropocentrism, deep ecology stresses that humankind and otherkind are of equal worth and that humans, therefore, need to learn to share the planet with other living things. Thus, endangered North American shorebird populations should be accorded the same right that humans' enjoy to birth and feed their young within the coastal ecosystems that human beings like to use for recreational purposes. Since all things depend upon one another for their health and well-being, all beings should be allowed to realize their own natural ends without becoming the objects of callous misuse.

The ethical corollary to this “live and let live” insight centers on equal regard for all species populations. Insofar as all life-forms are codependent members of the biosphere, the traditional value distinctions that prioritize the interests of humankind over otherkind are consistently effaced. Conventionally speaking, it has been said that because human beings are smarter or more sentient or more complex than other life-forms it follows that humans are more worthwhile than other beings and should therefore be given more resources to live and flourish. On the contrary, deep ecology stresses the supreme value of preserving the integrity of whole ecosystems—that is, integral communities of living beings in their native habitats such as temperate grasslands or tropical forests. This emphasis on protecting the health of natural systems effectively subordinates the particular interests of any one species—including the human species—to the larger welfare of the whole ecosystem. Deep ecologists label as “speciesist” the assignation of superior worth to one species over another, and they refer to “biotic egalitarianism” as the reverential attitude of equal regard human beings should have toward nonhuman species.

Deep ecology stresses an attitude of equal regard for all life-forms as the highest good humans can seek to live by in their interactions with the natural world. Since all organisms, from single-celled bacteria to highly developed mammals, are coequal centers of biological activity, the maintenance of healthy environments in which the realization of a biocommunity’s life cycle can be sustained is the primary good deep ecology valorizes. The moral stance that results from this commitment to green integrity is variously formulated as the “duty of noninterference,” the “principle of
minimum impact,” or “the rule of letting nature be.” This stance entails a hands-off, live-and-let-live behavioral norm that encourages our copartnership with nature in order to assist particular ecosystems in helping them realize their own natural ends. “Green teleology” is the watchword of deep ecology: loving and working with living systems toward the end that their growth and fruition are enabled in a manner consistent with their deepest biological impulses.

Deep ecology informs current practices of earth healing by different human groups, some of which are religious and some of which are not. It provides the baseline philosophy that guides thoughtful human efforts to live lightly on the earth and thereby shrink our “environmental footprint,” so to speak, so that other communities of beings can enjoy a rich and fruitful existence. Thus, in conflict situations where humans and nonhuman others have competing claims to resources and habitats, the ethical goal should be to develop policies that register no or as little negative human impact as possible on the natural world. Practically, this would entail that in circumstances where nonessential human interests are furthered by the destruction of plants and animals (for example, in the case of doing irreparable harm to a native grassland in order to make room for a housing development), the decision should be to make little or no provision for such environmental impact. On the other hand, however, in situations where the essential integrity and well-being of a species population is at stake, human or nonhuman, more latitude should be given to measures that will benefit the needy population in spite of the negative effects on the other populations not benefiting from the measures in question (for example, in cases where a sustainable drawdown of river water for human consumption might temporarily depress the flourishing of native biota). Nevertheless, the same rule applies in both situations, namely, the rule of “minimal impact as much as possible” regarding other species.

In religious terms, deep ecology emphasizes the sacredness and holiness of all things living in harmony and balance within the natural order of creation. Spiritually oriented deep ecologists refer to healthy and diverse ecosystems as “sacred places” or “holy ground,” terms that may sound oddly misplaced for religious persons used to reserving the language of “the sacred” or “the holy” for God alone. Referring to the created order in religious terms challenges the common understanding of traditional orthodoxy that only God can be said to be holy and that sacredness inheres in God alone, not natural systems. In conventional theological terms, it is wrong to say that the creation God has made is
sacred because such honorific language is uniquely applicable to God and appears to detract from the glory of the Creator. Such language appears idolatrous, exchanging worship of God for reverence of the earth.

I recently enjoyed a nature retreat led by Lorraine Fox-Davis, an American Indian healer, in the mountains of southern Colorado. Along with other retreat participants, our group hiked and camped in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range (named, according to legend, by Spanish missionaries for the mountains’ deep, red, eucharistic colors at sunset). On the retreat we bathed in a cold mountain stream, had morning devotions in the still quiet of a cottonwood grove, and watched deer and elk graze in the meadows beneath our campsite. This bucolic existence was interrupted late one evening by two black bears, who entered our camp and proceeded to root around in search of food. In the morning our campsite was a mess, but we escaped otherwise relatively unscathed. Some of our fellow campers’ personal vehicles, however, were not so fortunate. Some of the campers had left their cars and trucks, filled with open containers of food, too close to the wilderness area where we were staying. Though these automobiles were locked tight and their windows generally rolled up, the hungry bears smelled the food and proceeded to break into and tear apart the interiors.

Many of my retreat fellows were angry and upset at what they called the “destruction” wrought by the bears’ search for food. Some members of our cohort whose vehicles were broken into were crying; they all were apoplectic with frustration about the damage done to their prized Jeep Cherokees and Nissan Pathfinders. But Lorraine Fox-Davis explained to us that the reason their vehicles were attacked was because a few of us had brought large foreign objects loaded with food into a wilderness area. The fault does not lie with the bears, she gently chided the campers, but with us. The Sangre de Cristo mountains are part of a harmonious and fragile ecosystem that has survived intact for thousands of years in spite of many human incursions. These mountains are sacred, she said, because the Spirit of God lives in the mountains and the mountain ecosystem is richly diverse and naturally balanced. We should treat the mountains—including their animal denizens and natural systems—with awe and respect. But when we disrupt nature’s balance with our SUVs, processed food, and leftover trash, we sometimes are “judged” by the Spirit of the Mountains and reminded of our natural places in the great scheme of things. Our retreat leader said that the bears were God’s special emissaries sent to our campsite to remind us to treat the Sangre de Cristo mountains as holy ground.
Lorraine Fox-Davis’s theology of the mountains is rooted in a deep ecology sensibility. In green Christianity terms, since God as Spirit lives in the earth, and since all natural systems are inherently valuable in and for themselves, we can refer to God’s creation in sacred terms and mourn the loss of the lifeweb that nourishes and supports all of us as an attack on the sacred order of things, as a desecration. My sojourns in the southern Colorado high country, while probably not particularly enriching for the bears and elk and hummingbirds I met along the way, were deeply important to my own recovery of my identity as an earthen being whose essence is rooted in the organic lifeways and cycles of the natural world. Nature is an integrated whole, it is sacred ground, and when I live in harmony with my surroundings I live in harmony with myself and rekindle the spark of God that is within me and all other beings. Deep ecology is a refreshing tonic in contemporary Christianity that invigorates and restores human persons’ sense of identity with the larger biotic community to which we all belong.

The Cruciform Spirit

The biblical, Neopagan, deep ecology framework of this book emphasizes the unity of the Spirit and the natural world. Whether manifesting herself as a sacred animal—such as the biblical bird God in Genesis and Jesus’ baptism stories in the Gospels—or as a nonsentient life-form—such as the mighty wind in the creation story in Genesis and transforming fire in the Pentecost narrative in Acts—the Spirit labors to lead all creation into a healthy and robust relationship with herself. Spirit and earth, therefore, are bound up with one another, without confusion or division, each living through and with the other in symbiotic unity. By breathing the breath of life into all kinds, God as Spirit becomes a grounded being and undergoes permanent change within Godself. No longer an invisible heavenly deity divorced from earthly things, God in Christian faith is a landed reality who lives in the ground, swims with the oceans, and flows through the atmosphere that surrounds us and gives us life. God is now a body. God is now an earth being. God has become one of us.

Christianity often acts like a “discarnate” religion—that is, a religion that sees no relationship between the spiritual and the physical orders of being and, at times, discriminates against the needs of the flesh as inferior to the concerns of the soul. In the history of the church some early apostles rejected marriage as giving in to sexual pleasure, and greatly revered
saints and martyrs starved their bodies and beat themselves with sticks and whips in order to drive away earthly temptations. In many regards, Christianity has a sorry record as a religion that is conflicted about, or at times even at war with, the deep and genuine human need to reconcile the passions and drives of physical pleasure with the aspirations for spiritual transformation.

In fact, however, Christianity is not a discarnate religion. On the contrary, beginning with its earliest history, Christianity offers us a profound vision of God’s nature-centered identity through its ancient teaching that God at one time enfleshed Godself in Jesus, or became incarnate. Long ago God poured out Godself into the mortal body of one human individual, Jesus. But that is not all. Christians also believe that since the dawn of creation, throughout world history and into the present, God in *and through the Spirit* has been persistently infusing the natural world with divine presence. The Spirit is the medium, the agent, or, in terms more felicitous for a recovery of the Bible’s earth-centeredness, the *life-form* through which God’s power and love fill the world and all of its inhabitants. Through green Christian optics, we can now see that the gift of the Spirit to the world since time immemorial—a gift that is alongside and inclusive of Jesus’ death and resurrection—signals the beginning and continuation of God’s incarnational presence. As once God became earthly at the dawn of creation, and as once God became human in the body of Jesus, so now God continually enfleshes Godself through the Spirit in the embodied reality of life on earth. In this sense, God is carnal, God is earthen, God is flesh. The Spirit has always and continues to indwell the earth as its inmost source of life and breath, and the earth has always arrayed, and continues to array, the Spirit in the garments of the cardinal elements.

It is theologically proper to say, therefore, that the world is the “form” God takes among us, that the earth is the “body” of the Spirit we encounter daily. But with this affirmation comes considerable danger to God. In an earth-centered model of the Spirit, God is a thoroughgoing incarnational reality who decides in freedom, and not by any external necessity, to indwell all things. But in making this decision, God as Spirit places herself at risk by virtue of her coinherence with a biosphere that suffers continued degeneration. If God’s body—this small planet that is now under siege by continued global warming, deforestation, the spread of toxins, and the chronic loss of habitat—continues to suffer and bleed, then does not God, in some sense real but still unknowable and mysterious to us, also suffer and bleed? If God’s earthen body undergoes deep
environmental injury and waste, does not God in Godself also experience pain and deprivation? Since God and the earth, Spirit and nature, share a common reality, is it not possible that the loss and degradation of the earth might mean loss and degradation in and for God as well?

If it is the case that when the earth, God's body, suffers, then God's Spirit suffers as well, then we can say that the Spirit of God is "Christ-like" or "cruciform" because the Spirit suffers the same violent fate as did Jesus—but now a suffering not confined to the onetime event of the cross, as in the case of Jesus, but a suffering that the Spirit experiences daily through the continual debasement of the earth and its inhabitants. In agony and sorrow, Jesus bore his cross as he climbed Golgotha and was crucified for human sin. Also in pain and suffering, the Spirit bears the cross of a planet under siege as she lives under the burden of humankind's ecological sin. Indeed, the lash marks of human sin cut into the body of the crucified Son of God are now even more graphically displayed across the expanse of the whole planet as the body of the wounded Spirit bears the incisions of further abuse. The Spirit in the earth, the body of God for us today, is being crucified afresh.

In this earth-centered model, the Spirit in our time is the "cruciform Spirit" who, like Christ, takes into Godself the burden of human sin and the deep ecological damage this sin has wrought in the biosphere. But as Christ's wounds become the eucharistic blood that nourishes the believer, so also does the Spirit's agony over damage to the earth become a source of hope for communities facing seemingly hopeless environmental destitution. As Paul says in Romans 8, the earth, in and through the ministry of the Spirit, groans and moans, like a woman in labor, as the earth awaits its deliverance from human sin—and now we can say, its deliverance from human ecological sin. The Spirit's abiding presence in a world wracked by human greed is a constant reminder that God desires the welfare of all members of the lifeweb—indeed, that no population of life-forms is beyond the ken of divine love, no matter how serious, even permanent, the ecological damage might be to particular communities of living things.

Green Christian spirituality envisions God as present in all things and the source of our attempt to develop caring relationships with other life-forms. This perspective signals a fundamental revaluation of characteristic Christian themes. Christians speak of the embodiment of God in Jesus two thousand years ago, but now all life 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. The hope of this book is that readers will discover a new sense of intimacy with God and the earth through finding traces of the Spirit in all of creation.