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CRUM CREEK & SPIRITUALITY

Earth as a Living Sacrament

Mark I. Wallace

I enter a swamp as a sacred place,—a sanctum sanctorum.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU¹

If the world is God's body, then nothing happens to the world that does not also happen to God.

—SALLIE MCFAGUE²

*Gentle Goddess,
who never asks for anything at all,
and gives us everything we have,
thank you for this sweet water,
and your fragrance.*

—LEW WELCH³

Christianity has long been a religion that endows the natural world with sacred meaning. Every day, material existence—food and drink, life and death, humans and animals, earth and sky—is recalled in countless rituals and stories as the primary medium through which God relates to humankind and the wider earth community. Christianity's central ritual is a group meal that remembers the saving death of Jesus by celebrating the good gifts of creation—eating bread and drinking wine. Its central symbol is a cross of wood—two pieces of lumber lashed together as the means and site of Jesus' crucifixion. Its central belief focuses on the body—namely, that God became flesh in Jesus and thereby became one of us, a mortal, breathing life-form who experiences the joy and suffering of life on earth. And Christianity's primary sacred document, the Bible, is suffused with rich, ecological imagery that stretches from the Cosmic Potter in Genesis who fashions Adam from the dust of the ground and puts him in a garden, to the river of life in Revelation that flows from the throne of God, bright as crystal, vivifying the tree of life that yields its fruit to all of earth's inhabitants. Christianity is a fleshly, earthly, material religion.

In this chapter, I take up the question of Christianity's earthen identity by way of a nature-based retrieval of the Holy Spirit as the green face of God in the world. I suggest that the Spirit reveals herself in the biblical literature as a physical, earthly being who labors to create and sustain humankind and otherkind in solidarity with one another.⁴ Appropriating the provocative figure of the earth as the body of God, I maintain that the natural world is best understood as the primary mode of God's presence among us today. To make this point, I develop a case study of the Crum Creek watershed (a local watershed near my home and workplace) as a Spirit-filled, sacred place because it continues to function as a vital habitat for a wide variety of native species and their young. But this is a controversial point, and so I ask, Is it appropriate in Christian terms to describe God's Spirit as the enfleshed presence of God in all things—and who thereby renders the earth we inhabit as sacred, holy ground? Is such a theology genuinely Christian, or surreptitiously animist or pagan? My hope in this essay is to explore the promise of biblical faith as a nature-centered, body-loving religion to help heal the human race's exploitative environmental habits. Throughout, I will invoke Christianity's central belief that the Spirit of God imbues all things.

THE CONTEST BETWEEN SPIRIT AND FLESH

Christianity's green identity is often at war, however, with a residual Platonist tendency within Christian theology to valorize "spirit" or "mind" as superior to "matter" or "body." Many of the church's most gifted and influential early thinkers were enamored with Plato's controlling philosophical metaphors of the body as the "prison house" or the "tomb" of the soul. The fulfillment of human existence, according to Plato, is to release oneself—one's soul—from bondage to involuntary, bodily appetites in order to cultivate a life in harmony with one's spiritual, intellectual nature.⁵ Origen, the third-century Christian Platonist, interpreted literally Jesus' blessing regarding those who "have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:2) and at age twenty had himself castrated. As a virgin for Christ no longer dominated by his sexual and physical drives, Origen, in his mind, became a perfect vessel for the display of the power of Christ over bodily temptations.⁶

In the Christian West, Augustine is arguably most responsible for the hierarchical division between spirit and nature. Augustine maintains that human beings are ruled by carnal desire—*concupiscence*—as a result of Adam's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. Adam's sin is transferred to his offspring—the human race—through erotic desire that leads to sexual intercourse and the birth of children. In their fleshly bodies, according to Augustine, infants are tainted

with “original sin” communicated to them through their biological parents’ sexual intercourse. Physical weakness and sexual desire are signs that the bodily, material world is under God’s judgment. Thus, without the infusion of supernatural grace, all of creation—depraved and corrupted—is no longer amenable to the influence of the Spirit.⁷ This long tradition of hierarchical and antagonistic division between spirit and matter continues into our own time—an era, often in the name of religion, marked by deep anxiety about and hostility toward human sexuality, the body, and the natural world.

Nevertheless, the biblical descriptions of the Holy Spirit do not square with this oppositional understanding of spirit and flesh. Spirit language and imagery in scriptural sources and much of church history bring together God and the earth, the spiritual and the natural, mind and matter—but this message is often missed. Rather than prioritizing the spiritual over the earthly, the scriptural texts figure the Spirit as a carnal, creaturely life-form always already interpenetrated by the material world. Granted, the term “Spirit” does conjure the image of a ghostly, shadowy nonentity in both the popular and high thinking of the Christian West. In her earlier work, for example, McFague argued that the model of God as Spirit is not retrievable in an ecological age. She criticized traditional descriptions of the Spirit as ethereal and vacant, and she concluded that Spirit-language is an inadequate resource for the task of earth-healing because such language is “amorphous, vague, and colorless.”⁸ Later, however, McFague performed the very retrieval of pneumatology she had earlier claimed to be impossible: a revisioning of God as Spirit in order to thematize the immanent and dynamic presence of the divine life within all creation.⁹ McFague argues convincingly how the revival of the green Spirit tradition has the potential to energize humans’ sense of kinship with other life-forms and relocate them within the cosmic story of the planet’s evolutionary history:

That tradition is of God as spirit—not the Holy Ghost, which suggests the unearthly and the disembodied, nor initially the Holy Spirit, which has been focused largely on human beings and especially the followers of Christ, but the spirit of God, the divine wind that “swept over the face of the waters” prior to creation, the life-giving breath given to all creatures, and the dynamic movement that creates, recreates, and transcreates throughout the universe. Spirit, as wind, breath, life is the most basic and most inclusive way to express centered embodiment. All living creatures, not just human ones, depend upon breath. Breath also knits together the life of animals and plants, for they are linked by the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide in each breath inhaled and exhaled. Breath is a more immediate and radically dependent way to speak of life than even food or water, for we literally live from breath to breath and

can survive only a few minutes without breathing. Our lives are enclosed by two breaths—our first when we emerge from our mother’s womb and our last when we “give up the ghost” (spirit).¹⁰

McFague argues that God’s Spirit is the founding and final breath of our lives and the lives of all of our plant and animal relations. Her recovery of scriptural Spirit-breath language underscores how the biblical texts stand as a stunning countertestimony to the conventional mind-set that opposes spirit and flesh. Indeed, the Bible is awash with rich imagery of the Spirit borrowed directly from the natural world. The four traditional elements of natural, embodied life—earth, air, water, and fire—are constitutive of the Spirit’s biblical reality as an enfleshed being who ministers to the whole creation God has made for the refreshment and joy of all beings. In the Bible, the Spirit is not a wraithlike entity separated from matter, but a living being, like all other created things, made up of the four cardinal substances that compose the physical universe.¹¹

EARTH, AIR, WATER, FIRE

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

1. As *earth* the Spirit is both the *divine dove*, with an olive branch in its mouth, that brings peace and renewal to a broken and divided world (Gen. 8:11; Matt. 3:16; John 1:32), and a *fruit bearer*, such as a tree or vine, that yields the virtues of love, joy, and peace in the life of the disciple (Gal. 5:15-26). Pictured as a bird on the wing or a flowering tree, the Spirit is a living being who shares a common physical reality with all other beings. Far from being the “immaterial substance” defined by the canonical theological lexicon, the Spirit is imagined in the Bible as a material, earthen life-form who mediates God’s power to other earth creatures through her physical presence.
2. As *air* the Spirit is both the *vivifying breath* that animates all living things (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:29-30) and the *prophetic wind* that brings salvation and new life to those it indwells (Judges 6:34; John 3:6-8; Acts 2:1-4). The nouns for Spirit in the biblical texts—*rûach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek—mean “breath” or “air” or “wind.” Literally, the Spirit is pneumatic, a powerful air-driven reality analogous to a pneumatic drill or pump. The Spirit is God’s all-encompassing, aerial presence in the life-giving atmosphere that envelops and sustains the whole earth; as such, the Spirit escapes the horizon of human activity and cannot be

contained by human constraints. The Spirit is divine wind—the breath of God—that blows where it wills (John 3:8), driven by its own elemental power and independent from human attempts to control it, refreshing and renewing all broken members of the created order.

3. As the *living water* the Spirit quickens and refreshes all who drink from its eternal springs (John 3:1-15; 4:14; 7:37-38). As physical and spiritual sustenance, the Spirit is the liquid God who imbues all life-sustaining bodily fluids—blood, mucus, milk, sweat, urine—with flowing divine presence and power. Moreover, the Water God flows and circulates within the soaking rains, dewy mists, thermal springs, seeping mudholes, ancient headwaters, swampy wetlands, and teeming oceans that constitute the hydrospheric earth we all inhabit. The Spirit as water makes possible the wonderful juiciness and succulence of life as we experience it on a liquid planet sustained by nurturing flow patterns.
4. Finally, as *fire* the Spirit is the *bright flame* that alternately judges evildoers and ignites the prophetic mission of the early church (Matt. 3:11-12; Acts 2:1-4). Fire is an expression of God's austere power; on one level, it is biblically viewed as the element God uses to castigate human error. But it is also the symbol of God's unifying presence in the fledgling Christian community where the divine *pneuma*—the rushing, whooshing wind of God—is said to have filled the early church as its members became filled with the Spirit, symbolized by “tongues of fire [that were] distributed and resting on each one” of the early church members (Acts 2:3). Aberrant, subversive, and creatively destructive, God as fire scorches and roasts who and what it chooses, apart from human intervention and design—like the divine wind that blows where it wills. But like the other natural elements, fire should be understood as functioning in the service of maintaining healthy earth relations. Fire is necessary for the maintenance of planetary life: as furnace heat, fire makes food preparation possible; as wildfire in forested and rural areas, fire revivifies long-dormant seed cultures necessary for biodiverse ecosystems; and when harnessed in the form of solar power, fire from the sun makes possible safe energy production not dependent on fossil-fuel sources. The burning God is the God who has the power to incinerate and make alive the elements of the lifeweb essential for the sustenance of our gifted ecosystem.

God as Spirit is biblically defined according to the tropes of earth, wind, water, and fire. In these scriptural texts the Spirit is figured as a potency in nature who engenders life and healing throughout the biotic order. The earth's bodies of water, communities of plants and animals, and eruptions of fire and

wind are not only *symbols* of the Spirit—as important as this nature symbolism is—but share in the Spirit’s very *nature* as the Spirit is continually enfleshed and embodied through natural landscapes and biological populations. Neither ghostly nor bodiless, the Spirit is an earthly life-form, a living being, whose nature is the same as all other participants in the biotic and abiotic environments that make up our planet home. Running rivers, prairie fires, coral reefs, schools of blue whales, equatorial forests—the Spirit both shares the same nature of other life-forms and is the animating force that enlivens all members of the lifeweb. As the breath of life who moves over the face of the deep in Genesis, as the circling dove in the Gospels who seals Jesus’ baptism, or as the Pentecostal tongues of fire in Acts, the Spirit does not exist apart from natural phenomena as a separate, heavenly reality externally related to the created order. Rather, *all* of nature in its fullness and variety is the realization of the Spirit’s work in the world. The Spirit is an earthen reality—God’s power in the land and sky that makes all things live and grow toward their natural ends. God is living in the ground, swimming through the oceans, circulating in the atmosphere; God is always afoot and underfoot as the quickening life force who yearns to bring all denizens of this sacred earth into fruition and well-being.

HILDEGARD’S GREEN PNEUMATOLOGY

There are numerous appropriations of the earthen God tradition within the history of theology that are important sources of the Spirit theology proposed here. One such source is the farsighted writings of Hildegard of Bingen. Similar to Joachim of Fiore—who taught that humankind had now entered the third period of history, the age of the Spirit—Hildegard was a twelfth-century monastic and mystical prophet who wrote trinitarian theologies with special attention to the role of the Spirit in the world. As did Joachim, Hildegard joined a religious order. But Hildegard did so at the behest of her parents at age nine. At this early age Hildegard became an anchoress and lived her life as a recluse, walled into a monastic cell by the local bishop for the rest of her life. Yet Hildegard emerged from her childhood cell to become a prolific writer, musician, artist, herbalist, abbess of her growing religious community, and even statesperson as she maintained influential relationships with bishops, kings, and emperors during the High Middle Ages. She was called the “Sibyl of the Rhine” for her wide-ranging impact on medieval culture through the power of her visionary writings.

In her major work entitled *Scivias* (that is, *Sci vias lucis*, “Know the Ways of Light”), Hildegard says she heard a voice from a living fire say to her, “O you who are wretched earth and, as a woman, untaught in all learning . . . Cry

out and relate and write these my mysteries that you see and hear in mystical visions. So do not be timid, but say those things you understand in the Spirit as I speak them through you.”¹² Hildegard, being commanded by God to “cry out and write,” becomes an oracle of the Holy Spirit. Though women were forbidden to exercise public leadership roles in the teaching ministry of the medieval church, the Spirit cut loose Hildegard’s hesitant tongue and enjoined her to preach. Many of Hildegard’s contemporaries, including many male clerics, saw her as filled with the Spirit and able to exercise the biblical role of prophet in a culture that needed her special message. Still today, Hildegard is a Spirit-inspired trailblazer for women (and men) who look for God’s call in their lives as a subversion of a male-dominated ecclesial and social order.

Resonant with the nature mysticism of biblical Spirit theology, the content of Hildegard’s message was essentially ecological, as we understand that term today. Harkening back to the earthen language of the Spirit in the biblical texts—the Spirit is breath, water, fire, and life-form such as a dove—Hildegard offers a nature-based model of the Spirit in relation to the other two members of the Godhead: “He who begets is the Father; he who is born is the Son; and he who in eager freshness proceeds from the Father and the Son, and sanctified the waters by moving over their face in the likeness of an innocent bird, and streamed with ardent heat over the apostles, is the Holy Spirit.”¹³ Hildegard’s earthen spirituality was the source of her practice as a naturalist and plant-based healer. Keeper of the soil, she published extensive catalogs of the medicinal properties of the flora she cultivated and used for ailing visitors at the monastery in Bingen. She wrote and sang hymns of thanksgiving, praising God for the bounty of nature and the fertility of the earth. Spiritually and physically, the earth’s rich vegetation has healing properties that can refresh and renew all of God’s creatures. As medievalist Elizabeth Dreyer puts it,

In addition to the Spirit’s role as prophetic inspiration, Hildegard links the Holy Spirit with the term *viriditas* or “greening.” She imagined the outpouring of the Spirit in natural rather than cultural metaphors. She combined images of planting, watering, and greening to speak of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Hildegard linked the flow of water on the crops with the love of God that renews the face of the earth, and by extension the souls of believers.¹⁴

For Hildegard, ecology and horticulture are religion because the Spirit lives in and through the natural world, bringing all things into health and fruition. Hildegard’s explicit correlation between God as Spirit and the fecundity of creation is a significant source for my attempt to “green” theology in conversation with McFague’s Christian environmental thought.

SOJOURNING IN THE CRUM CREEK

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

A variety of species of wildlife relies on the Crum Creek watershed for food and raising young. Scarlet tanagers migrate from Colombia and Bolivia to lay their eggs in the old-growth forests surrounding the creek area. Spotted and red-backed salamanders are two of the twelve or so species of amphibians that live within and along the banks of the creek and its tributaries. Monarch butterflies migrate from Mexico to the open meadows of the watershed area, where they roost to feed on milkweed plants and lay their eggs. Ancient southern red oaks survive in a section of the Crum Woods near the Swarthmore campus in an aboriginal forest relatively undisturbed by white settlement. American eels migrate downstream through the creek every fall to lay their eggs in the Sargasso Sea near Bermuda; in turn, their offspring then swim upstream to mature in the same creek area where their parents began their own journeys out to sea. And showy, large-flowered trillium wildflowers fade from white to pink each year in the deep, rich woods of the watershed.¹⁵

The section of Crum Creek near the Swarthmore campus is my favorite site for passive recreation and easy walking meditation. Living in a world awash in parking lots and strip malls, I find it healing and restorative to be able to take refuge in the dark quiet of the woods. Henry David Thoreau writes about the art of getting lost, the vertiginous pleasure of abandoning oneself to a natural place without the artificial supports of urban maps and street signs. "Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves," says Thoreau. Today many of us travel with cell phones and global positioning devices so that no one need go missing and become confused. But in taming wild places and making them the quantifiable objects of our measurement and control, we have done harm to our basic humanity, our basic animal nature. We are animal beings at our core. Our need for sleep, hunger for food, drive for companionship, and

desire for sex are telling signs of our carnal natures. To be sure, we are animals that are self-aware and self-conscious, animals whose conscience can burn with shame and guilt, animals who create art, engage in science, and produce grand mythologies that map the cosmos and set forth the roles each of us should play. But we are animals all the same.

To be divorced from our fleshly, bodily natures—not to see and hear the mad rush of a swollen river in the early spring or the smell of moist leaf litter in the autumn in the woods around us—is to be cut off from the vital tapsprings that make us who we are. We live and work in fixed-glass, temperature-controlled buildings sealed off from the natural world; we transport ourselves in fossil-fuel machines that require ever-widening incursions into undisturbed habitats; we eat processed food that has been genetically manipulated, irradiated, and then sealed in airtight packaging in order to preserve its interminable shelf life. We have replaced lives lived in sustainable harmony with the rhythms and vitalities of the natural order with soul-deadening, consumption-intensive lifestyles that leave us emotionally depleted and spiritually empty. We need untamed places to return us to our animal identities, and I am deeply grateful for the role the Crum Woods plays in my own return to the wildness within me.

Crum Creek is a celebration of the natural amity that characterizes the human and the more-than-human spheres of existence. It is a place of scenic beauty, sensual delight, and spiritual sustenance. Like the ancient groundwater aquifers in the woods that are recharged by winter snows and spring rains, the depths of my own inner life are recharged by regular sojourns along the forested banks of the streams and tributaries that make up the watershed.

But in spite of its natural beauty and seeming health, all is not well with the Crum Creek watershed. There are many threats to the biodiversity and well-being of the creek area. Overall development pressures pose the largest perils to the integrity of the watershed. In the upper portion of the creek area, housing construction, shopping centers, office parks, and parking lots have fragmented natural habitats and increased the amount of paved areas, leading to stormwater runoff problems. In the lower portion of the creek near Swarthmore College, continued institutional development by the college along the edges of the watershed has created the same sorts of problems. Ironically, while Swarthmore College has been a relatively benign caretaker of the woods near its campus for many generations, in recent years the college's growth pattern has made it a threat to the preservation of species and habitat in lower Crum Creek. This troubling growth pattern entails cutting down edges of the forest preserve to open up space for college facilities. Since the 1960s, new townhouses for faculty, expanded student dormitories, additions to existing academic buildings, new access roads, and construction of surface parking lots have shrunk the perimeter of the forest.

These past and future uses of forest near the college campus raise troubling questions about the long-term health of the Crum Creek watershed. Within Delaware County, the suburban area that includes Swarthmore College just west of Philadelphia, the Crum Woods includes the last remaining old-growth forest in the county, with remaining stands of native trees and deep-woods habitat for threatened and endangered species of plants and animals. This wealth of wildlife habitat—including, as I have noted, a southern red oak forest, spotted salamander breeding ponds, scarlet tanager nesting grounds, and migrating American eel populations, among others—relies on the protected forest interior to survive. Historically a good neighbor of the forest, Swarthmore College's institutional growth trajectory may further shrink the rich heartland of the forest that supports these and other plant and animal populations. By cutting into the woods, the college makes more compact the woodland core and thereby diminishes its strength and vitality. The shrinking of this deep-woods core makes forest-interior plant and animal life more vulnerable to temperature and weather changes and the invasion of exotic species.

CRUM CREEK AS THE WOUNDED SACRED

Degraded but still robust, wounded but still alive, the Crum Creek watershed is an impaired wildlife area that continues to supply water, food, and other basic elements to the many communities, human and nonhuman, that flourish alongside and within its banks and streams. Crum Creek suffers regular abuse from suburban storm-water runoff; sewage discharges; dams and other stream impediments that create low flow conditions; and the cutting down of perimeter forest that supports interior habitat networks for threatened plants and animals. But to me the Crum Woods is a sacred place, a place where I am nourished and affirmed in my religious quest, a place where I find God.

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

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

I grant that to honor the Crum Creek watershed as a sacred place appears, at first glance, to continue to expand the use of this term to include locales that

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

Wherever there are places left on Earth where natural ecosystems are in balance with their surroundings, there is God's presence. God is the giver of life, the sustainer of all that is good, the benevolent power in the universe who ensures the health and vitality of all living things. The Crum Creek watershed—battered and degraded though it may be—continues to function as a balanced and self-sustaining network of life-giving habitat for plant, animal, and human well-being. The life-giving role the Crum Creek performs is divine in the truest sense of the word because it describes precisely the role God performs in and through the earth: to give life, to make all beings come into fruition, to sustain the zest and vigor of creation. In this sense, the Crum Creek watershed and God are one because they are both sources of life and health for earthen beings. To say, then, that the watershed is a sacred place does not debase the meaning of the word "sacred" by designating just any such place as sacred or religious based on personal whim or fancy. On the contrary, to celebrate the Crum Woods as a sacred place is to drop to one's knees on the ground and extend one's arms to the sky, to honor this place of God's indwelling as one of the remaining life-giving habitats on our planet that make our existence, indeed the existence of all of us, possible at all.

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

Envisioning the unity of the Spirit and the Crum habitat opposes the classical theological idea of God as unchangeable and apathetic in the face of the

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

McFAGUE'S PANENTHEISM

A primary source for a theology of the wounded Spirit is the agential-organic model of God in Sallie McFague's biocentric theology. For McFague, God as agent is relatively free and independent from Earth while God as organic life-form is the "embodied spirit" of the universe. As the radically immanent reality within which we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), God, organically understood, is the "body of the universe." In this model of the natural world as God's body, all forms of life, from the smallest microorganisms to the great whales of the ocean deep, are embodiments of God. All creation enfleshes the divine life in McFague's pan-*en*-theistic model of God: God is in every living thing and all living things are interanimated by the divine life-source. This model affords theology with a new planetary agenda, because once the Christian community can learn to reconceive of the world as God's body, it will understand that the health of the planet and the well-being of God are coterminous values that are achievable only on the basis of Earth-friendly lifestyles. But does this model also subject God to fundamental loss, perhaps even destruction, in a manner that the classical model of God fully divorced from earthly determination does not? As McFague writes, while "God is not reduced to the world,

the metaphor of the world as God's body puts God 'at risk.' If we follow out the implications of the metaphor, we see that God becomes dependent through being bodily, in a way that a totally invisible, distant God would never be."¹⁶

On an initial reading of McFague's work, God appears to be fundamentally immanent to the world: the world, as God's body, is the primary medium of God's presence, and God is "at risk" in a world suffering from acute environmental degradation. But on a further reading we find that God, agentially understood, is not dependent on the world in the same way, for example, that we are dependent on our own bodies, in spite of what might appear to be the logical force of McFague's panentheistic model of God. "Everything that is, is *in* God and God is *in* all things and yet God is not identical with the universe, for the universe is dependent on God in a way that God is not dependent on the universe."¹⁷ God is *in* all life-forms, but the reality of God is neither *identical* with nor *exhausted* by God's embodied participation in the well-being of the planet. In my mind, McFague appears to equivocate on the critical issue about whether God is fully enfleshed within Earth community or not. That is, if the world *is* God's body, and if "being embodied" (as opposed to simply "having a body") entails that a being is fundamentally dependent on its body for its life and sustenance, then in what sense is God *both* bodily and yet *not* dependent on God's body, the universe, for the divine life's health and maintenance? Does McFague want to have it both ways? Does she want to maintain both God's identity *with* and autonomy *from* the universe, God's body?

In McFague's agential-organic formulation, does God remain "up in heaven," as it were, ultimately secure and insulated from the environmental squalor suffered on the earth "here below"? In the end, it appears that God is not vulnerable to final loss and destruction in the event that God's Earth-body is destroyed—in spite of the fact that if we were to lose our bodies, meaningful personal identity as we know it would be lost as well. God is at risk in McFague's paradigm, but not in any terminal sense. But reimagining God as Spirit as *thoroughly* incarnated within the natural world—a move initially advanced by McFague but not fully embraced in her final analysis—entails the disturbing conclusion that God's fate and the world's future are fundamentally bound up with one another. By deciding in freedom, and not by any internal necessity, to indwell all things, including the Crum Creek ecosystem, God places God's self at risk just insofar as the modes of God's presence suffer environmental degradation. God, then, is so internally related to the universe that the specter of ecocide raises the risk of deicide: to wreak environmental havoc on the earth is to run the risk that we will do irreparable, even fatal harm to the Mystery we call God. The wager of this model is that while God and world are not identical to one another (so McFague), their basic unity and common destiny raises

the possibility that continual degradation of the earth's biotic communities may result in the attenuation and eventual destruction of the divine life itself (*pace* McFague).

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

COBB'S CRITIQUE OF SACRED LAND THEOLOGY

In traditional Christian thought only God is sacred. God alone is supremely absolute and sovereign over the whole created order. All other beings, while valuable as products of God's creative love and bearers of God's image, only have value and worth relative to God. The author and arbiter of life and death itself, God is the principal power in the universe who rules with authority, judgment, and compassion over all of the human and nonhuman subjects in God's care and domain. In this classically feudal picture of God's relationship to his creaturely vassals, sacredness belongs to God and God alone.

McFague has consistently challenged this feudal model as bad theology and bad ecology. She argues that the kingly model of God and the world has led to a hierarchical understanding of human beings as God's special image-bearers who are given the responsibility to exercise lordship and dominion over the earth. In the Great Chain of Being, God, as the disembodied source of all

life, places humankind in between the highest order of being (heaven) and the lowest order (earth) so that human beings can be God's vice-regents over the created order. Since in the monarchical model neither God nor humankind is understood as intrinsically related to the world, it follows that the earth can be used—and sometimes abused—to serve human ends. Traditional Christian thought is indicted by McFague as partly responsible for the environmental crisis just insofar as it has sacralized this monarchical model of God and humankind as standing over against the earth—which, in turn, is relegated to the status of a lower order of being that needs human control and oversight.¹⁸

In most respects, this feudal view of God and the world is rejected by theologian John B. Cobb Jr. Cobb laments Christianity's myopic focus on the salvation of human beings to the exclusion of concern for the well-being of nonhuman plant and animal communities. This anthropocentric bias has blinded Christianity to the degradation of the biosphere and the cry of animal suffering that defines human history. A new vision of Christianity in harmony with nature is the demand of our time. Cobb's move to a thoroughgoing green Christianity in harmony with ascribing sacred value to the Earth community would seem to be the natural trajectory of his thought. And in certain important respects, Cobb does share basic assumptions with this orientation. All beings, including and especially human beings, are radically and mutually interdependent on natural systems: to destroy plant and animal life wantonly is to threaten and diminish the life quality and well-being of all of us, human and nonhuman alike.

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

Nevertheless, [the sacredness of all creatures] language is, from a historic Protestant perspective, dangerously misleading. Speaking rigorously, the line between the sacred and the profane is better drawn between God and creatures. To place any creatures on the sacred side of the line is to be in danger of idolatry. For many Protestants . . . the right way to speak is incarnational, immanent, or sacramental. God is present in the world—in every creature. But no creature is divine. Every creature has intrinsic value, but to call it sacred is in danger of attributing to it absolute value. That is wrong.¹⁹

Cobb's case against radical religious ecology is that it wrongly blurs the line of distinction needed to separate beings of relative value from the divine being itself, the bearer of absolute value. Unless theology polices the borderland that divides creation and Creator, there is the danger that religious faith will slip into the worship of a false divinity, an idol, and degenerate into an animist belief-system that regards all beings as holy—Spirit-filled bearers of divinity. Idolatry for Cobb is the confusion of realms of reality that need to be kept apart. Cobb's theology operates within a binary, either-or logical field: one worships either God or nature, but not both. Since Christianity is not an animist religion that invests all things with sacred presence, one should worship God alone as sacred. While nature *is* charged with God's presence, according to Cobb, it does not follow that nature *itself* is a divine reality alongside or internal to God and thereby an object worthy of our devotion and worship. To call the created order sacred, therefore, is dangerous and idolatrous: it is to deify and revere the earth as equal in worth and value to God. To do this is to displace God's unique role as humankind's proper object of worship.

From the perspective of classical theology, I understand Cobb's concern. But the witness of Scripture and tradition is to the world as the abode of divinity, the home of life-giving Spirit, God's dwelling place where the warp and woof of everyday life is sacred. As McFague writes, nature is a "divine habitation" and the place where "we see the presence of God in the world."²⁰ All life is sacred because the earth is a natural system alive with God's presence that supports the well-being of all created things. McFague's point is that God is not a dispassionate and distant potentate who exercises dominion over the universe from some far-removed place. Rather, in and through this planet that is our common home, God is earnestly working with us to heal the earth, but God also suffers deeply from the agony of this unlifted burden. Building on McFague's nature theology, I have said that the *earthen* Spirit who infuses all things with her benevolent presence is also the *wounded* Spirit who implores us, in groans too deep for words, to practice heartfelt sustainable living in harmony with the natural world around us. In the warmth of the sun, the shelter of the encircling sky, the strength of the great oceans, and the fecundity of the good land, we have everything we need to recover our kinship with Spirit and Earth and develop green lifestyles in response to this kinship.

It is not blasphemous, therefore, to say that nature is sacred. It is not mistaken to find God's presence in all things. To speak in animistic terms, it is not wrong to re-envision Christianity as continuous with the worldviews of traditional peoples who bore witness to and experienced divinity everywhere—who saw and felt the Spirit alive in every rock, tree, animal, and body of water they encountered. For me it is not idolatry to enjoy Crum Creek, degraded though it

may be, as a sacred place that plays a crucial role in maintaining the health and well-being of humankind and otherkind in eastern Pennsylvania. God as Spirit is the gift of life to all creation, and where life is birthed and cared for, there God is present, and there God is to be celebrated. God is holy, and by extension, all that God has made participates in that holiness. Thus, when we labor to protect and nurture the good creation God has made, we invest all things with inherent, supreme value as a loving extension of God's bounty and compassion.

Sacred, then, is the ground we stand on; holy is the earth where we are planted.

Crum Creek 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 biophilic reevaluation *and* continuation 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.