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Green Christianity

Mark Wallace

CHRISTIANITY HAS LONG BEEN A RELIGION THAT ENDOWS THE natural world with sacred meaning. Everyday, material existence—food and drink, life and death, humans and animals, Earth and sky—is recalled in 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 becomes one of us, a mortal, breathing life-form who experiences the joy and suffering of life on Earth. Christianity's primary sacred document, the Bible, is suffused with rich, ecological imagery that stretches from the Cosmic Potter in Genesis to the tree of life in Revelation that yields its fruit to all of Earth's inhabitants. Christianity, then, is a “deep green” or “earthen” religion because it binds God to the created order and thereby values the natural world as a holy place.

Christianity's earthen identity is also undergirded through its depiction of the Holy Spirit as the green face of God in the world. (I use here the female pronoun to name the Spirit; there is good precedence for this usage in the Bible and Christian tradition.) I suggest that the Spirit reveals herself in biblical literature as a physical, earthly being (dove, light, water, and air) who labors to sustain humankind and otherkind in solidarity with one another, and that the natural world—the body of God, as it were—is best understood as the primary mode of God's presence among us today.

My case is that without a deeply felt spiritual connection to the Earth community as the enfleshment of God's presence, it will be difficult for Christians and other people of faith to develop long-term, sustainable relationships with the good creation God has made. A partial turn to valorizing nature as sacred ground has been made in post-Vatican II papal encyclicals and bishops' pastorals and, similarly, in contemporary Protestant ecological theologies. But a residual anthropocentric bias in Catholic and Protestant thought—namely, that the end of creation is human flourishing—has prevented a full biocentric turn to ascribing holiness or sacred value to the created order.

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

MARK WALLACE, PhD, graduate of The University of Chicago, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and member of the Interpretation Theory Committee and the Environmental Studies Committee at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania. He has authored *Finding God in the Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, Nature, Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, Violence, and the Renewal of Creation*, *The Second Naïveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* plus he edited *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* by Paul Ricoeur.