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Earthing The Spirit: With Mark Wallace

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Earthing the Spirit: With Mark I. Wallace

MM: I haven't read Alfred North Whitehead, but I was fascinated – almost disturbed – by the fact that you point to him as a figure who contributes to the strong metaphysical tradition by desiring a rigorous scientific-theoretical framework for religions like Christianity – and the quotes you provide sustain your argument.³⁹ I say 'fascinated – almost disturbed' because Whitehead is a pivotal figure for process thought and ecological theology. Would you therefore argue that his process philosophy and the green theology it inspires remain excessively metaphysical?

MIW: Yes. I think that's the problem. I think the process tradition, in its worst moments, tries to ground Christian thought on philosophical foundation that understands God primarily as a move within metaphysics. So God becomes a being understood under the horizon of other beings. And it limits God's freedom. And it limits God's potential to be novel and different. So my major complaint with process philosophy and process theology is that it's onto-theological. It evacuates God of God's otherness and it renders 'God' a term to be understood within the horizon of metaphysics. So that's my major disagreement with process thought. *But* the sensibility that animates process thought I'm in *deep* sympathy with. So the idea in process thought that we understand God in dynamic rather than static terms, and we understand God as changing, evolving, dynamically operating in a way that is true to current evolutionary and environmental thinking is, to me, a wonderful move in process thought. So the sensibility in process thought has, I think, deep affinities with current environmental thinking and current postmodern environmental thinking. But the attempt by process thought to ground religious thinking on a philosophical foundation I think is a terrible mistake.

39 Refer to Wallace, 'God is Underfoot: Pneumatology after Derrida', in *The Religious*, ed. John D. Caputo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 197-211 [henceforth Wallace, 'God is Underfoot']; also refer to Wallace's *Fragments of the Spirit*.

MM: Even though Derrida warns us that we cannot escape metaphysical economies – and you seem to agree with him – you nevertheless suggest that contemporary theology should be ‘cutting its moorings to the philosophical tradition of understanding God as supreme cause and ground of being’.⁴⁰ Are you suggesting this cut be clean? Is a clean cut possible? Is it even *desirable* leading perhaps to an excessive fideism?

MIW: That’s a good question. I think of theology as a freestanding rhetorical discipline: not as a subspecies of philosophical inquiry. So, as a freestanding rhetorical tradition, I think theology always needs to be vigilant and make sure that it’s not grounding its enterprise on the false security of a philosophical foundation. In that sense, I think theology always needs to guard against too-close philosophical or ontological or metaphysical ties. But can the ‘cut’ or the move away from metaphysics or philosophy be completely clean? No: I don’t think it can be completely clean. There’s a wonderful quote by Karl Barth: ‘Whenever I open my mouth and I speak theologically I am also speaking philosophically.’ So it’s always the case that our theological articulation is colored – if not determined – by philosophical presuppositions. But I think with that recognition one tries to be clear about the degree to which one’s theological articulation is tied to one’s philosophical presuppositions. So it’s an encouragement to be vigilant – not what I think would be a naïve insistence that theology completely cut itself away from its philosophical antecedents or its philosophical moorings. I don’t think that’s possible, but I think theology can be vigilant.

MM: Although your argument for envisioning God as ‘Earth Spirit’ is a powerful one, are there not nevertheless in-built problems? For example, that it may lapse into a kind of pantheism in which God’s transcendence is erased? On the other side of the coin, the risk that matter is made sacred on account of something else – Earth Spirit – rather than being valued for what it is, which is ultimately irreducibly mysterious?

MIW: The risk or the wager of my work is pantheism or paganism or a kind of heathen Christian vision that so closely ties God to the life of the Earth that it’s difficult to distinguish between the two realities. What I

40 Wallace, ‘God is Underfoot’, 203.

would like to do is articulate, in theological terms, a sort of ‘Chalcedonian logic’, so that God and Earth mutually interpenetrate one another but in such a way that the two aren’t confused but also in such a way that the two are seen as inseparably bound to one another. So there will be some people – particularly more traditional Christians – who will see this effort on my part towards what process thinkers and others – including Sallie McFague – call *panentheism*.⁴¹ More traditional Christians will see my panentheistic sensibility as pagan or even idolatrous, because I bring together too closely the creation and the Creator. But, in fact, I think that – not only in light of the current ecological crisis but also in terms of the biblical foundations of Christianity – that God is Earth Spirit. And so I make the case in the article you’re referring to, and in other things that I’ve written, that God as Spirit is consistently figured in biocentric terms: as earth, as fire, as wind, and water, and other terms. And it’s these biocentric figurations of the Spirit in the Bible that become the source of my own Earth-centered theology. It’s panentheistic.

MM: Just a quick word on ‘panentheism’? How is it differentiated from ‘pantheism’?

MW: Pantheism, in my mind, conjures the image of a reference to Earth as identical with the divine life. And much of my reading in Native American traditions *at times* helps me understand some aspects of Native American traditions as being pantheistic. That is, there is no way to distinguish between Earth, on the one hand, and divine Spirit on the other. I think Christianity wants to nuance that relationship and set up a dialectic between the two. So, again, I would say in panentheistic terms: it’s not that God and Earth are the same reality; it’s that the two realities are, in process terms, *internally* – not extrinsically – related to one another. They are inseparably unified with one another but also distinct.

MM: I’m attracted to the idea that God may be a ‘benevolent, all-encompassing divine force within the biosphere who continually indwells and works to maintain the integrity of all life-forms’.⁴² However, isn’t this conception perhaps marked by a kind of Neoplatonic nostalgia

41 Refer to McFague, *The Body of God*.

42 Wallace, ‘God is Underfoot’, 204.

for a god who is unproblematically ‘good’ and ‘pure’ and ‘loving’? Isn’t a green pneumatology too reductive although in a direction *way* more affirmative than Christian Platonism? Shouldn’t postmodern theology at least be considering the more radical path opened by the Nietzschean speculation of a god ‘beyond good and evil’? Or, from another angle, the biblical God – if taken *unselectively* – is *both* jealous and loving, crazy and reasonable, corporeal and incorporeal? ‘A God before which we can fall to our knees in awe, or play music or dance.’⁴³ I guess you yourself acknowledge that you ‘propose to retrieve some key biblical tropes of God’⁴⁴ and that this hermeneutical selectivity is nothing to be ashamed about – a selectivity which is something Richard Kearney readily acknowledges and is committed to.⁴⁵

MIW: That’s a very good question and I would refer you to my book on the Spirit, *Fragments of the Spirit*, which has a whole chapter on what I call ‘The Spirit and Evil’.⁴⁶ My way of understanding God in Christian environmental terms is through the Spirit. And I think one of the original contributions of my work to this green pneumatology model is a recognition of the Spirit’s open complicity with structures of evil. I have not read anything in Christian thought that actually indicts the Spirit as complicitous with evil structures and evil forces. There is in some feminist and political writing in Christian theology a recognition of *God’s* complicity with structures of evil. But actually the *Spirit itself* is also complicit with these structures. You’re right: in the shorter articles I follow through one trajectory regarding biblical figurations of the Spirit which is: that the Spirit is understood in more positive, benevolent terms. But actually the Spirit – like the other members of the Trinity – tragically, to me, is in collusion with structures of evil – or even the origin itself of evil – in a way that painfully complicates how one is to understand God in our time. In the Hebrew Bible, the Spirit oftentimes visits individuals

43 The remark belongs to an anti-onto-theological remark by Heidegger; refer to his *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 72: ‘Before the *causa sui* man [*sic*] can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.’

44 Wallace, ‘God is Underfoot’, 204.

45 Refer to my dialogue with Kearney in the present volume.

46 Refer to Wallace’s chapter entitled ‘The Spirit and Evil: Eyeless in Gaza (Again)’ in Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit*, 171-208.

and propels them into acts of bloody warfare that are horrific. Some commentators say: 'Well, that was superseded by the New Testament and the Spirit has sort of evolved beyond those early, more barbaric calls to war. The Spirit has become a more benevolent life force.' But the picture is much more complicated. The case study that I use in my own work in this regard is the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts where two individuals in the early Jerusalem church lie to the church about whether they have given the full proceeds of their tithe to the leaders of the church. And they lie. And according to the leaders of the church, they haven't just lied to human beings: they've lied to the Spirit. And Peter comes to Ananias and Sapphira and says: 'Because you've lied to the Holy Spirit, you will be carried away.' And, in fact, that's what happens: they drop dead and the people in the church and in the city of Jerusalem are horrified by this work of what I consider to be the vengeful Spirit. [Acts 5.1-11] So it's this angry, vengeful – in my mind *evil* – work of the Spirit that has to be criticized, based on a political, emancipatory, environmental reading of the Bible.

MM: Just one other point about the quote I just mentioned: a 'divine force within the biosphere' which 'maintain[s] the integrity of all life-forms...'. You argue that God sustains all life forms. I assume that you do not want to be 'bio-centric' and would also include 'inanimate' beings.

MIW: I should say 'biotic' and 'abiotic'.

MM: It's just that, throughout your paper, you talk about the living or the biotic. I don't think that you're biocentric because the four key terms that you use – earth, air, water, fire – are all inanimate.

MIW: That's a good point. You mean 'biocentric' in a *narrow* sense of only referring to living, sentient beings. Whereas my work tries to encompass what I call 'all life forms': this would be all entities.

MM: For me, some entities don't 'live': a rock *is* but it doesn't 'live' in our normal sense of the term.

MIW: I would talk about rock or land formations as communities of abiotic and biotic life, in which the Spirit lives within and empowers and inhabits these abiotic/biotic communities. When I say ‘biocentric’ I’m trying to open up God’s love and God’s sustaining presence to include *all* things, *all* entities – not just sentient, conscious living beings.

MM: The next question goes back to something you mentioned before. I understand that paradox can only be comprehended up to a certain point, but can you unravel a little your proposition that ‘God as Spirit is best understood, paradoxically, as *beyond* Being and still radically *immanent* to all beings within the natural order.’⁴⁷ You previously mentioned the phrase ‘internally related’: it’s such a hard idea to grasp.

MIW: The animating sensibility is, on the one hand, to preserve God’s radical otherness: God’s transcendence from and independence from determinate human and non-human life; on the other hand, it’s to radically locate God within all things. I first came to this through Martin Buber’s work in an aside in his book *I and Thou*, where Buber says: ‘You understand that God is wholly other.’ He says: ‘That’s true. But don’t you also understand that God is wholly same.’⁴⁸ And ‘wholly same’ here, to me, conjures the image of God as radically immanent within the life force. I wouldn’t *solve* the paradox this way but the way I would articulate how the paradox is worked out, in terms of God’s move towards creation, is to say: while God is, on one level, wholly other, in God’s wholly otherness and in God’s freedom, God has wagered Godself to become incarnate and is continually – through the Spirit – enfleshing Godself within the biosphere. And that wager, in my mind, means that God is now, in our time, the damaged, wounded God, because God has infused Godself within creation. Creation then becomes the living flesh of the divine life. And insofar as we degrade and wreak ecocide in relation to that divine flesh, we degrade and harm and *perhaps* – and this is the divine wager – we even do permanent harm and we create permanent damage within the life of God. I want to, in a Barthian, negative, Derridean gesture, preserve God’s wholly otherness. But I also think that, in a

47 Wallace, ‘God is Underfoot’, 205.

48 Refer to Buber’s *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Collier Books, 1986).

counter-veiling move, I want to insist on God's radical immanence to all things.

MM: I've wondered about Derrida's statement 'Every other is wholly other' and I've questioned whether that limits us from adding the condition: 'Every other is *also* wholly other' because every other could be *a little bit the same or wholly same*.

MIW: I agree with you. That's how I would gloss Derrida's famous comment. I would say: 'Every other is wholly other and wholly same.' I would want to insist on that dialectic with reference to the divine life. That would irritate some ecotheologians, on the one hand; it'll irritate some Barthians, on the other. But that, to me, is the central affirmation of the notion of incarnation within Christian thought. It's not a punctiliar once-in-time event two thousand years ago – that *is* the case with Jesus. But the point of Jesus's life and ministry is that it now inaugurates the gift of Spirit. And Spirit now lives with us, in us, and within *all* things on an *ongoing* basis, which is, to me, the point of the incarnation.

MM: You mention in the essay the suspect notions of the Adamic Fall and of original sin. I agree that these ideas are thoroughly questionable and ecologically disastrous, but – and I'm perhaps playing devil's advocate here – do they or couldn't they provide a platform from which we could address phenomena like the ecological crisis? To explain: if there was no Fall, then it could be argued that environmental degradation is merely part of the continuing story of creation. Without these kinds of concepts, how could we argue that the human devastation of the biosphere is 'unnatural'? If sin is structural, then it seems we're stuck with ruining the planet.

MIW: In broad terms, I would want to preserve thinking dialectically about both fall and blessing, or about both sin and gift. And I think that's at the heart of the Christian tradition in its better moments. People like Paul Ricoeur and their work on human fallibility have been very important to me in this regard. People like Matthew Fox who talk about

'Original Blessing' are very important to me in this regard.⁴⁹ I see the inaugural creation hymn in the Book of Genesis as a double-forked statement. On the one hand, affirming original blessing: creation is gift, it's unilateral gift. It's not a reciprocal gift that necessitates a human response. It is this extravagant, transgressive, *extremely* generous gifting of God to all things, living and nonliving. On the other hand – and this is the mystery of creation – in some sense, that gift is faulted, cracked, fissured. It's not that God is sinful or makes human beings sinful, but there is in our origins what Ricoeur calls a certain kind of 'disproportionality' or 'discontinuity' to the human project.⁵⁰ So sin is always already a possibility but not a given actuality. So I think of the Fall as a myth speaking to this crack or fault line that runs through human nature – that makes us *fallible* but not *sinful*. And, at the same time, it embeds us in a good creation that always provides us with hope no matter what it is that we do.

MM: I find it admirable how you stress that certain biblical texts *appear* to reinforce longstanding hierarchical dualisms – such as Paul's dichotomy between 'spirit versus flesh' in Romans 8 – but that careful reading is required. This is something I think Brian Ingraffia does in his book *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology* – a move which I think should be applauded – even though I agree that his treatment of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida is problematic to say the least.⁵¹ Would you describe your work as involving sophisticated biblical retrievals, which would fall under the rubric of a contemporary, progressive kind of 'biblical theology'? I like using that term rather than the term you use in your conclusion which is 'positive theology' because I think 'biblical theology' may differentiate it from the positive theology which is excessively metaphysical.

MIW: I don't want my work to be 'biblical theology' in the old sense of that term: as if one can simply read off the Bible, unadulterated, these

49 Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe: Bear, 1983).

50 Refer to Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967).

51 Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*. As I note during my dialogue with Hart, I qualifiedly agree with his criticism of Ingraffia in his 'Introduction to the 2000 Edition' of *The Trespass of the Sign*, xxii-xxiv.

'great master-themes' that then get organized by the theologian. That's a kind of bad neo-orthodoxy that I want to eschew.

MM: A 'postmodern biblical theology'?

MIW: Yeah, any kind of qualifier like that. You could call it a postmodern, biblically-sonorous theology. I want my theology to always resonate deeply to the complicated intertext of the Bible. The reason I hesitate around the bare-bones term 'biblical theology' is that the so-called biblical theology that I've read before doesn't understand the Bible as a point-counterpoint intertext. To me, it sees it as this flat, homophonic story that doesn't acknowledge the deep problems and tensions and fissures and cracks within the biblical story itself. So this multi-faceted picture of God that we talked about – [that God] is benevolent on the one hand, and complicitous with structures of evil on the other hand – biblical theology so-called doesn't recognize that. And this is also why I'm nervous about securing the theological enterprise on the pseudo-security of a philosophical foundation in the sense of onto-theology and metaphysical theology. I want to avoid that extreme; I also want to avoid the extreme of bad biblical theology, and develop a theology that's biblically resonant but is always performed with an emancipatory intent. And sometimes the Bible facilitates an emancipatory intent; and sometimes it cuts against it. And it's the responsibility of the theologian to recognize that the Bible is always in travail with itself and to use the Bible, in effect, to critique the Bible.

MM: To add weight to your argument that Paul is not essentially *anti-somatic* (anti-body), you quote 1 Corinthians 6.19-20: 'Do you not know that your body (*soma*) is a temple of the Holy Spirit (*hagiou pneumatos*) within you, which you have from God? So glorify God in your body.' Couldn't it be easily demonstrated that there is an underlying – perhaps an *obvious* – privileging of the spiritual in this passage: that the body is special *because* it is the Spirit's temple? That the body is lesser if it is not a temple of the Holy Spirit? Shouldn't we, as 'green' thinkers, be undermining *any and all* references to our bodies as vessels for something else – be it a soul or divine spirit? In other words, shouldn't we attempt to eradicate this anti-somatic vocabulary of 'vessel', 'prison

house', 'tomb', etc.? Against Paul, shouldn't we declare: 'Glorify the body – just because there is body'?

MIW: That's a good question. Much of my work comes out of radical environmentalism and here I think of people like Susan Griffin or John Muir or Aldo Leopold and other people who valorize and celebrate bodily corporeal physical life for its own sake – not because it's a medium for Spirit.⁵² And that is a kind of robust pagan sensibility that I have deep affinities for. But, on the other hand, my work comes out of my own attempt to be christianly faithful and to actually see the tension between Christian Spirit-centered work and radical pagan environmental body-centered work. I want to see the tension between the two and to try to bring those two vocabularies together. And the way I would do it is something akin to Paul in his better moments. Now, in his worst moments, Paul does sound like a gloss on Plato: the body now becomes a prison house, a tomb –

MM: It's better than a 'vessel': it's a temple! But it's *still* a vessel for *something else*.

MIW: Right. And the body supposedly needs to be tempered, disciplined, set aside, polemicized against, so that the body can release the Spirit and so that the Spirit can return to its disembodied source which is God. And there is that line of thinking in Paul. I think Paul, in his *better* moments, sees the body as a *neutral* – neither good nor bad, neither 'flesh' nor 'spirit' in that sense – clearing for sometimes the war but sometimes the meeting of physical life, on the one hand, and Spirit life, on the other. So, in his better moments, I think Paul recognizes that body as the site for living the life of the Spirit. And, if you read Paul that way, that's the opening for a *rapprochement* between pagan body-centered thought and

52 Griffin, Muir, and Leopold are prominent figures in the history of ecology; refer to, e.g., Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2000); John Muir, *To Yosemite and Beyond: Writings from the Years 1863 to 1875*, eds. Robert Engberg and Donald Wesling (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980); Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*, intro. Robert Finch, illust. Charles W. Schwartz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Christian Spirit-centered thought. That's Paul in his better moments – not his worst moments.

MM: And we all have bad moments.

MIW: Right!

MM: As you know, I'm looking at the Derridean reflection on gift/ing and how that *may* relate to ecotheology. And I'm glad that you've already mentioned the gift of the Spirit: be it creation per se or whatever. Would you like to talk a little bit more about that?

MIW: I think life is gift. This is a footnote to Derrida. And I think life-as-gift consists of four cardinal or basic elements, all of which are identified in Spirit terms in the Bible. This is my Native American reading of the Bible – and I admit that this is a hermeneutical strategy. It's not that I have been raised in a nativist culture. But if one were to choose American Indian optics to understand the Bible, one would understand the Spirit as the dance between Grandfather Sky, on the one hand, and Mother Earth, on the other. And God's gifts to humankind and to all other kinds is the gift of the four cardinal elements: water, fire, earth, and air. It is an incredible blind spot in Christian theology – that the Christian theologians that I know of – including ecotheologians – don't understand how the Spirit is figured in biocentric terms within the biblical literatures. The Spirit is fire, air, water, earth. Sometimes the Spirit is figured as a life form like a dove, on the one hand, or as a bush, on the other hand, that gives gifts to the Christian community. So it's this understanding of the radical giftedness of God through the cardinal elements that are understood metaphorically as essential to the Spirit's being that I think is the basis for green theology in our time. It's not the only basis: I think there are other ways of doing it: you can read the Jesus story with green eyes. You can also look at God – apart from Jesus and the Spirit – with green eyes. You and I have talked today about creation: one can talk about a theory of creation with green eyes. To me, one avenue of approach to this is through this Earth-centered figuration of the Spirit.