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# The Song Of The Thrush: Christian Animism And The Global Crisis Today

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## The Song of the Thrush

*Christian Animism and the Global Crisis Today*

MARK I. WALLACE

*The thrush alone declares the immortal wealth and vigor that is in the forest. . . . Whenever a man hears it he is young, and Nature is in her spring; wherever he hears it, it is a new world and a free country, and the gates of Heaven are not shut against him.*

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

### The Song of the Thrush

Through a set of fortuitous circumstances last year, I moved to the edge of a three-hundred-acre forest adjacent to Swarthmore College, where I teach. At the time of my move, I was startled early one morning by what I later learned from a friend to be the call of the wood thrush. I have since grown accustomed to this wonder. The song of the thrush is a melody unlike anything I have ever heard. Liquid, flute-like, perfectly pitched—the thrush sings a kind of ethereal duet with itself in which it simultaneously produces two independent melody lines that reverberate with one another back and forth, back and forth. The thrush lives in the interior of the forest and refuses the lure of my feeder; like God’s Spirit, its effects are

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Much of the material in this essay is drawn from the following two works: Mark I. Wallace, *Finding God in the Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005); idem, *Green Christianity: Five Ways to a Sustainable Future* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

felt and heard by me even though I have never seen it. In the spring and summer I wake up, and often go to sleep, to the otherworldly harmonics of a bird that I cannot see but whose delicate polyphony now pleasantly haunts my dreams. Thoreau says whoever hears the song of the thrush enters a “new world” where the “gates of Heaven are not shut against” the listener. The airy trills of the thrush open up to me the beauty and mystery of the natural world whenever I am graced by its invisible presence. Sight unseen, awash in the deep of this sweet counterpoint, the thrush for me is a moving synecdoche of the beauty of creation. In the refrain of a Native American prayer,

Beauty is before me  
 And beauty is behind me  
 Above and below me hovers the beautiful  
 I am surrounded by it  
 I am immersed in it  
 In my youth I am aware of it  
 And in old age I shall walk quietly  
 The beautiful trail.<sup>1</sup>

For me, “the beautiful trail” — the natural world — serves as the primary site for the sort of spiritual encounters listening to the wood thrush provides. “I enter a swamp as a sacred place—a *sanctum sanctorum*,” wrote Henry David Thoreau.<sup>2</sup> The whoosh of a strong wind, the taste of the sea on my tongue, the delicate movement of a monarch butterfly, the arch of the bright sky on a cold winter night, the screech of a red-tailed hawk — these events are preternatural overtures that greet me from another plane of existence. It is not that this other plane stands over and against everyday reality, but rather that commonplace existence is a window into another world that is *this* world but now experienced in its pregnant depths and deeper possibilities. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke’s Gospel who walked and talked with Jesus but did not recognize him until their understanding was changed — like the gift of bread and wine that is not experienced as God’s body and blood apart from its ritual transformation — the natural world stands mute until it is spiritually encountered as saturated with grace and meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> “Now Talking God,” in *Earth Prayers: From Around the World, 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations for Honoring the Earth*, ed. Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 32.

<sup>2</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” in *The Norton Book of American Nature Writing*, ed. John Elder and Robert Finch (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 183.

In secular parlance, to be human is to dwell poetically on the Earth; in religious terms, to be human is to dwell mythically on the Earth.<sup>3</sup> How to experience Earth mythico-poetically—how to find God as Eco-Spirit through the daily miracle of ordinary existence—is the thrust of this essay.

The orientation that drives my appreciation of nature as sacred ground is what I call Christian animism—the biblically inflected conviction that all of creation is infused with and animated by God’s presence. The term *animism* has its origins in the early academic study of the vernacular belief systems of indigenous peoples in Africa and the Americas. Sharing resonances with the Latin word *animus*, which means “soul” or “spirit,” it originated with nineteenth-century British anthropologist E. B. Tylor who used it to analyze how primordial people attributed “life” or “soul” to all things, living and nonliving. Animism was central to an evolutionary, occidental vocabulary that described the unusual folkways of so-called primitive peoples. In spite of its colonial and pejorative origins, the term today carries a certain analytical clarity by illuminating how indigenous communities envision nonhuman nature as “ensouled” or “inspired” with sacred presence and power. As Graham Harvey writes:

[Animism] is typically applied to religions that engage with a wide community of living beings with whom humans share this world or particular locations within it. It might be summed up by the phrase “all that exists lives” and, sometimes, the additional understanding that “all that lives is holy.” As such the term animism is sometimes applied to particular indigenous religions in comparison to Christianity or Islam, for example.<sup>4</sup>

What intrigues me about Harvey’s definition is his assumption that monotheistic traditions such as Christianity should be regarded

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<sup>3</sup> The sensibility here is borrowed from Friedrich Hölderlin who writes: “Full of merit, and yet poetically, dwells man on this Earth” (Friedrich Hölderlin, *Samtliche Werke*, ed. Gotthold Friedrich Staudlin [Berlin: Cotta, 1846], 372; English translation by Stefan Schmanski from *Martin Heidegger, Existence and Being* [South Bend, IN: Regnery, 1949], 282). Poetry is a meaning-making activity that invests life with a measure of coherence and purpose. Language is a world-creating exercise that converts existence in empty space into habitation or “dwelling,” in Hölderlin’s parlance, in a world charged with rich possibilities.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Harvey, “Animism—A Contemporary Perspective,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron R. Taylor et al., 2 vols. (New York: Continuum, 2005), 1:81.

as distinct from animism. Initially, this makes sense in light of the historic Christian proclivity to cast aspersions on the material world as dead matter and the flesh as inferior to the concerns of the soul. Pseudo-Titus, for example, an extra-canonical exhortation to Christian asceticism from late antiquity, urges its readers to cleanse themselves of worldly pollution by overcoming fleshly temptations: "Blessed are those who have not polluted their flesh by craving for this world, but are dead to the world that they may live for God!"<sup>5</sup> At first glance Christianity's emphasis on making room for God by denying the world and the flesh is at odds with the classical animist belief in the living goodness of all inhabitants of sacred Earth.

In the main, however, Christian faith offers its practitioners a profound vision of God's "this-worldly" identity. Harvey's presumption that Christianity and animism are distinct is at odds with the biblical worldview that all things are bearers of divinity—the whole biosphere is filled with God's animating power—insofar as God signaled God's love for creation by incarnating Godself in Jesus and giving the Holy Spirit to indwell everything that exists on the planet. The miracle of Jesus as the living enfleshment of God in our midst—a miracle that is alongside the gift of the Spirit to the world since time immemorial—signals the ongoing vitality of God's sustaining presence within the natural order. God is not a sky-god divorced from the material world. As once God became earthly at the beginning 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 essay I analyze the biblical promise of Christian animism: that human beings are obligated to care for creation because everything God made is a bearer of the Holy Spirit. In this formulation, however, I do not mean that nature is dull and inert and only becomes sacred and alive with the infusion of Spirit into all things. Nature, rather, is always-already aflame with movement, weight, color, voice, light, texture—and spiritual presence. Nature's capacity for *relatedness*, its proclivity to encounter us, as we encounter it, in constantly new and ever-changing patterns of self-maintenance and skillful organization is the ground tone of its sacred, vibrant power. Recent work in anthropology, ethnology, and comparative religious studies highlights how indigenous peoples celebrated, and continue to celebrate, relations with other-than-human communities

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<sup>5</sup> "Pseudo-Titus," in Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 239.

of beings that are alive with spirit, emotion, desire, and personhood. The ascription of personhood to all things locates humans in a wider fraternity of relationships that includes “bear persons” and “rock persons” along with “human persons.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, all things are persons, only some of whom are human. As David Abram argues, nature or matter is not a dead and lesser thing that stands in a lower relationship to animate spirit but is a self-organizing field of living, dynamic relationships.

Yet as soon as we question the assumed distinction between spirit and matter, then this neatly ordered hierarchy begins to tremble and disintegrate. If we allow that matter is *not* inert, but is rather animate (or self-organizing) from the get-go, then the hierarchy collapses, and we are left with a diversely differentiated field of animate beings, each of which has its own gifts relative to the others. And we find ourselves not above, but in the very midst of this living field, our own sentience part and parcel of the sensuous landscape.<sup>7</sup>

The insight that nature is a living web of gifted relationships is not, however, equivalent to other similar-sounding perspectives that are often equated or used interchangeably with the term *animism* in daily discourse. *Paganism* and *heathenism*, Latin and Old English terms, respectively, stand for the *paganus* or country-dwelling people, and the “heathen” or people of the heath, both of which developed agricultural spiritualities of sacrifice and planting-and-harvest rituals prior to the arrival of Christianity in Western cultures. The term *pantheism*, on the other hand, emphasizes that God and the cosmos are one and the same equivalent reality without remainder. Animism—now refracted though biblical optics—shares affinities with these viewpoints but emphasizes with more force the indwelling of Spirit in all things—echoing its Latin root’s notion of “soul” or “spirit”—so that the great expanse of the natural world can be reenvisioned as alive and sacred and thereby deserving of our nurture and love.

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<sup>6</sup> See “new animism” studies of human-nature intersubjectivity in Patrick Curry, “Grizzly Man and the Spiritual Life,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 4 (2010): 206–19; and Priscilla Stuckey, “Being Known by a Birch Tree: Animist Reconfigurations of Western Epistemology,” in *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 4 (2010): 182–205.

<sup>7</sup> David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 47.

Of the current models of the interconnected relation between God and Earth, *pan-en-theism* is closest to Christian animism. Panentheist theologian Sallie McFague argues for the mutual, internal relatedness of God and creation but notes that God is not fully realized in the material world; God is in the world, indeed, but God is not “totally” embodied within everyday existence. She writes:

Pantheism says that God is embodied, necessarily and totally; traditional theism claims that God is disembodied, necessarily and totally; panentheism suggests that God is embodied but not necessarily or totally. Rather, God is sacramentally embodied: God is mediated, expressed, in and through embodiment, but not necessarily or totally.<sup>8</sup>

While my sensibility and McFague’s are deeply aligned, Christian animism pushes further her initial point by suggesting that God is fully and completely embodied within the natural world.<sup>9</sup> Here the emphasis does not fall on the limited relatedness of God and world such that God, finally, can escape the world, but rather the focus falls on the world as thoroughly embodying God’s presence. Unlike many Christian theologies that emphasize God’s transcendence, my position, akin to McFague’s, champions divine *subscendence*: God flowing out into the Earth, God becoming one of us in Jesus, God gifting to all creation the Spirit to infuse all things with divine energy and love. Or to phrase this point differently, as God’s Spirit *ensouls* all things with sacred purpose so also are all things the *enfleshment* of divine power and compassion on Earth. This dialectic of ensoulment—Earth is blessed as the living realization of divine grace—and enfleshment—God pours out Godself into the carnal reality of lived existence—is the mainspring of my Christian animist vision of reality. Now nothing is held back as God overflows Godself into the bounty of the natural world. Now all things are bearers of the sacred; each and every creature is a portrait of God; everything that is, is holy.

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<sup>8</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 149–50.

<sup>9</sup> For wider discussion, see Mark I. Wallace, “Crum Creek Spirituality: Earth as a Living Sacrament,” in *Theology That Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God*, ed. Darby Kathleen Ray (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 121–37; and Ric Hudgens, “On Christian Animism” (July 29, 2011), available on the [www.jesusradicals.com](http://www.jesusradicals.com) website.

## Carnal Spirit

Christian animism takes flight when the ancient Earth wisdom of the biblical witness is recovered afresh.<sup>10</sup> A nature-based retrieval of the person and work of the Spirit as the green face of God in the world is an especially potent exercise in ecological biblical hermeneutics. Recovering biblical texts through environmental optics opens up the Spirit's ministry as a celebration of the good creation God has made for the joy and sustenance of all beings. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and Christian discussion partner, writes that when "we touch the Holy Spirit, we touch God not as a concept but as a living reality."<sup>11</sup> A retrieval of the Spirit's disclosure of herself in the biblical literatures as one with the four cardinal elements—earth, air, water, and fire—is a principal means by which Christianity's carnal identity can be established—not as a concept, but as a living reality, or better, as a living being.<sup>12</sup> (Incidentally, I will use

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<sup>10</sup> For this perspective, see Norman C. Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel, vol. 1 of *The Earth Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield, 2000), 25–37. The five volumes of *The Earth Bible*, edited variously by Norman C. Habel, Shirley Wurst, and Vicky Balabanski from 2000 to 2002 set the standard for systematic eco-exegesis of the Bible. Similarly, see Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, eds., *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008); and Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead, 1995), 21.

<sup>12</sup> The emerging field of eco-pneumatology—nature-based reconstructions of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit—is represented by the work of Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007); Chung Hyun-Kyung, "Welcome the Spirit; Hear Her Cries: The Holy Spirit, Creation, and the Culture of Life," *Christianity and Crisis* 51 (July 15, 1991): 220–23; Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003); Anselm Kyongsuk Min, "Solidarity of Others in the Power of the Holy Spirit: Pneumatology in a Divided World," in *Advents of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Current Study of Pneumatology*, ed. Bradford E. Hinze and D. Lyle Dabney (Marquette, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001), 416–43; Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993); idem, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997); Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *God's Spirit: Transforming a World in Crisis*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1995); Nancy Victorin-Vangerud, *The Raging Hearth: Spirit in the Household of God* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000); Wallace, *Finding God in the Singing River*; Wallace, *Green Christianity*; and Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994).



the female pronoun throughout this essay to name the Spirit based on some compelling scriptural precedents.)<sup>13</sup> As Jesus' ministry was undergirded by his intimate communion with the natural world, so also is the work of the Spirit biblically understood according to the primal elements that constitute biological existence.

As *Earth*, the Spirit is a fleshy, avian life form—a dove—who is 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 planet 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. At Jesus' baptism, Luke's Gospel says the Spirit appeared in "bodily form"—the Greek term is *somatikos*—as a dove. This winged, feathered God actualizes an Earth-based communion in which all beings are filled with divine presence, heaven and Earth are unified, and God and nature are one. In the Bible, God is human flesh in the person of Jesus, to be sure, but God is also animal flesh in the person of the Spirit, the bird God of the scriptural witness (Gn 1:1–2; Mt 3:13–17; Mk 1:9–11; Lk 3:21–22; Jn 1:29–34).

As *Air*, the Spirit is both the animating divine breath who brings into existence all living things (Gn 2:7; Psalms 104:29–30), and the wind of prophecy and judgment who renews and transforms those she possesses and indwells (Jdg 6:34; Jn 3:6–8; Acts 2:1–4). *Rûach* (Hebrew) and *pneuma* (Greek) are the biblical terms for *spirit*; they mean "breath," "air," or "wind." The breathy God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. In meditation when we say, "Focus on your breath," in essence we are saying "focus on God." Our lives are framed and made possible by the perennial gift of divine wind. We enter consciousness drawing our first breath—we inhale God at the moment of our birth—and we exhale God with our last breath—we pass into death by evacuating the aerial Spirit from our mortal bodies. The Holy Spirit is God's invigorating, life-giving presence

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<sup>13</sup> On the biblical and theological history of feminine language and imagery for the Spirit, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition," *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37 (1993): 111–40; Gary Steven Kinkel, *Our Dear Mother the Spirit: An Investigation of Count Zinzendorf's Theology and Praxis* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990); and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), esp. 128–31.

within the atmosphere who sustains our need-for-air existence and the existence of all creatures on the planet.

As *Water*, the Spirit brings life and healing to all who are baptized and drink from her eternal springs (Jn 3:1-15, 4:1-30, 7:37-38; Acts 8:26-40, 11:1-18). True thirst, true desire, true need is satiated by drinking the liquid God who soaks all beings with a deep sense of wholeness and joy. In the Eucharist we eat God in the bread and drink God in the wine. In this act we are reminded that all of Earth's vital fluids that make planetary existence possible—blood, mucus, tears, milk, semen, sweat, urine—are infused with sacred energy. Again, as with Earth and air, life is a primordial gift in which God graces all things with the necessary elements for survival and full fruition. The Water God entertains us with torrential rains, seeping mudholes, rushing rivers, and cascading waterfalls so that life on this juicy, liquid planet can be hydrated and refreshed.

As *Fire*, the Spirit is the blaze of God that prophetically condemns the wealthy and unjust who exploit others, and the divine spark that ignites the multilingual and interracial mission of the early church (Mt 3:11-12; Acts 2:1-4). On the one hand, fire is a harsh metaphor for God's judgment against human arrogance and overly inflated sense of self; on the other, it is an expression of God's unifying presence in the fledgling church, as happened at Pentecost with the Spirit's incandescent announcement of herself in tongues of fire to a diverse collection of disciples. This sacred fire erased false differences and consumed the ethnic and cultural divisions that marked the early Christians apart from one another. In the wider biosphere the Fire God continues as a unifying, vivifying power necessary for the well-being of planetary life; fire cooks our food, heats our homes, powers our transportation systems, and maintains our planet's temperate climate. Without the gift of fire we would all perish, but with our dumping of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, we have unleashed the sun's lethal potential, and perverted nature's balance by producing a superheated weather system that will endanger the survival of future generations.

To be human is to live in spiritual harmony with the primary elements. A full life consists of everyday gratitude and care for the elemental gifts of natural existence. In part, this elemental sensibility is recoverable by a return to historic belief and practice. Ancient Christian belief teaches that God is present to us "under the elements" of bread and wine. Putting to work the Christian animist model, this belief is deemed ever so true and now expanded as well: beyond bread and wind, God's Spirit continues to be real under *all*

of the cardinal elements—earth, air, water, fire—that constitute the building blocks of life. While the Holy Spirit is sometimes regarded as a vague and disembodied phantom irrelevant to religious belief or planetary existence, the Bible tells a different story of a radically embodied God who incarnates Godself as Spirit in the four elements. Correspondingly, and using language borrowed from French philosopher Luce Irigaray, Ellen Armour develops an “elemental theology” in which God is known and loved through the primal elements. By reimagining core liturgical practices in accord with the elemental dynamics of bodily existence, Armour injects new life—new elemental life—into the ritual heart of Christian faith:

The central Christian rituals, baptism and eucharist, connect immediately with water and earth. The waters of baptism signify the move from sin to redemption, death to rebirth. The grain and grapes that become bread and wine (and ultimately body and blood) are products of earth and water. The Feast of Pentecost celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit—in the form of “divided tongues, as of fire” (Acts 2:3)—on Christ’s apostles, endowing their ministry with new authority as each listener heard the gospel message in his or her own native tongue. The Feast of the Ascension calls attention to air as the medium through which Christ ascends, thus linking the heavens and the earth, human and the divine. . . . We are quite literally sustained by air, water, and earth—physically and, if we adopt this way of thinking, spiritually. We have, then, religious and moral obligations to the natural world. Elemental theology repositions the relationship between divinity, humanity and the natural world. . . . The elements bind all three together in a fragile network of interdependency rather than domination.<sup>14</sup>

### Earthen Spirit

This elemental model of the Spirit’s real and ongoing union with Earth is resonant with the fifth-century vocabulary used in Christianity’s early doctrine of Jesus Christ’s “two natures.” In 451 CE the ecumenical churches met in Chalcedon, in what is today Western Turkey, to formulate a more refined understanding of how the divine and the human relate in Jesus of Nazareth. The historic

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<sup>14</sup> Ellen Armour, “Toward an Elemental Theology,” in *Theology That Matters*, ed. Darby Kathleen Ray (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 54.

churches decided that in the one person of Jesus, divinity and humanity are fully realized in an organic and permanent unity that admits no separation or confusion. The Chalcedonian Creed asks all Christians to confess to the

one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, alteration, division, separation; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus, then, is an integrated, complete, and whole person, fully divine and fully human, and his two natures are understood as being neither confused with nor internally divided from one another.

The Chalcedonian formula is an instance of a productive contradiction. Such a contradiction imaginatively juxtaposes two apparently opposing ideas—the ideas of divinity and humanity in one person—in order to articulate a new vision of reality—in this case, the idea that this one person, Jesus, is a divine human being. Another way to refer to this type of tensive thinking is to speak of a “coincidence of opposites,” an instance of “semantic impertinence,” or a “non-oppositional dualism.”<sup>16</sup> When dialectical thought is stretched to its limits, there is the possibility of discovering, paradoxically, a previously undisclosed unity, a blinding flash of new insight, that was not possible prior to an isolated inventory of the oppositions in question.

Employing, then, the dialectical grammar of Chalcedon, we can say that the Spirit indwells the Earth and the Earth enfleshes the Spirit. This formulation of the relationship between Spirit and Earth signals an inseparable unity between the two realities without a consequent absorption of the one into the other. Another way to put this is to say that Spirit and Earth are one and that Spirit and Earth are not one. To be sure, Spirit and Earth enjoy a permanent

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<sup>15</sup> “The Creed of Chalcedon,” in *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 2:62.

<sup>16</sup> These phrases, which speak to the reconciliation of apparently opposing positions to form a burst of new insight into reality, are used, respectively, by Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins, 6th German ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933); Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); and Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

and living unity one with the other; each reality internally conditions and permeates the other in a cosmic festival of love and harmony. Erotically charged, Spirit and Earth dwell in oneness and fellowship with one another. But both modes of being live through and with one another without collapsing into confusion with, or separation from, one another. The reciprocal indwelling of Spirit and Earth is neither an absorption of the one into the other nor an admixture of the two. By the same token, the mutual indwelling of Spirit and Earth does not signify merely an outward and transitory connection between the two realities.

The Spirit is the “soul” of the Earth—the wild, life-giving breath of creation—empowering all life forms to enter into a dynamic relationship with the greater whole. In turn, the Earth is the “flesh” of the Spirit—the living landscapes of divine presence—making God palpable and viscous in nature’s ever-widening circles of evolutionary and seasonal changes. Whether manifesting herself as a living, breathing organism like a dove, or an active life-force, such as wind or fire, Spirit indwells nature as its interanimating power in order to bring all of creation into a harmonious relationship with itself. Spirit is the vital *rûach*—God’s breath—that gives life to all beings. All things—rocks, trees, plants, rivers, animals, and humans—are made of Spirit and are part of the continuous biological flow patterns that constitute life on our planet. As Denis Edwards writes, “The Creator Spirit is present in every flower, bird, and human being, in every quasar and in every atomic particle, closer to them than they are to themselves, enabling them to be and to become.”<sup>17</sup> The Spirit ensouls the Earth as its life-giving breath, and the Earth embodies the Spirit’s mysterious interanimation of the whole creation. To experience, then, the full range of nature’s birthing cycles, periods of growth, and seasons of death and decay—to know the joy and sadness of living in harmony with nature’s cyclical processes and flow patterns—is to be empowered by Spirit and nurtured by nature’s

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<sup>17</sup> Denis Edwards, “For Your Immortal Spirit Is in All Things,” in *Faith Revealing – Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, ed. Dennis Edwards (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 56. For Amos Yong’s Pentecostal theology of Spirit-filled creation, see his “A Spirit-filled Creation? Toward a Pneumatological Cosmology,” in *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, 173–228 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); for her ecofeminist pneumatology, see Sharon Betcher, “Grounding the Spirit: An Ecofeminist Pneumatology,” in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller, 315–66 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

bounty. The Spirit is the hidden, inner life of the world, and the Earth is the outward manifestation of the Spirit's sustaining energies.

Deploying Chalcedonian grammar to model the interrelationship between Spirit and Earth challenges the classical, philosophical idea of God in Christian thought. In the metaphysical model God is an immovable heavenly being insulated from this-worldly concerns. God is divorced from the passions and vagaries of transient existence. In the classical paradigm God is unfeeling, self-subsistent, and independent from the ebb and flow of life and death that make up our earthly habitations. Metaphysical doctrines about "divine apathy" and "divine impassibility" – the standard, philosophically influenced belief that God is a stolid, dispassionate being not susceptible to the whims and fancies of human emotions – achieved the status of obvious truth in early Christian thought as a reaction to the fire-and-fury characteristic of the gods and goddesses of pre-Christian pagan mythology.<sup>18</sup> In the face of the malevolent and capricious actions of pagan divinities, Christians envisioned their God as pure goodness and impassive to change and circumstance. Beyond life and death, the supreme God of Christianity was seen as quintessentially self-possessed and far removed from the tumult and impermanence of mortal existence. All flesh is mortal; "their days are like grass" (Ps 103:15). But God, according to classical Christianity, is not mortal, God is not fleshly being. God is the All-Powerful, who is uniquely immortal, invisible, and unchangeable. God, in a word, is Being itself – eternal and immovable.

The Chalcedonian logic of the Spirit – that Spirit and Earth, interactively conceived, are one – opposes this metaphysical idea of God as unchangeable and apathetic in the face of the suffering and turmoil within the creation that God has spun into existence. The earthen God of biblical witness 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 ecological 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

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<sup>18</sup> See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 172–277.

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 ecosystems of fish and marine life die off, God suffers; and as our planet endures what appears to be the era of the Sixth Great Extinction, like the great extinctions of the Ice Age and other mass death events, God suffers. When we plunder and lay waste to the Earth, God suffers.

Because God and Earth mutually indwell, God is vulnerable to the same loss and degradation the Earth undergoes at the greedy hands of its human caretakers. This means that God as Spirit, Earth God, lives on "this side of eternity," as it were. Earth God lives on "this side" of the ecological squalor our global greed has spawned. God is not an inert, metaphysical concept but a living, suffering co-participant in the pain of the world. The God of Christian animism has cast her lot with a depredated planet and has entered into the fullness of the tragic history of humankind's abuse of our planet home. God has become, then, in our time, a tragic figure. God is a tragic figure not in the sense that God evokes our pity because God is weak and inadequate in the face of environmental terror—fated for destruction along with the destruction of the Earth—but rather in the sense that the tragedy of human rapaciousness is now God's own environmental tragedy as well. Who can say what profound torment is felt in the depths of the divine life when God surveys the devastation human avarice and stupidity has wrought? The sorry spectacle of Earth under siege and God's longing for a renewed biosphere are one. In union of heart, in agony of spirit, God and Earth are one.

In Jesus, God enfleshed Godself at one time in one human being; in the Spirit, God enfleashes Godself continually in the Earth. In both instances God decides in freedom and love for all beings, not by any internal necessity, to enter into the fullness of human tragedy. In making this decision regarding our sad eco-drama, Spirit puts herself in harm's way by becoming fully a part of a planet ravaged by human arrogance. *God is at risk in the world today.* It is not an extreme statement to say, then, that the threat of ecocide brings in its wake the specter of deicide: to wreak environmental havoc in the biosphere is to run the risk that we will inflict lasting injury to the source and ground of our common life together, Earth God. Spirit and Earth are one. Spirit and Earth are one in suffering. Spirit and Earth are one in the tragedy of ecocide. Spirit and Earth's common unity and life-centered identity raise the frightening possibility that despoiling our planet and chronically unsustainable living may result in permanent trauma to the divine life itself.

## The Reformed Tradition and the Eco-Crisis

The biblical ideas of creation, incarnation, and Spirit are the fountainhead of a Christian animist vision of the sacred character of the natural order. But Christian animism does not sit well with some Christian thinkers. One reviewer of my earlier work writes:

Beware! Under the inspirational title, *Finding God in the Singing River*, Mark I. Wallace proposes that Christianity needs to return to its roots in paganism, animism, and deep ecology. . . . The author uses a lofty tone and densely constructed sentences that disguise his warping of truth and to present his beliefs. . . . This book is alarming in that it teaches the worldview of deep ecology, and that the religions of paganism and animism are biblical. . . . It might work as a textbook for training students to spot propaganda, educational hogwash, faulty logic, and false teachings.<sup>19</sup>

My response is to suggest, to paraphrase Graham Harvey's earlier comment, that all that exists is alive, all that exists is good, all that exists is holy. We will not save what we do not love, and unless, as a culture, we learn to love and care for the gift of the created order again, the prospects of saving the planet, and thereby ourselves as well, are terrifyingly bleak. But insofar as God is in everything and all things are inter-animated by divine power and concern, we can affirm that God is carnal, God is earthen, God is flesh. And with this animist affirmation the will is empowered and the imagination ignited to fight against the specters of global warming and the loss of biodiversity as the great threats of our time.

Hungry for eruptions of the animist sacred, personally speaking, I mourn in our time the continued loss of the wider community of nature as the seedbed for full fruitions of God in my life. This terrible loss signifies, in the language of Reformed theology, that we are living in a time of *status confessionis*.<sup>20</sup> In historic Reformation theology a *status confessionis*, or "state of confession," existed whenever

<sup>19</sup> Elece Hollis, review of *Finding God in the Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, Nature*, by Mark I. Wallace, available at christianbookpreviews.com.

<sup>20</sup> See Eberhard Busch's discussion of *status confessionis* in the Reformed tradition in Darrell Guder, "Reformed Confessions and Confessing Church—Interview with Eberhard Busch," in *The Presbyterian Outlook* (May 14, 2002), 22–28.



the heart of the biblical message, the gospel, was fundamentally threatened by ecclesiastical and political authorities. In recent times such periods of *status confessionis* included the Nazi period in the 1930s, when German churches were charged with expelling non-Aryan pastors and members, and the apartheid period in the 1980s, when white churches and the governing South African authorities enforced rigid social, educational, and housing divisions based on ethnic backgrounds.

Today marks a similar crisis, a *status confessionis*, because the church and world leaders have stood by while major oil and gas companies have wrought havoc with the global climate system. The natural systems that support life on Earth are under attack—a direct consequence of anthropogenic climate change—because no one has the moral courage to rise up and challenge the dominant economic culture. The most important issue that confronts Christianity in our time is the fate of creation. Without a biologically robust planet, Christian community, and all other forms of community, human and otherwise, will wither and die. The climate crisis is a knife to the heart of church life—as it is to all forms of life. Without clean air, fresh water, and biodiverse land masses, the prospects of a healthy future for humankind and otherkind are increasingly bleak. Correspondingly, the Christian message will lose its relevance in an eco-dystopian tomorrow where populations of humans and other beings shrink and mass die-offs are a common occurrence.

This, then, is the most compelling theological issue of our time: the prospect that God's Spirit will no longer be able to renew the face of the Earth (Ps 104:30) because Earth itself will be no more, at least not for human habitation. Can the Spirit renew creation when creation itself, to paraphrase Paul in Romans 8, suffers and groans to the point that it can no longer bear the weight of human sin—the sin of massive global degradation? In a coming world that is dangerously hot and unstable, we face the prospect, to paraphrase Bill McKibben, of the death of life *and* the death of death itself; that is, we face the specter of the realities of life and death losing their existential meaning in a future when the despoilment is now complete of the a/biotic systems that make human and all other existence possible.<sup>21</sup> Our and other species' fate is doomed until we find solutions to the release of heat-trapping emissions into the atmosphere,

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<sup>21</sup> See this analysis in Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random, 1989). See also Dieter Gerten and Sigurd Bergmann, eds., *Religion in Environmental and Climate Change: Suffering, Values, Lifestyle* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

the primary driver of global warming. Climate change destroys the very ecosystems that make life possible in the first place—and, in theological parlance, such change destroys the vision of a healed and restored creation that is central to Christian hope. Without hope, Christian faith is doomed. If billions of people and other life forms are at risk, the Christian message of promise and purpose will ring hollow. Christianity may not survive the global collapse of nature—the apocalyptic destruction of God’s handiwork, creation itself, which God promised in Genesis never to destroy again. Unless ecosystemic life and well-being is secured, therefore, the Christian church, adrift and rudderless, has no future. This is the *status confessionis* of our time.

In every respect, therefore, the Earth crisis is a spiritual crisis because without a vital, fertile planet it will be difficult to find traces of divine wonder and providence in the everyday order of things. Personally speaking, when the final Arctic habitat for the polar bear melts into the sea due to human-induced climate change, I will lose something of God’s beauty and power in my life. When the teeming swell of equatorial amphibians can no longer adapt to deforestation and rising global temperatures, something of God will disappear as well, I fear. I am like the First Peoples of the Americas, who experienced the sacred within the Black Hills of what is now South Dakota, or on top of Mount Graham in southern Arizona, and then found that when these places were degraded, something of God was missing as well. Without these and other places charged with sacred power, I am lost on Earth. Without still-preserved landed sites saturated with divine presence, I am a wanderer with no direction, a person without hope, a believer experiencing the death of God on a planet suffering daily from human greed and avarice.

“We are on the precipice of climate system tipping points beyond which there is no redemption,” wrote Jim Hansen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, in 2003. As we reach these catastrophic tipping points, what will human existence on Earth look like in ten to twenty years? Chronic heat waves will provoke mega-droughts and render daily life unbearable at times; Arctic permafrost and sea ice will crack and disappear, causing islands and shorelines to shrink and vanish; continued carbon dumping will render the world’s oceans more acidic and ultimately lethal to coral reefs and fish stocks; melting permafrost in Siberia and elsewhere will release huge amounts of methane into the atmosphere, resulting in killer hurricanes and tsunamis; biodiverse ecosystems will collapse and produce dead monocultures of invasive species where

the basic dynamic of plant pollination itself is undermined; and a hotter and less forgiving planet will cause crop failures and large stretches of arable land to become desert, mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue fever and malaria to reach epidemic proportions, and mass migrations of tens of millions of people as rising sea levels destroy homes and communities. In the near future we will look back at greenhouse gas-induced events such as the European heat wave of 2003 that killed thirty thousand people—or Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history that killed eighteen hundred people—as telltale portents of the coming storm. We will remember other positive environmental changes—the banning of DDT in the United States in the 1960s, the general eradication of ozone-depleting CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) in the 1980s—and then wonder why we were not able to extricate ourselves from the “Big Oil” economy that was even then destroying the planet. In 2015, 2020, or 2025 we will rue the day we allowed those who denied global warming to confuse the public into thinking that current climate change is a natural cycle for which we have no responsibility. We will recall the definitive reports by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005 and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2007, based on tens of thousands of studies by hundreds of climate researchers over many years of investigation, that made clear to us that our fossil-fuel economy is the most important anthropogenic factor driving the dangerous climate changes we now see all around us.

With an alarming sense of urgency, we will know then, even as we know now, that it is time to act. In my life, the song of the wood thrush calls me to action.

Every generation, to borrow Thomas Berry’s phrase, has its “Great Work.” Every generation has an overarching sense of responsibility for the welfare of the whole that gathers together people and societies across their cultural and ideological differences. In this generation our Great Work is to fight global warming by reenvisioning our relationship to Earth not as exploiters but as biotic kinspeople with the myriad life forms that populate our common home. This is the mandate of our time. As Berry writes:

The Great Work before us, the task of moving modern industrial civilization from its present devastating influence on the Earth to a more benign mode of presence, is not a role that we have chosen. It is a role given to us, beyond any consultation with ourselves. We did not choose. We were chosen by some power beyond ourselves for this historical task. We did not choose the

moment of our birth, who our parents will be, our particular culture or the historical moment when we will be born. . . . The nobility of our lives, however, depends upon the manner in which we come to understand and fulfill our assigned roles.<sup>22</sup>

Every generation has a sacred calling to seize the moment and battle the forces of oppression and degradation so that future generations can live richer and more meaningful lives. The Great Work of our generation is to develop inspired models of sustainable development that promote ecological and climate justice for all of God's children. Sustainability is a forward-looking category that asks how institutions today can secure and manage the labor and environmental resources necessary for achieving their economic goals while also preserving the capacity of future human communities and ecosystems to survive and flourish. Native American folklore often speaks of animal and related resource-management practices done with an eye toward their impact on the seventh generation to come. Seventh-generation full-cost business and accounting practices relocate the goal of financial profitability within the context of fair labor performance, responsible consumption of energy, and careful management of waste.<sup>23</sup> Sustainable development, then, articulates policies that address this generation's vital needs without sacrificing the ability of future generations to meet their own vital needs. For highly industrialized economies like our own, sustainability will be predicated on kicking our habit of dependence on fossil fuels, the primary source of global climate change. My hope is that Christian animism can provide the theological and moral foundations necessary for practical responses to weaning ourselves off unsustainable

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 7.

<sup>23</sup> The seventh-generation ideal is also identified today as the *triple bottom line business model* (people, planet, profit). In this model financial profits depend upon carefully managed environmental and social performance. Here corporate, societal, and ecological interests dynamically interact and mutually support one another. This model is analyzed as the "new bottom line" in Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 227–40; as "oikonomia economics" in Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, 2d ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1989, 1994), 138–75; and as "ecologically reformed capitalism" in Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 81–110.

coal, oil, and natural gas supplies in order to save the planet for future generations.

Religious faith is uniquely suited to fire the imagination and empower the will to make the necessary changes that can break the cycle of addiction to nonrenewable energy. Many of the great social movements in the history of the United States—the abolitionist groundswell of the nineteenth century, the suffragist associations of the early twentieth century, the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and today, the Occupy movement—were and are energized by prophetic religious leaders who brought together their spiritual values and passion for justice to animate a moral force for change more powerful than any force to stop them. To paraphrase William James, religion today, in the face of cataclysmic climate change, must become the moral equivalent of war by becoming more disciplined, more resourceful, and more visionary in fighting the causes of global ecological depredation. The hope of Christian animism—the vision of a verdant and beautiful Earth saturated with divine presence—can religiously charge practical responses to the crisis of unsustainable living today. The supreme calling of our time will be for all of us to find a spiritually grounded, aesthetically resonant, and morally compelling approach to engaging the problem of climate change—and to do so now, before it is too late. ➤