

11

Rewilding Christian Spirituality

Outdoor Sacraments and the Life of the World

—LISA E. DAHILL

In May 2012, a friend and I took an eight-day bicycle trip from Pittsburgh to Washington, DC. Our trek . . . began through the valley of the Youghiogheny River in western Pennsylvania. Tall trees shaded the trail; the shale hillsides were alive with water . . . All this water brought ladyslippers, trillium, buttercups, thick stands of laurel and rhododendron. The creeks were full of turtles and choruses of frogs and toads, air alive with dragonflies, butterflies, and songbirds. [In all directions,] in sound and sight and the sparkling (or rain-spattered) waters of the great river itself—life was teeming.

[Later in] the first day . . . the path moved under a high overpass. Far above us, motorists on I-70 were rocketing along at 65 mph, most presumably hardly noticing that a river snaked below. Passengers would have had to peer over the rail intently . . . as they zoomed past to have seen our bike path at all, let alone the two of us on it; and from that distance and speed all the wet complexity in which we were immersed and the creatures so vivid for us would have been a green blur disappearing as quickly as it had appeared.

I-70 is the interstate whose steady hum [was] audible from my backyard in Columbus, Ohio, and it gives travelers easy access to the seminary where I [taught]. I travel[ed] it regularly. So the experience of seeing that highway from far beneath . . .

was striking. From . . . the beautiful living thickness of the world itself in all its created reality, the oblivious world of the interstate seemed impossibly remote, even alien. We were perpendicular—cross-wise—to it in direction, and hundreds of yards beneath it in plane. That day on the Youghiogheny River gave form to a perception I am coming to call *perpendicularity*: the experience of the disconnection between much of contemporary human life from the living reality of the natural world.¹

CONTEXT

We know the staggering dimensions of this alienation: the extent to which our current economic system and worldviews fail to take account of our planet's limits and our own place in the larger biological world on which our lives depend. We recognize—most of us, now and then, maybe in a rueful way—the extent to which our fossil-fueled lives charge along in more or less complete experiential detachment from the rest of the biosphere. We try to take in the scientific data tracking the effects of our global economic engines, culminating in the most recent IPCC report of the searing future we face if current greenhouse-gas emissions continue: “the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems.”² What's going on down there, way below our interstates, off the edges of our screens, beyond our earbuds? The cascading patterns of disruption of our planet's core life-support systems, whole species and ecosystems wiped out and gone forever—exacerbating human trauma, dislocation, war, famine, and economic exploitation—and the astonishing beauty of the natural world itself, in its still-sustaining wildness and diversity and abundance: all this complexity and mystery of the biosphere is out there, both transcending us and withering under our attack.

To face this reality of climate chaos is the challenge Laurie Zoloth outlined in her 2014 presidential address to the American Academy of

1. Dahill, “The View from *Way Below*,” 250–51. I first used the term “perpendicularity” in a companion piece published a year earlier. See “Bio-Theoacoustics.” The present essay is revised from my 2015 presidential address to the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, titled “Into Local Waters: Rewilding the Study of Christian Spirituality.” The original address is published in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* (adapted here with permission).

2. IPCC, *Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report*, 8.

Religion: to recognize this emergency for what it is, the shattering “interruption” of our ordinary priorities and projects, the shock of our lives jolting all humans into new thinking and leadership and requiring us in whatever roles we serve in church or society to step up into leadership and activism. Each person needs to discern and give their own signal contributions toward turning this gigantic ship that is our shared Western economic system.³ In this past summer’s watershed encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis calls on all people of Earth to “acknowledge the appeal, immensity, and urgency of the challenge we face” and to join in “a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet . . . a conversation that includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.” Indeed, we need what Pope Francis calls “ecological conversion”: a whole new way of being Christian and human.⁴

This essay is my response to these appeals from Zoloth and Pope Francis, along with the cries from all over Earth of those already suffering the effects of climate change and global economic injustice, and the great call echoing from the planetary systems necessary for the flourishing of life as we know it. How does Christian spirituality creatively cherish and respond to the new “Eaarth” we inhabit, the new geologic age we have entered?⁵ Here I outline a Christian spirituality of biocentric sacramental reimmersion into reality: “rewilding” Christian spiritual practice for the Anthropocene.⁶ To summarize at the outset: I believe that Christian ecological conversion requires new and re-prioritized physical, spiritual, and intellectual immersion in the natural world. Thus I will argue for restoration of the early church’s practice of baptizing in local waters, for new

3. Zoloth, “2014 AAR Presidential Address,” 3–24.

4. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* paras.14–15, 216–21. In this call to ecological conversion Francis echoes Thomas Berry’s appeal to contribute to the Great Work of our time: “Our hope for the future is for a new dawn, an Ecozoic Era, when humans will be present to the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner.” Berry, *The Great Work*, 55.

5. McKibben, *Eaarth*. On the data supporting scientists’ coining and usage of the term “Anthropocene” to describe the new geological epoch into which human greenhouse emissions have already brought our planet, see Hamilton, et al., eds., *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis*.

6. I use the language of “rewilding” in this essay in debt to George Monbiot, whose work *Feral* brought the movement of literal rewilding to a large readership. I am also influenced by Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, and David Abram, whose books *The Spell of the Sensuous* and *Becoming Animal* model an immersive presence to the life and lives of the biosphere that I experience as authentically, i.e., *wildly*, baptismal.

forms of outdoor Eucharistic life, and for reclaiming primary attention to the Book of Nature alongside our attention to the Book of Scripture.

We hear the cries of Earth's most vulnerable precisely as *Christians*—bearing the distinctively Christian burden of responsibility for the present crisis. Lynn White famously articulated this responsibility in 1967 in his article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” asserting that Christianity is uniquely and dangerously anthropocentric, in a biocentric world marked by mutuality, not domination and dominion.⁷ Despite decades of Christian contesting or nuancing of White's claims, they still accuse us. As a civilization based on historically Christian principles, in at least nominally Euro-American Christian societies, and sustained by continuing Christian legitimation, we are “losing track of nature” in ways now that White never imagined, via the ever-thickening layers of technology, video screens, virtuality, robotics, etc.⁸ Thus, responding adequately to Lynn White's critiques—and to the appeals from Laurie Zoloth and Pope Francis—requires Christians perhaps above all to forge truly new forms of thinking and practice for our time: the Eco-Reformation to which this volume calls us.

For indeed Christian spirituality too is complicit in heedlessness to the natural world. Despite the incarnational and sacramental heart of the Christian vision, theologians and mystics through the ages have contributed to the formation of dualistic, otherworldly forms of piety that have had profoundly damaging effects. These are not the whole story of Christian spirituality, by any means; our traditions, including Lutheranism, are also full of Earth-loving spiritualities, the sacramental imagination, beauty and grace in every leaf. How can we then help explore and generate old or new forms of Christian practice that can creatively reconnect us to the larger life of the Earth? I ponder this question first within my own experience.

7. White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.”

8. The language of “losing track of nature” comes from Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*, 164. Many scholars have documented the alienating effects of technology in human experience of the natural world. The psychic cost of this alienation is traced in work by, among many others, Paul Shepard: see, e.g., “The Domesticators.” The popular examination of the human cost of alienation from nature received a boost from the work of Richard Louv, especially *Last Child in the Woods*.

BIOCENTRIC BAPTISMAL SPIRITUALITY

Since a sabbatical five years ago, I have felt increasingly uncomfortable in human religious worlds and discourse, all religious rooms, even the intimacy of prayer that was my home for so long. From within a long and intimate relationship with Jesus filling prayer, community, vocation, and sacramental worship, something began to shift. It was as if one day the chancel walls gave way and I stepped through and realized it's *all* chancel, this sacramental *world*, the real world. And so I've been living increasingly outdoors for years now—out in the creek, in the Ohio woods, now inside the California wind, its stunning oceanic expanse. What's harder is that I have no idea what is going on. It's disorienting: Jesus is dissolved, all that's left is the wind . . . the *literal* wind, the outdoor wind breathed from trees and cold fronts that fills my lungs and pushes against me on my bike and lifts pollen and petals and termites and spores up and out and this is all I seem to need, ever—but is this Christian? Is it really prayer? It's strange prayer, as it opens, this utter outdoor-ness. All I want is to live in the water—the literal water, the creek near my home in Ohio, actual rocks, with literal salamanders and mayflies, and those who fish here. Now the ocean, the elusive drenching California rain.

This was not my own idea; this sending simply *happened*, shoving me out into a vast world where religion doesn't matter to the salamanders on their own terms. I can't seem to come back inside; the creation itself is all I want, its wild particularity and beauty, its complexity. And having pondered this for years, slowly I began to realize that perhaps this urge out into the wildness of the world was an invitation not *out of* faith but further into some stranger face of God: being invited to learn from the creation about a Creator who speaks in wild languages I don't understand: bird languages, drought languages, smells and winds, predation, illness, death, life . . . the natural world my holy book.

This is hard. The surprise has been to realize with Job that being shoved out of human religious God-worlds into the scale and strangeness of the real world is itself divine address, the un-reading of Scripture, itself held within Scripture. The whirled interruption blows apart the closed-loop discourse Job and his friends have been exchanging. That airless airspace where human concerns are all that matter, the boring global static of endless human voices and debating; it all ends. The divine presence—the Name that cannot be spoken—breaks in with a radically

non-anthropocentric vision, offensively, redemptively theo-centric, bio-centric.⁹ And if even Job on his ash heap needs opening to the dazzling complexity and beauty of the layers of life cascading and interdependent on this gorgeous radiant miracle of a planet, out here on the far thin edge of the universe—to see the Creator’s beauty and wisdom and logic filamented through every cell and star and membrane and muscle, every stem and fruit and feather—then how much more do we so-called privileged ones need this vision?

And so I began to see how the sacramental Word I had loved indoors, in so many gorgeous Eucharists and transforming contemplative monastic retreats—how this *Logos* lives *outdoors*. Jesus dissolved into the natural world. I experienced an ecstatic immersive baptism into the literal life of the world; with David Abram I discovered

our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth—our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with *other* eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.¹⁰

Out in that contact and conviviality I found an astonishing fullness of life that I slowly began to name *as* the baptismal life, a much wilder immersion than I had ever imagined. I have come to recognize that the ecological conversion to which we are summoned requires not only brilliant scholarship, new theologies, even papal encyclicals. Restoring 2.2 billion Christians to the passionate and intimate love of Earth requires Christians’ literal re-immersion, through baptism the primal sacrament, back into the wild life of Earth’s hydrologic system. And so my first and primary proposal is to restore the normative practice of Christian baptism into local waters.

9. See Schifferdecker, “Of Stars and Sea Monsters”; and McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind*. See too H. Paul Santmire’s work in developing a “theo-cosmocentric” Christian spirituality in *Before Nature*.

10 Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 22.

The early church, like John the Baptist, practiced baptism in the rivers available; that was what “living water” meant—flowing water, a connection to a larger fullness of life considered intrinsic to the sacrament itself. In time this river-water was re-routed into indoor baptisteries and eventually separated from its river-source into ever tinier fonts, until what had been a fully immersive outdoor sacrament has become, in most communities around the world, an indoor rite using the minimum necessary amount of water. In his 1977 study, *Baptism*, historian Martin Marty notes how far Christian practice has moved from “the early understanding which involved relishing, drowning in, and enjoying the water of life. The baptismal river became a pool; the pool became a well or cistern; the cistern became a barrel; the barrel became a font; the font became a birdbath; the birdbath became a bowl; the bowl became a fingerbowl.”¹¹ Even laudable efforts in liturgical communities more recently to learn what Baptists and others have been modeling all along—the transforming symbolic power of full immersion in baptism, and construction of fonts with the sounds of running water and immersive capacity—still result in baptisms taking place in indoor rituals more or less fully cut off from the actual biological life of the larger watersheds in which such communities are located.

I want to move back out: to step away from chlorinated tapwater in bowls or pools in climate-controlled rooms, and to restore the practice of Christian baptism into the uncontrolled, dangerous, transforming waters of a community’s watershed.¹² We know that forms of practice powerfully shape belief, *habitus*, worldview; liturgical scholar Benjamin Stewart has demonstrated how powerfully the *form* of baptismal experience—full immersion or sprinkling—shapes in formative ways participants’ spontaneous, untutored articulation of what their baptism *means*.¹³ Thus the practice of indoor baptism, however powerfully enacted, does not necessarily translate, in people’s imagination, into the sort of radical spiritual/

11. Marty, *Baptism*, 18. The earliest church practice of baptizing in rivers appears in the *Didache*, chapter 7: “baptize . . . in living water. If you do not have living water, baptize in other water; if you cannot in cold, then in warm; if you do not have either, pour water on the head three times . . .” (cited in Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship*, 8).

12. Here I acknowledge my gratitude to the work and vision of Ched Myers, a pioneer in “watershed discipleship,” or learning to practice Christian life in relationship with the creatures, forces, and features of one’s actual local watershed. See “From ‘Creation Care’ to ‘Watershed Discipleship.’”

13. Stewart, *The Role of Baptismal Water at the Vigil of Easter in the Liturgical Generation of Eco-Theology*.

ecological immersion into the actual local watershed and the largest life of Earth that we need today.

But what if baptism moves outdoors again? Some communities have never left: rural African-American communities in particular still baptize joyfully in rivers as they have done for centuries. And Russian Orthodox Christians' rites of blessing the waters at the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus in early January bring worshipers out to the local creek or lake in joyful—even immersive—connection to the larger baptismal blessing of these waters in Christ.¹⁴ But for many of us, such immersion is new and strange. If baptism moves outdoors, can we baptize at Easter Vigils, in Northern Hemisphere cold? What about pollution? Is it safe? Will we die?

This is not an idle question. In many places in the world, local water sources are so polluted that immersion in them represents an immediate danger. Theologian Lynn Hofstad has traced the ecological and theological dimensions of the problem of pollution in river-based Hindu and Christian water rites in an essay titled, "Murky Symbols: How Contamination Affects the Symbolic Meaning of Water in Religious Rituals."¹⁵ There she writes, "The result of [the] toxic mix of human, agricultural, and industrial waste [in rivers throughout India and Southeast Asia] is water that is not fit for human consumption or even use."¹⁶ Needless to say, such poisonous water is also unfit for ritual, symbolic use: rather than bringing new *life*, it quite literally brings *death*.¹⁷ As Hofstad's work and other analyses make clear, the safety and purity of local water for adequate symbolic use in Christian baptism is an urgent pastoral question in many places, regardless whether the rite takes place indoors or out.¹⁸ But enough water to fill a font can be purchased by those with adequate means, whereas the watershed itself is all that's available for the poorest

14. See Denysenko, *The Blessing of the Waters and Epiphany*.

15. Hofstad, "Murky Symbols."

16. Hofstad, "Murky Symbols," 29. Footnote 70 (p. 23) describes the pollution in the Yamuna River in India: "The water from over 50,000 industries and over eight million people flows largely untreated into the river. The Yamuna water that leaves Delhi contains dangerous amounts of arsenic, cyanide, lead, mercury, and other industrial pollutants, as well as considerable amounts of human excrement. People get chemical burns and skin diseases from bathing in the water, and the government has declared all crops grown on the banks of the Yumana unfit for human consumption." See Haberman, "River of Love in an Age of Pollution," 348.

17. Hofstad, "Murky Symbols," 31.

18. *Ibid.*, 30. See also McGann, "A Theopolitics of Water."

participants. If the practice of *all* Christian baptism moves normatively outdoors, this forces even the rich in a given area to have “skin in the game.” If they can’t just purchase water for indoor rites but must baptize their children in the local river with everyone else, might that not oblige the rich to use their political muscles differently?

Even in the U.S., where natural water sources are comparatively clean, the radical vulnerability such baptismal practice entails is part of its sacramental power: drawing us close to the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the *Logos* permeating all things, the effects of our own economy’s devastation, the raw edges of many creatures’ survival needs. We might run across people without permanent homes, camping among those trees; we might need to know how to distinguish poison oak from live oak. If we baptize in local waters we will need to know the local scientists who monitor pollution levels, to learn what is safe and what isn’t, and to join the activists fighting to defend and restore this creek, this river, this lake or ocean. We will need to know the watershed more intimately than we ever imagined if we are to baptize out here. Restoring the practice of baptism outdoors thus dramatically broadens the meaning of being Christian: not excluding human-communal levels of spiritual meaning but extending those to include now also one’s spiritual incorporation into experienced immersive kinship with the larger biological community in which one lives and into the hydrological cycle of the Earth itself, its jeopardy and beauty. Thus being Christian comes to mean, also, baptized into the full wildness of the world and its flourishing, and into this particular watershed. It is utterly *immersive*.¹⁹

I first sensed the power of this movement once home from that Youghiogheny trip, when I realized I wanted to go all the way in. I bought an inflatable kayak and set out for my first voyage late one June afternoon, deciding to explore Alum Creek near my home. I was astonished to realize that at kayak level in the water, the surrounding trees blocked all urban view except for the occasional bridge overhead, and these trees were filled with warblers, crows, vultures, hawks, the creek itself populated with ducks and herons, as well as the occasional kingfisher. Around the roots of the trees that first magical dusk voyage I saw a skunk, a mink, a family of raccoons climbing one of the sycamores overarch-ing the river. But it was in the water—which from street view above I

19. Video games are also described with this adjective, of course. Thus my proposal for full-body immersion in local waters describes an alternative as well to the seductive and dis-placing grip of “virtual reality.”

had assumed was basically dead—that the miracle happened. The golden light of the late afternoon somehow hit at just the right angle that the stream’s depth lit up, and I was stunned to see masses of tiny fish darting in union, shadowy carp, many mollusk shells, riparian plants, some bass, even a water-snake. The water was clear as light, rich with nymphs and organisms, each milliliter of this urban stream full of life, and I knew for the first time that the water supporting life is *itself alive*. Living water is wild water. And I sensed how urgently Christianity and Christians and I needed to be baptized fully *into these actual waters*, these living waters. Over the years I kept kayaking, and began wading and swimming as well, getting to know this creek. I began designing seminary rites of baptismal remembrance along its banks, and I learned how the herons and riparian creatures and homeless folks at the edges of our circle pull ritual language out into all sorts of new connections.²⁰

A student in this period, Robin Lutjohann, added his own testimony to my expanding baptismal vision.²¹ Robin was a master’s student at Harvard when he came to faith through his connection with the ministry of University Lutheran Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Desiring baptism, he asked if this rite could take place not in the sanctuary’s font but in the Charles River; the pastor, Joanne Engquist, was happy to plan this with him. Robin describes his experience as a joyously public processional event, open to and engaging of bystanders and boaters struck by this community, following a cross, with streamers and violin and drum, toward a baptism into this river Charles with all its history and beauty and industry and legend. Robin emerged from those waters a Christian with a huge dripping joyful connection to *all* of this life.

His experience reminds me that we are baptized not only into the human Body of Christ, but into bodies of real water with their own public political and ecological life, and into the Body of God in Sallie McFague’s sense: the biosphere, spoken into abundance of life by the Word itself.²² Practicing baptism in this way—like Robin’s—is harder than baptism in a room. It’s more dangerous, more public, more political, more euphoric; it binds participants to the literal water of a given place at the heart of their experience of Christ, and it binds community members to one another and to all other forms of life in that place in an unforgettable intimacy.

20. See Dahill, “Life in All Its Fullness.”

21. Personal communication, 2015.

22. McFague, *The Body of God*.

Such practice takes seriously the *biological and literal* dimensions of the Word becoming flesh, becoming matter, taking on and permeating and filling all created life.²³

How might the Christian imagination and vocation—Christian spirituality itself—expand if all or most baptisms, as well as baptismal affirmations, took place out *in local waters*? How urgently might we and all the Christians of a given watershed take action, in that case, against degradation of these waters, endangering the vulnerable humans we long to baptize here, or against policies that dump toxic waste in certain zip codes, poisoning children and leaching into drinking water? How might the Spirit who fills all Earth's baptismal waters, oxygenated and alive, animate our protest of water's privatization, pollution, and waste? Could baptism into real waters break the catastrophic spell of otherworldliness for good—could it enact viscerally at last what being Christian means, today: our shared physical and spiritual participation in the threats and the aliveness of God in the life of the world itself?

REWILDING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY: BAPTISM, EUCHARIST, WORD

Thus my first proposal for a re-wilding Christian spirituality is to move baptism outdoors to the fullest extent locally possible.²⁴ My proposal thickens and makes explicit what baptismal life means: the closest possible union with the biologically and ecologically incarnate, crucified, risen Christ, the *wild Logos* inhabiting all Earth's watery life, through whom indeed all things were made.²⁵ Baptism into this divine life filling all that is creates new kin in this wild *Logos*, a new Body of Christ: every species made of stardust, threaded with DNA, cycling life through its membranes, a whole new relationality in this Word and Wisdom to

23. Sacramentally oriented traditions have always insisted on the primacy of the literally embodied dimension of Word and sacraments, inseparable from their symbolic function; see, e.g., Lathrop, *Holy Ground*; and Gibler, *From the Beginning to Baptism*. My proposal draws this physicality explicitly into the larger biotic relationality essential today.

24. With this proposal I am in no way intending to deny the goodness also of indoor baptism, the womblike character of deeply enclosed watery ritual. But to effect and proclaim the ecological conversion our planet needs, the *primary or normative* site of Christian baptism needs to return outdoors, our fundamental physical and spiritual re-immersion into Earth's hydrological cycle and the life of a particular watershed.

25. John 1:1–5. On Logos theology, see Johnson, "Deep Christology."

which we're joined in the water. And an expanded vision of Christian life then calls for a fuller Eucharistic life as well, one adequate to this multiplicity of human, divine, and interspecies relations, stretchy enough to encompass and nourish this deep geo-/hydro-/biological immersion.

In 2012, I wrote about the power of such outdoor movement in Eucharistic experience, through a liturgy a seminary colleague and I had designed and led. The essay engages five dimensions of such outdoor experience: a) the question of the outdoors as "holy ground," b) the practice of sharing peace with other creatures, c) Eucharistic implications of the edibility of our own flesh to other animals, d) the practice of non-verbal rites connecting participants in direct sensory ways with the larger world, and e) the rethinking of questions of sending, thresholds, and liminality when worship takes place outside of a "sanctuary."²⁶ I continue to be intrigued with all of these questions, perhaps most of all with the one listed third here: the Eucharistic implications of that unsettling mystery of our bodies' edibility to other creatures.

Lutherans cherish the physicality of the sacraments, the edibility of divine life as Jesus' body and blood permeate and incorporate ours. This physical theology experienced in one's own body in every Eucharistic celebration provides a crucial link to the physicality of all food, of all life, and to questions of poverty and abundance, hunger and delight, as these take flesh in billions of human bodies and the living land and water that feed us, all over our earth. Much Christian thinking over the centuries has pressed the ethical implications of our Eucharistic sharing in the "one bread" of the hungry in the one Body of Christ. We do not as often ponder further how our bodies' edibility by other creatures (from wolves to mosquitoes) provides a similarly Eucharistic ethic of our species' participation in the rest of creation. As privileged North Americans we may speak of "stewardship" of creation—from a position of dominance and inviolability—but too often shun uncomfortable questions of how Jesus' *kenosis* [self-emptying] models a similarly radical availability of our human flesh and life for the thriving of other species or ecosystems, and of marginalized human beings on Earth. Might movement outdoors . . . open us to the sacramental implications of our permeability to the rest of creation?²⁷

26. Dahill, "Indoors, Outdoors."

27. Ibid., 115–16. For more on the holy and unsettling mystery of our bodies' edibility to other creatures, see the incisive work of Jewish environmental philosopher James Hatley: "The Uncanny Goodness of Being Edible to Bears"; and "Blood

In both of the primary Christian sacraments, joined in the flesh of the central sacrament that is Jesus Christ incarnate in all that is, therefore, we are invited *out*. More starkly than any previous generation of Christians, we face the choice to participate in the noticing and speaking and loving now of this living Word, in all its beauty and power, or to be increasingly complicit in the ongoing silencing of this Word, the very *Logos* of God in all that is. For it is precisely this living Word, the *Logos* permeating the creation in unique and marvelous forms all over this Earth, that our present economic systems are extinguishing, day after day after day.

Thus, in addition to moving the practice of Christian baptism and Eucharistic life outdoors, my final proposal is to learn again to hear and love this living Word not only in the Book of Scripture but also in what earlier centuries of Christians called the Book of Nature.²⁸ In proposing attention to the Book of Nature as a distinctive focus I am not asserting that nature on the one hand, and its religious apperception through Scripture and tradition on the other, really are fundamentally separate; in fact, it is precisely because the natural world itself participates in divine revelation that I am asserting the indispensability of attending to it. What that means, however, is complex. We are good at reading texts, but the text that is the natural world speaks in mysterious languages that are both increasingly remote from much of our daily experience and rapidly being destroyed in their intact wild life. How can we speak of attention to the Book of Nature as a constitutive element of Christian spirituality? I see *three primary strategies*: development of skill in contemplative eco-hermeneutics, increased attention to the natural sciences, and attention to indigenous and Earth-centered spiritualities in our interfaith work.

Spiritual or Contemplative Eco-Hermeneutics

The language of “eco-hermeneutics” is used in various ways today.²⁹ Rather than the biblical or philosophical uses of this language, I am here engaging the work of Douglas Christie, who traces an eco-hermeneutics distinctive to Christian spiritual practice. Christie’s 2013 book, *The*

Intimacies and Biodicy.”

28. For more on attending to the Book of Nature, see my expanded development in “Into Local Waters,” as well as Clingerman, “Reading the Book of Nature.”

29. See the essays by Norman C. Habel, Barbara R. Rossing, and David M. Rhoads in this volume for attention to biblical eco-hermeneutics; for more on philosophical eco-hermeneutics, see among others Clingerman et al., eds, *Interpreting Nature*.

Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology, brings together resources of the Christian contemplative tradition—particularly the earliest monastic immersions in Word and silence, desert and the heart—and the contemporary moral and spiritual urgency of learning to attend today with just such disciplined and devoted spiritual presence to the natural world as a place of divine encounter. In his chapter titled “*Logos: The Song of the World*,”³⁰ Christie traces the contours of sustained Christian contemplative attention to the living Word through whom all things were made, from early philosophical grounding of desert monastics’ understanding of *Logos* into the practice of presence to this Word precisely in and through the particular faces, sounds, and movements of the creatures and forces of creation everywhere around them. Showing how for these Christians the distinctive logic manifest in each creature—hummingbird or lichen or cicada—embodies in a fundamentally trustworthy way a revelation of this divine Word, Christie calls contemporary pray-ers too into deeply contemplative attention to the creatures and larger forces of creation, precisely as means of divine encounter. He writes: “There is a strong and recurring appreciation in Christian contemplative thought and practice for the revelatory power of the Word . . . as the enlivening force behind and within every living being . . . [In attending to the world itself] One finds vivid traces . . . of an incarnate Word. To listen to this Word is to become aware of a language arising from the shape and texture of the living world, a Word as old as the world itself.”³¹

Such attention requires time in conscious awareness of this world and its creatures in order to begin to get to know the patterns of their sounds and movements, to learn to hear, or read, or sense them: the language of the spiritual senses returned to actual physical connection with the creatures around us.³² Surely the minimum hermeneutical attention we need to give the Book of Nature is simply to get outdoors in a regular and sustained way and begin listening: deepening relationship with that wild *Logos* permeating all that is.

30. Christie, *Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 179–222.

31. *Ibid.*, 193, 208.

32. I develop this proposal at more length in my essay, “Bio-Theoacoustics.”

Natural Sciences as Dialogue Partners

Part of contemporary alienation from ecological reality and need is that (as many have noted) at least since the Enlightenment the split between the worlds of “science” and “religion” has increasingly separated these two interwoven Books of divine revelation, to the conceptual impoverishment of both. Science can lose touch with the sacredness of all that is and participate in increasingly destructive forms of technology and exploitation of the biosphere, while religion—even the sacramental Christian imagination—is too often cut off from the vast weird mystery and beauty inherent in scientific insight: the emergence of new forms of life itself, the most intricate cell-biological processes, the scope of cosmic grandeur. Thus a second dimension of attention to the Book of Nature involves learning our way into natural-scientific fields and into scientific literacy generally. Systematic and constructive theologians have been engaging in dialogue with the natural sciences for decades in ways that have transformed the face of Christian theological reflection.³³ It’s no easy task of course to become fluent in the technical, arcane, often mathematically-based sciences at the depth needed for them to inform our thinking. Yet surely all Christians must continue to deepen our listening from whatever point of scientific engagement we now have. If we are to contribute in vital ways toward the Great Work of our time, we need to hear what scientists are telling us. Only in this way can we discern where our gifts might make the most important difference, where our expertise can help Christians and humans and other species negotiate what is certain to be an agonizing, catastrophic set of transitions ahead, and how our distinctive voices best contribute to the much larger project of the world’s life.

Indigenous Listening

We learn to listen to the natural world itself as a primary contemplative and mysteriously hermeneutical practice; we learn to listen to scientists who help us live into our world’s life and death; we need to learn to listen also to indigenous leaders in particular and those who practice non-dualistic religions and spiritualities. Pope Francis too urges this priority of attention: “it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities

33. Those interested in listening into these conversations might begin with the work published in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. <http://www.zygonjournal.org/>.

and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners.”³⁴ Yet the unfortunate historical relationships between European Christians’ “exploration,” colonizing, dominating, and evangelizing of the rest of the world means that European-descended Christians do not have a good history of respectful listening to those who know the land best, let alone learning from them. As Tink Tinker writes, “[W]e need to step back and notice that Indian peoples and their cultures were some of the first victims of the eco-destructive machine that invaded this continent from Europe . . . Parked on so-called reservations, Indian people are [still] largely absent from American consciousness, erased even as we continue to live—in desperate poverty.”³⁵

Tinker’s warning reminds us that learning from and with indigenous dialogue partners—like any truly transforming encounter—is not first a matter of books and study but a long-term, in-person, first-person process. Who are the indigenous inhabitants of your watershed? Do any members of this community live nearby? What resources will help us all listen more deeply to the past and present insights of non-dualistic spiritual communities toward cherishing together the places and planet we inhabit?³⁶

CONCLUSION: WILD CHRISTIAN LIFE

I have asserted that outdoor Christian practices of Word and sacrament can help recast the meaning of Christian life toward encountering the *wild Logos* incarnate and filling all that is: a rewilded Christian *spirituality*.³⁷ Here Jesus Christ is not a mark of separation—Christians on one

34. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, para.146. Francis continues, “For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best.”

35. Tinker, “American Indians and Ecotheology,” 71–72.

36. Because written insights also matter, one might look to the work collected in Grim, ed., *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology*, along with resources particular to a given place or project.

37. In “Into Local Waters,” I expand questions of the Spirit: “What Spirit animates a baptismal practice and life outdoors, in full immersion into the natural world on its own terms? Do we have new contributions toward naming the experience of those who sense the Spirit alive in our *spirit-ualities* in more comprehensively ecological terms? From John Muir’s ecstatically mountain- and rock-centered Spirit and spirituality, to

side, non-Christians elsewhere. Here Christ is the one who brings Christians and our best wisdom, faith, and practice back into restored unity in our *shared* waters with all people and all creatures. In a time of so many religious divisions, and of increasing interfaith or multi-religious collaboration, such baptismal Earth-belonging can help create truly shared *religious* space: namely this water, this creation we all love.³⁸ For people of all religions breathe the same air, drink the same water, are creatures of the same biosphere with one another and trillions of other kin, beyond our species. To all these Christians too are joined in the literal baptismal waters and watersheds of our place.

I am also curious about conceiving of forms of *interspecies* faith out here in the water. Does the Body of Christ into whom we are baptized—that *wild Logos*—include the fish, plants, birds, insects, animals, shellfish, and microbes alive in these waters as well? Can a Christian spirituality include I/Thou relations with creatures beyond the human? St. Francis thought so—but there haven't been many serious calls for interspecies spirituality since.³⁹ What kinds of prayer and practice will test, probe, and celebrate a rewilding baptism, new rites and renunciations, new forms of community, new watershed spiritualities?

At the outset of this essay I used the language of “perpendicularity” to describe the perception of radically *cross-wise* orientation from my usual fast-pace, technologically driven forms of life: an immersion in a world much thicker and slower and relationally diverse than that of the interstate highway far above. I find this image continuing to echo in me, as I still ponder the shape of the baptismal and intellectual Christian life. In whatever ways I can, I want to get off the freeway and back to the bike path, all the way into the river. I want to learn from those who live “way below” our destructive economic systems how life looks from their perspective. With all those contributing to this volume, and countless others around the world today, I want an Eco-Reformation for the life of the world.

Teilhard de Chardin's luminous vision of the universe encompassed fully in Christ, to contemporary eco-feminist and eco-liberation thinkers, Christians are expanding what we mean by 'Spirit' in many directions,” 153.

38. The visionary collaboration between eco-philosopher Mary Evelyn Tucker and physicist Brian Swimme attempts, through a series of projects (book, film, curricula, web resources) to give vision and voice to this “Big Story” that is the universe itself, shared by all. See <http://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org/>.

39. My own work, “The View from *Way Below*,” is an initial attempt in this direction, toward an interspecies Eucharistic spirituality.

How do climate change and the wild baptismal Spirit of life interrupt our lives and call us into new leadership in the crises already unfolding on Earth? In small and large ways, with generosity and creativity, we need all hands on deck. And we need a Christian spirituality for our time, attentive to each endangered creature in our watersheds and across the Earth—a spirituality courageous enough to name our complicity with eco-erasure and climate injustice, to critique and turn from forms of piety that no longer serve us well, and to invite all Christians into the waters of life, for the life of the world. Grace calls us out into a much larger communion, unpaved, unprivileged. The water's alive—let's go in.

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