The Spirit in the New Millennium:

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Featuring Special Guest
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“The Spirit in the New Millennium: The Duquesne University Annual Holy Spirit Lecture and Colloquium” was initiated in 2005 by Duquesne University President Charles J. Dougherty as an expression of Duquesne’s mission and charism as a university both founded by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and dedicated to the Holy Spirit. It is hoped that this ongoing series of lectures and accompanying colloquia will encourage the exploration of ideas pertaining to the theology of the Holy Spirit. Besides fostering scholarship on the Holy Spirit within an ecumenical context, this event is intended to heighten awareness of how pneumatology (the study of the Spirit) might be relevantly integrated into the various academic disciplines in general.

This lecture may be read online at www.theholyspiritcolloquium.duq.edu. You can contact us at holyspirit@duq.edu. Radu Bordeianu, Ph.D., serves as the director.
2008 Colloquists

• Dr. Marie Baird
  Associate Professor of Theology and Director of Graduate Studies, Duquesne University (Pittsburgh, PA)

• Rev. Dr. Radu Bordeianu
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• Dr. Nona Verna Harrison
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• Dr. Despina Prassas,
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• Rev. Dr. Michael Raschko
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• Rev. Dr. Bonaventure Ikenna Ugwu, C.S.Sp.
  Academic Dean and Vice Rector, Spiritan International School of Theology (Attakwu, Enugu, Nigeria)
Creative Giver of Life
An Ecological Theology of the Holy Spirit

Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J.

Introduction: A Living Planet

The image of Earth from space, a blue marble swirled around with white clouds against a vista of endless black, has become familiar to our generation. Astronauts who have seen this view with their own eyes speak of its power to change their attitude. Saudi Arabian astronaut Sultan bin Salman al-Saud, part of an international crew, recollected: “The first day we all pointed to our own countries. The third day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day, we were all aware of only one Earth.” Another astronaut, American Rusty Schweigert who walked on the moon, had this to say: “From the moon, Earth is so small and so fragile, and such a precious little spot in the universe, that you can block it out with your thumb. Then you realize that on that spot, that little blue and white circle, is everything that means anything to you - all of history, music, poetry and art, birth and love and death, tears, joy ... And then you are changed forever; your relationship to the world is no longer what it was.”¹

In our day, a new awareness of the magnificence of Earth as a planet that hosts life is growing among people everywhere. It is an ecological awareness, ecological from the Greek οίκος, meaning home, and referring to this living planet as our home. It is a consciousness pervaded by wonder at Earth’s living beauty and, simultaneously, by distress at its despoiling. Ecological awareness is a new dialogue partner for theology. It raises challenges and provides opportunities to take yet another step in the age-old journey of “faith seeking understanding” of the ineffable mystery of God whom we confess. This lecture begins by sketching an ecological view of the world, which will in turn open the door for insights about the Creator Spirit to come to the fore.

Consider the story of how life came about. Current scientific consensus
holds that the universe originated about 14 billion years ago in a primordial flaring forth, rather inelegantly named the Big Bang. From that explosive instant on to this day, the universe continues to expand. In one corner of one galaxy, our own solar system formed about 5 billion years ago, coalescing under gravity’s pull from debris left by ancient exploding stars. On one of these planets, Earth, life began about 3.5 billion years ago, igniting from minerals and gasses to form communities of single-celled creatures deep in the seas. Life then evolved from single-celled to multiple-celled creatures; from sea to land and air; from plant to animal life; and very recently from primates to human beings, we mammals whose brains are so richly textured that we experience self-reflective consciousness and freedom, or in classical philosophical terms, mind and will.

This contemporary universe story teaches us amazing things.

~ The universe is unfathomably old. We humans have only recently arrived. Carl Sagan memorably used the timetable of a single Earth year to dramatize the cosmic calendar. If the Big Bang occurred on January 1st, then our sun and planets came into existence September 9th; life on Earth originated on September 25th; and the first humans emerged onto the scene on December 31st at 10:30 pm.² Placing this timetable into graphic physical motion, the American Museum of Natural History in New York contains a spiraling cosmic walk. Starting at rooftop level with the Big Bang, each normal-sized step you take down the spiral covers millions of years. At the bottom, you step over all of human history in a line as thin as a human hair.

~ The observable universe is incomprehensibly large. There are over 100 billion galaxies, each comprised of billions of stars, and no one knows how many moons and planets, all of this visible and audible matter being only a fraction of the matter and energy in the universe. Earth is a small planet orbiting a medium-sized star toward the edge of one spiral galaxy.

~ The universe is profoundly dynamic. Out of the Big Bang, the galaxies of stars; out of the stardust, the Earth; out of the molecules of the Earth, single-celled living creatures; out of the evolutionary life and death of these
creatures, an advancing tide of life, fragile but unstoppable, up to the riot of
millions of species that exist today; and out of one branch of this bush of life,
homo sapiens, the species in which the Earth becomes conscious of itself.
Human thought and love are not something injected into the universe from
without, but are the flowering in us of deeply cosmic energies. Religiously
this positions us, in Abraham Heschel’s beautiful phrase, to be the cantors of
the universe, able to sing praise and thanks in the name of all.3

~ The universe is complexly interconnected. Everything links with everything
else; nothing conceivable is isolated. What makes our blood red? Scientist
and theologian Arthur Peacocke explains, “Every atom of iron in our blood
would not be there had it not been produced in some galactic explosion
billions of years ago and eventually condensed to form the iron in the crust
of the earth from which we have emerged.”4 We are made of stardust. The
subsequent story of evolution makes clear that humans share with all other
living creatures on our planet a common genetic ancestry. Bacteria, pine
trees, blueberries, horses, the great gray whales: we are all genetic kin in the
great community of life.

This story of life makes us stand in awe. But at the same time we humans are
inflicting deadly damage on our planet, ravaging its identity as a dwelling
place for life. The way we consume and exploit resources and pollute is
dealing a sucker punch to life-supporting systems on land, sea, and air. The
litany makes for nightmare headlines: global warming, holes in the ozone
layer, rain forests logged and burned, ruined wetlands, collapsed fisheries,
poisoned soils. The widespread destruction of ecosystems has as its flip side
the extinction of the plant and animal species that thrive in these habitats.
By a conservative estimate, in the last quarter of the twentieth century 10%
of all living species went extinct - and the dying continues. We are killing
birth itself, wiping out the future of our fellow creatures who took millions
of years to evolve. Their perishing sends an early-warning signal about the
death of our planet itself. In the blunt language of the World Council of
Churches, “The stark sign of our times is a planet in peril at our hands.”5

The picture darkens as we attend to the deep-seated connection between
ecological devastation and social injustice. Poor people suffer disproportionately from environmental damage; ravaging of people and ravaging of the land on which they depend go hand in hand. In the Amazon basin, for example, lack of just distribution of land pushes dispossessed rural peoples to the edges of the rain forest where in order to stay alive they practice slash-and-burn agriculture, in the process destroying pristine habitat, killing rare animals, and displacing indigenous peoples. Closer to home, in our country the economically well-off can choose to live amid acres of green while poor people are housed near factories, refineries, or waste-processing plants which heavily pollute the environment. The bitterness of this situation is exacerbated by racial prejudice as environmental racism pressures people of color to dwell in these neighborhoods.

Feminist analysis clarifies further how the plight of the poor becomes exemplified in poor women whose own biological abilities to give birth are compromised by toxic environments, and whose nurturing of children is hampered at every turn by lack of clean water, food, and fuel. Women-initiated projects such as the Chipko movement in India, where village women literally hug the forest trees to prevent lumber interests from cutting them down; and the Green Belt movement started by Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai in Kenya, whereby women plant millions of trees and receive a small income for nurturing them, show how restoring the earth interweaves intrinsically with the flourishing of poor women and their communities. Poverty and its remedy have an ecological face.

For people of faith, the question of God is profoundly involved in these considerations. Where is God, and what is God doing, and how does that affect our lives, in an evolutionary world under threat? The ancient but neglected field of pneumatology (study of the Spirit) is poised to make a contribution. On the frontier of cosmic science and ecological responsibility, it invites us to rediscover the reality of God the Holy Spirit, Creative Giver of Life.
I. Remembering the Spirit

From the opening scene in the Bible where the Spirit moves over the waters at the beginning of creation, to the last scene where the Spirit invites all who are thirsty for the water of life to “Come,” the ruah / breath / wind / spirit of God is at play everywhere in the natural world. We cannot flee from God’s Spirit even by flying to the highest heaven or diving to the deepest canyon in the sea (Ps 139:7-10). The Spirit is the Lord and Giver of life, natural and human. This much is obvious: to teach an a-cosmic relation to God is not to know the God of the Bible. The first fifteen hundred years of Christian theology by and large paid attention to this point. Theology was like a three-legged stool, held up by interlocking considerations of God, the human race, and the natural world. This was true of Christian as well as Jewish and Islamic reflection. However, the fierce sixteenth century conflict in the West over how humans are saved from sin, whether by faith alone (the Protestant position) or by faith and good works (the Catholic position), caused an intense focus on the human dilemma. As happens in any fight, people lost sight of the wider reality. In the post-Reformation centuries, Catholic theology tied the Spirit very tightly to church office and the teaching of the magisterium, while Protestant theology fastened onto the Spirit’s work of justification in the individual person. The churches paid attention to the Spirit at Pentecost and during Confirmation ceremonies but, with few exceptions, both sides forgot the biblical, early Christian, and medieval witness to the cosmic presence and activity of the Spirit of God.8

During these centuries, neo-scholastic theology envisioned God on the model of a monarch at the very peak of the pyramid of being. “He,” for it was always the ruling male who was the model for this idea, dwelt beyond the world, uncontaminated by its messiness. He gave commands which the world had to obey. Even when this Supreme Being was portrayed with a benevolent attitude, which the best of theology did, He was still essentially remote, ruling the universe while not affected by it in any significant way. He loved the world, but humans had to try hard to find their way back to “Him.” This theology’s brilliant achievement was to establish the transcendence of God beyond any second thoughts. But it was less keen on divine immanence,
II. Presence of the Creator Spirit

At the end of his popular book *A Brief History of Time*, physicist Stephen
Hawking asks a famous question: “What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?” In the integrity of his adherence to atheism, he leaves the question open. Biblical faith answers that it is the Spirit who breathes life into the exuberant, diverse, interrelated universe. The mystery of the living God, utterly transcendent, is also the dynamic power at the heart of the world and its evolution. This refers to divine action not just in the beginning at the Big Bang but even now, persistently, as the universe continues to take shape into the future. The Creator Spirit is the unceasing, dynamic flow of loving power that sustains the world, brings forth life, weaves connections between all creatures, and repairs what gets damaged. Instead of sitting beyond the point of the pyramid of privilege, the divine Spirit encircles and indwells the universe.

**Creative Presence**

To describe this, the Bible uses cosmic images whose imaginative resonance is different from anthropomorphic images of God as king, lord, or father. It refers to the Spirit as ruah / breath or blowing wind, as blazing fire, as flowing water. None of these has a definite, stable shape; they can surround and pervade other things without losing their own character; their presence is known by the changes they bring about. Just so, the Spirit energizes the natural world of birthing and dying throughout billions of years.

The schema that allows for the most intelligible interpretation of this indwelling is pan-en-theism. Unlike theism, which infers God to be the highest member of the order of being, insisting on God’s difference and distance from the world while paying little attention to divine nearness (the model which modern a-theism rejects); and unlike pan-theism (all is God), which erases the difference between created and uncreated, thereby collapsing God and the world into each other, panentheism posits a relationship where everything abides in the Creator Spirit who in turn encompasses everything. Here the Giver of Life is “over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:6). What results is a mutual abiding for which the pregnant female body provides a good metaphor. Widespread adoption of this understanding in contemporary theology has been called “a quiet revolution.” Even so, Augustine long ago
depicted this indwelling in memorable terms:

I set before the sight of my spirit the whole creation, whatsoever we can see therein (as sea, earth, air, stars, trees, mortal creatures); yea and whatever in it we do not see .... But Thee, O Lord, I imagined on every part environing and penetrating it, though in every way infinite: as if there were a sea, everywhere and on every side, through unmeasured space, one only boundless sea, and it contained within it some sponge, huge, but bounded; that sponge must need, in all its parts, be filled with that immeasurable sea: so conceived I Thy creation, itself finite, yet full of Thee, the Infinite; and I said, Behold God, and behold what God hath created; and God is good, yea, most mightily and incomparably better than all these ...

The natural world of Augustine’s day was thought to be static, set up by God in the beginning according to a blueprint in the divine mind. The presence of God that he envisions within it takes on new contours in an evolutionary universe. Present as sea to sponge, the Spirit of God is supremely radiant, relational energy, continuously creating in and though the processes of nature, which have their own integrity. The Spirit of God is like a great creative Matrix who grounds and sustains the cosmos and attracts it toward the future. Throughout the vast sweep of cosmic and biological evolution, the Spirit embraces the material root of life and its endless new potential, empowering the cosmic process from within. The universe, in turn, is self-organizing and self-transcending, energized from the spiraling galaxies to the double helix of the DNA molecule by the Spirit’s quickening power.

**Cruciform Presence**

There is yet more to be said. For the natural world is not only beautiful in its harmonies. It also presents us with an unrelentingly harsh and bloody picture, filled with suffering and death. Bodily existence requires eating; hence predation is an inescapable part of the pattern of biological life. On a grand scale, the history of life itself is dependent on death; without death
there would be no evolutionary development from generation to generation. The history of life is a story of suffering and death over millions of millennia. The temptation is to deny the violence and escape into a romantic view of the natural world. But there is another option, namely, to seek the Creator Spirit in the midst of pain.¹³

To do so, theology performs a typical maneuver, taking its eyes off the immediate question to consult the gospel. Christian theology interprets Jesus as the Word and Wisdom of God whose life, death, and resurrection reveal the character of the living God. What do we glimpse through this lens? A merciful love that knows no bounds, a compassion that enters into the depth of people’s sin, suffering and terrifying death, to bring new life. An ecological vision gives theology warrant to cross the species line and extend this divine solidarity to all creatures. The Creator Spirit dwells in compassionate solidarity with every living being that suffers, from the dinosaurs wiped out by an asteroid to the baby impala eaten by a lioness. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without eliciting a knowing suffering in the heart of God, who constantly works to renew the face of the Earth. Such an idea is not meant to glorify suffering, a trap that must be carefully avoided. But it works out an implication of the vivifying Spirit’s relation to an evolutionary, suffering world with an eye to divine compassion. Nature’s crying out is met by the Spirit who groans with the labor pains of all creation to bring the new to birth (Rom 8:22-23). Thus is the pattern of cross and resurrection found at work on a cosmic scale.

*K*Futuring Presence*

Rather than being a settled place, the universe is ever-changing. In the beginning was a homogenous sea of radiation. Rather than remain at a granular level of existence, the universe has unfolded extravagantly over time, emerging in increasingly elaborate forms. Biologists such as Stephen Jay Gould warn against interpreting this story as a necessary, directional, linear march from the Big Bang to the human race. The story of life is more like a branching bush, with humanity itself one recent twig on one branch of the bush. While granting this point, other scientists argue that since
the universe as a whole has in fact moved in a certain direction from its cosmic origins, it obviously has propensities toward ever more complexity, beauty, and ordered novelty. Taking the long view we can see that from the beginning the universe is seeded with promise, pregnant with surprise. More has regularly come from less. The cosmic story has been one of restless adventure that produces the genuinely new.

Indwelling the world with creative compassion, the Creator Spirit’s presence is future-oriented, luring the world along the paths of creative advance. This realization connects the natural world squarely with the biblical story, where God is a God of surprises who keeps approaching with a call to “come ahead” into the future, promised but unknown. Think of the call to Abraham and Sarah to leave their home and travel to a new land, capped off by the surprising gift of a child to them in their sterile old age (Gen 12-21); think of the summons to the Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt to pass over the sea into freedom (Ex 1-15); think of the surprising annunciation to an unknown young woman in a poor village inviting her to bear the Messiah (Lk 1:26-38); think of Christ’s commission to the women disciples at his empty tomb to go and announce that he is risen (Matt 28:1-10; Jn 20:1-18). Divine presence in human history keeps acting unexpectedly to open up the future. So too with the natural world: the vivifying Spirit is forever at work, generously bringing forth novelty in the world of nature. And the adventure is not yet finished. The natural world is the bearer of divine promise that moves toward the final day when heaven and earth will be transformed by divine blessing: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev 21:5).

III. Action of the Creator Spirit

The presence of Creator Spirit in the natural world raises in direct fashion the question of divine agency. How does God act in an evolutionary, emergent universe? The scientific picture of the universe indicates that over uncounted millennia, nature actively emerges into new forms at all levels. Even the dawning of life and then of mind can be accounted for without special supernatural intervention. One mistaken religious concept places
divine intent and action directly into the physical nexus of the universe. The bitterness of the disputes between adherents of intelligent design and the so-called new atheists is due to the fact that they both share this assumption. Fundamentalists posit direct divine action while the materialist scientists find no trace. I want to say: a plague on both your houses. The fundamental view of how God acts that is held by both parties is inadequate. In a review of Richard Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion*, which is a diatribe against religion, Terry Eagleton observed that part of the problem with Dawkins’ thesis is that he imagines God, “if not exactly with a white beard, then at least as some kind of *chap*, however supersized.” 14 It is this deficient view of God’s action as part of the physical nexus of the universe that gets contemporary discussion into impossible dead-ends.

Disputes within theology over divine agency can be just as fierce as those between science and religion. At least six positions claim a seat at the table. Single action theory understands God to have acted once, in the beginning; since then, God sustains the world while the details of cosmic history are just how it all happens to work out (Gordon Kaufman, Maurice Wiles). Positing much more divine involvement, process thought holds that God provides initial aims to every concreting event, and acts by the power of persuasion to lure the world in a desired direction (Alfred North Whitehead, John B. Cobb, David Griffin). Making an analogy with the agency of embodied human persons, a third position envisions the world as the body of God, with God acting in the world the way the soul acts in the body (Sallie McFague). Using information theory, the top-down causality position understands that God acts in the world through the influence of the whole upon the parts (Arthur Peacocke). The ‘causal joint’ theory uses the innate openness of physical processes to predicate that God acts as one of the initial conditions of an event, inputting the pattern that influences the overall outcome (John Polkinghorne, Nancey Murphy, Robert Russell).

A sixth, more classical position holds to the distinction between primary and secondary causality, seeing God’s agency effective through the working out of natural causes. As the unfathomable Source of the world’s existence, God bestows natural forces and individual creatures with power to act with their
own independence. These two causes are not two species of the same genus, not two different types of causes united on a common ground of generating effects. They operate on completely different levels (itself an inadequate analogy), one being the Cause of all causes, the other participating in this power to act, as things that are burning participate in the power of fire. This idea continues to be articulated by some Catholic thinkers today. Working in this tradition, Australian Denis Edwards observes, “Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) long ago clarified that God’s way of acting in the world (what can be called primary causality) is not opposed to the whole network of cause and effect in nature (secondary causality). God’s work is achieved in and through creaturely cause and effect. It is not in competition with it. Aquinas never knew Darwin’s theory of evolution, but he would have had no difficulty in understanding it as the way that God creates.”

While markedly different from each other, these various positions have much in common. They shun an extrinsic model of divine activity. They seek to make intelligible the idea that the Creator Spirit, as ground, sustaining power, and goal of the evolving world, acts by empowering the process from within. They see divine creativity acting in, with, and under cosmic processes. God makes the world, in other words, by empowering the world to make itself.

Even granting this, what makes the conversation so dicey for theology is chance. Unlike the science of the Enlightenment period which envisioned the universe operating in a determined, mechanistic way, today’s science has revealed the existence of extensive zones of openness in nature. In these areas what happens next is intrinsically unpredictable. This is not because we have not yet developed instruments capable of measuring such systems and thus predicting outcomes. Rather, there is something in nature itself that defies total measurement. The microscopic realm studied by quantum physics is one such zone; large, non-linear, dynamic systems studied by the physics of chaos are another; the biological development of species by natural selection is a third.

Take as an example the non-linear, dynamic system of weather. One day a
butterfly flutters its wings in Beijing; the small current of air it sets in motion cascades upward in ever-amplifying intersection with other air currents; one week later, as a result, there is a major storm in New York. There is no simple cause and effect, but an open, dynamic system that can be tipped this way or that way with the most minute changes. Over time, a certain pattern will emerge as the systems continue to work. But given the sensitivity of the system to initial conditions, in any given instance no sure prediction is possible.

Or take biological evolution. Things run along smoothly until some slight change is introduced: a gene mutates due to bombardment by solar rays, or a hurricane blows a few birds off course to a new island, or the Earth is struck by an asteroid. This disrupts smooth operations to the point almost of breakdown. Then out of this turbulence emerges, spontaneously, a more intricate order adapted to the new conditions.

Technically speaking, random events working within lawful regularities over eons of time have crafted the shape of the world that we inhabit today. If there were only law in the universe, the situation would stagnate. If there were only chance, things would become so chaotic that no orderly structures could take shape. But chance working within nature’s laws disrupts the usual pattern while being held in check, and over millennia their interplay allows the emergence of genuinely new forms that cannot be reduced to previous components. This chance-within-law pattern over deep time is precisely what one would expect if the evolving universe were not predetermined, but were left free to explore its potential by experimenting with the fullest range of possibilities inherent in matter.¹⁶

This means that as far as science can fathom, the universe’s unfolding has not happened according to a pre-determined blueprint. A startling moment occurred at an annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America when Bill Stoeger, Jesuit astrophysicist from the University of Arizona, asked: rewind the clock of the world back to the first moment and let it start ticking again: would things turn out the same way? The scientific consensus is an emphatic “No,” because of chance. There was stunned silence and then an
eruption of argument as a roomful of theologians tried to wrap their minds around this idea and relate it to our basic ideas about divine providence.

How does the intrinsic role of chance in cosmic and biological development impact our understanding of divine agency? Theology now discovers that the indwelling Creator Spirit not only grounds nature’s regularities, being the source of law, but also empowers the chancy interruptions of regularity that bring about the new. Boundless love at work in / with / under the processes of the universe, the Spirit embraces the chanciness of random mutations and chaotic conditions of open systems, being the source not only of order but also of the novelty that causes chaos to happen in the first place. Divine creativity is much more closely allied to disorder than our older theology ever imagined. In the emergent evolutionary universe, we should not be surprised to find divine creativity hovering very close to turbulence.

The concept of divine power in this reflection is obviously different from omnipotence wielded in a monarchical way. On many fronts today, theology has been working to redefine omnipotence as the power of love. This idea gains added currency in the framework of ecology, which delineates the inner capacity of nature to self-organize into new, more complex forms, and sees this being accomplished by the mechanism of random events working within law-like regularities over deep time. If the source of nature is the Creator Spirit, then divine power is acting here in a self-emptying, infinitely humble and generous way, a christic way, endowing the universe with the capacity to become itself. It is as if at the Big Bang the Spirit gave the world a push saying, “Go, have an adventure, see what you can become. And I will be with you.” In more classical language, the Giver of life not only creates and conserves all things, holding them in existence over the abyss of nothingness, but is also the dynamic ground of their becoming, empowering from within their self-transcendence into new being. This is not a denial of omnipotence, but its redefinition. The Spirit of God moves in the world with compassionate love that grants nature its own creativity and humans their own freedom, all the while companioning them through the terror of history toward a new future.

In view of the openness of the natural world, John Haught suggests, happily
in my view, that we should no longer think of God as having a set plan for the evolving universe, but rather a vision. This vision aims at bringing into being a community of love. The Creator Spirit is at the heart of the process, guiding / luring the world in that direction, all the while inviting the world to participate in its own creation through the free working of its systems. At the quantum level, in non-linear dynamic systems, through natural selection, and by free human agency – the new emerges! Grounded and vivified by such freeing power, the universe evolves in the integrity of its own proper autonomy.

IV. Challenge of the Creator Spirit

An ecological theology of the Creator Spirit in the natural world not only expands our awareness of divine presence. It also reframes understanding of the natural world itself. Instead of being divorced from what is holy, matter bears the mark of the sacred, being imbued with a spiritual radiance. For the Spirit creates what is physical—stars, planets, plants, animals, ecological communities, bodies, senses, sexuality—and moves in these every bit as vigorously as in souls, minds, ideas. Catholic sacramental theology has always taught that simple material things—bread and wine, water, oil, the sexual union of marriage—can be bearers of divine grace. This is so, it now becomes clear, only because to begin with the whole physical world itself is the locale of God’s gracious indwelling, a primordial sacrament of divine presence. This leads to the crucial realization that the natural world enjoys its own intrinsic value before God. It is not created simply for human use, nor is it only an instrument to serve our needs. We can no longer reduce divine care to one, newly arriving species, *homo sapiens*. Far from being a mere backdrop for our human lives or a stage for our drama, the natural world is a beloved creation valued by God for its own sake.

Hence this theology of the Holy Spirit directs the church to hear the divine challenge to love and justice in a new key, calling for responsible, assertive care for the Earth. It becomes clear in our day that a moral universe limited to human persons is no longer adequate. Ethical reflection needs to widen attention beyond humanity alone and recenter vigorous moral consideration
on the whole community of life. Pope John Paul II articulated a stunning principle that supports such praxis: “respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation.” In other words, we owe love and justice not only to humankind but to “otherkind.” In such an ecological ethic, Jesus’ great command to love your neighbor as yourself extends to include all members of the Earth community. “Who is my neighbor?” asks Brian Patrick? He answers: “The Samaritan? The outcast? The enemy? Yes, yes, of course. But it is also the whale, the dolphin, and the rain forest. Our neighbor is the entire community of life, the entire universe. We must love it all as our very self.” Converting minds and hearts to such an Earth ethic entails at least three responses that will enable us to live as partners with God in continuing creation rather than as destroyers of the world.

~ The contemplative response. Here we gaze on the Earth with eyes of love rather than with an arrogant, utilitarian stare. We will not save what we do not love, and this response begins by awakening our biophilic desires. As the scientist Louis Agassiz noted: “I spent the summer traveling; I got half-way across my back yard.” The wonders of our planet are a source of revelation. Anyone who has ever glimpsed the beauty of God through an experience of delight or awe in the natural world knows this. The contemplative response engages the natural world with religious imagination and heart, allowing it to lift our minds and hearts to God and enfolding it into our religious love.

~ The ascetic response. Here we restrain our rampant consumerism and self-indulgence in order to protect the Earth. A sensuous, earth-affirming asceticism leads us to live more simply: observe the Sabbath as a genuine day of rest; fast from shopping; endure the inconvenience of running an ecologically-sensitive household; and conduct business with an eye to the green bottom line as well as the red or black. We do these things not to make ourselves suffer and not because we’re anti-body, but so that we can become alert to how enslaved we are by the marketplace and act to offset its effect on the planet.

~ The prophetic response. Here we take critical action on behalf of the
survival of the planet. The ongoing destruction of the Earth through human acts of ecocide, biocide, geocide is a deeply sinful desecration. In the tradition of biblical prophecy and the spirit of Jesus, we counter this destruction by acting for the care, protection, restoration, and healing of nature, even if this goes counter to powerful economic and political interests - and it does. If nature is the new poor, as Sallie McFague suggests, then our passion to establish justice for the poor and oppressed now must extend to include suffering human beings AND life systems and other species under threat. “Save the rain forest” becomes a concrete moral application of the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” The moral goal becomes ensuring vibrant life in community for all.

Conclusion

An ecological theology of the Creator Spirit has two benefits. First, it opens doors to new forms of relationship with the all-holy God present and active throughout the whole world. The Holy One who fires up the blaze of being does not stand over against the world, or rule it as a king from afar, but dwells in vivifying and compassionate relationship with human beings and the whole universe, attracting all into the future. Second, this theology motivates an ethic of care for the Earth. In our day a terrible drama of life and death is being played out in the natural world. Instead of living as thoughtless or greedy exploiters, we are called to live as sisters and brothers, friends and lovers, mothers and fathers, priests and prophets, co-creators and children of this Earth which God so loves.

Karl Rahner once famously wrote, “the devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something, or he [she] will cease to be anything at all.” Our times call for experience of the Creator Spirit in the natural world, forever moving over the void, breathing into the chaos, pouring out, informing, quickening, warming, groaning, interrupting, comforting, setting free, befriending, challenging, and blessing, being indeed the One in whom we live and move and have our being (cf. Acts 17:28). Now when we hear that “the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us” (Rom 5:5), we realize that this love is universal,
planetary, cosmic, and unceasing. An ecological theology of the Spirit sets religious people off on a great adventure, expanding the repertoire of our love.

(Endnotes)


3 Abraham Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Scribner, 1954): 82. “All Thy works praise Thee (Ps. 145:10): We are not alone in our acts of praise. Wherever there is life, there is silent worship. The world is always on the verge of becoming one in adoration. It is man who is the cantor of the universe, and in whose life the secret of cosmic prayer is disclosed.”


7 Carol Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan, eds., *Earth, Wind, & Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2004).


9 These images are suggested by Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean* (Against Praxeas), 8.


19 Brian Patrick, cited in Dowd, Earthspirit, 40.


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