“CHRISTIANITY AND ECOLOGY”

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Precisely why should we care about the nonhuman natural world? Most of us probably believe that it is a good thing to do, and we can even give some very convincing pragmatic answers to the question. But theology is concerned with the religious justification of any ecological concern we might have. It is the task of environmental theology to spell out, from within the context of a particular religious tradition, the ultimate reasons why we should care about the cosmos. In my case, the tradition is Christian, and so in this and the following chapter I would like to draw out what I think are some distinctive contributions of Christian faith to the ecological movement.

I have already suggested that the threat of global ecological collapse need not lead us to abandon our religious traditions, but that it could be a major historical stimulus to their revitalization. Yet in the case of Christianity such a suggestion may seem too optimistic. Critics of this tradition, as well as some Christian authors themselves, have complained about Christianity's complicity in the western war against nature? Hasn't Christianity been too anthropocentric, too androcentric, too otherworldly and too cavalier about the intrinsic value of nature? Hasn't its theology so overemphasized the need to repair the “fall” of humanity that it has almost completely ignored the original goodness of creation? Hasn't it heard the words of Genesis about human “dominion” over the earth as an imperative to exploit and deface it?

Whether these accusations are justified or not, it is at least certain that many Christians, perhaps even the majority of them, continue to interpret the physical universe as though it were little more than a “soul school” wherein we are challenged to develop our moral character but which itself has little intrinsic significance and no share in human destiny. In this interpretation nonhuman nature is merely a set of props for the drama of human salvation or a way-station for the human religious journey.

Because of its traditionally longing so much for another world, British philosopher John Passmore doubts that Christian theology can ever reshape itself in an ecologically helpful way without ceasing thereby to be Christian. Since Christianity actually sanctions our hostility toward nature, he argues, the only healthy alternative is a radical secularism:

Only if men see themselves ... for what they are, quite alone, with no one to help them except their fellowmen, products of natural processes which are wholly indifferent to their survival, will they face their ecological problems in their full implications. Not by the extension, but by the total rejection, of the concept of the sacred will they move toward that sombre realization.¹

While Passmore's indictment of Christianity may be harsh, I think we have to admit that environmentally speaking this tradition, like many others, has been at best ambiguous.² While the doctrines of creation and incarnation clearly affirm the value of the cosmos, most Christian spiritualities, saints and scholars have been relatively indifferent to nature. The welfare of the natural world has seldom, if ever, been a dominant concern. We can boast of St. Francis of Assisi, or of Ignatius Loyola, who urged us to see God in all things (and that would have to include nature as well). But we cannot forget other saints like Martin and John of Ephesus, each at opposite ends of the Mediterranean during the rise of Christianity, both of whom are famous for their prowess in the art of deforestation.³ And if expressions of a deep love of nature appear in some Christian hymnody and hagiography, there are just as many indications of a desire to escape from nature in other facets of the tradition.⁴

Concern for either local or global environmental welfare is not a very explicit part of the Christian tradition. Nevertheless, I agree with Paul Santmire that there is great promise for theological renewal in the ecologically ambiguous Christian tradition.⁵ In fact a rethinking of Christianity in terms of the environmental crisis is already under way, and it is the cause for some optimism that this tradition may potentially be enlivened by an ecological transformation. The new theological reflection comes in several different strains, of which I shall discuss three. I will call these respectively the apologetic, the sacramental and the eschatological attempts to formulate an environmental theology. None of these can be found in a perfectly pure form, and aspects of all three may be found in the work of any single author. Nevertheless, they vary considerably in theological method, and so I hope it will prove illuminating to treat them here as distinct types.

THE APOLOGETIC APPROACH

The first, and the least revisionist of the three, is the more or less apologetic enterprise of trying to show that there is already a sufficient basis in scripture and tradition for an adequately Christian response to the environmental crisis. It is exemplified by recent statements of the pope and the American Catholic bishops,⁶ as well as a number of theological articles and books published in the past decade or so.⁷ According to this approach, which runs the range from biblical literalism to very sophisticated theological scholarship, we have simply ignored the wealth of ecologically relevant material in the tradition. Therefore, what we need to do now in order to have an adequate environmental theology is simply dig up the appropriate
texts and allow them to illuminate the present crisis. Sometimes this apologetic method merely scours the scriptures for nuggets of naturalism in order to show that the Bible cares about the cosmos after all. At its most simplistic extreme it does little more than recite the psalms and other biblical passages that proclaim creation as God’s handiwork. But at a more erudite level of interpretation it excavates the themes of incarnation and creation as theological warrants for an ecological theology. In addition it digs out environmentally sensitive, and previously overlooked passages in the early Christian and other theological writings. More than anything else, though, the apologetic approach emphasizes the biblical notion that God has given humanity “dominion” and “stewardship” over creation, and that this is reason enough for us to take care of our natural environment.

This first type of ecological theology also argues that if only we practiced the timeless religious virtues we could alleviate the crisis. Since one of the main sources of our predicament is simple human greed, the solution lies in a renewed commitment to humility, to the virtue of detachment, and to the central religious posture of gratitude by which we accept the natural world as God’s gift and treat it accordingly. If we allowed our lives to be shaped by genuinely Christian virtues, our relation to nature would have the appropriate balance, and we could avert the disaster that looms before us.

I call this approach apologetic because it defends the integrity of biblical religion and traditional theology without requiring their transformation. It holds, at least implicitly, that Christianity is essentially okay as it is, that environmental abuse stems only from perversions of pure faith and not from anything intrinsic to it, and therefore that Christianity does not need to undergo much of a change in the face of the present emergency. Rather, we need only to bring our environmental policies into conformity with revelation and time-tested doctrine. With respect to the present state of our environment, the fault is not with Christianity but with our failure to accept its message.

How are we to evaluate this apologetic approach (which is probably the one most Christians, and I suspect most Christian theologians, take today)? On the positive side, I would say that it does develop an indispensable component of an ecological theology: it turns our attention to significant resources in the Christian classics that have not been sufficiently emphasized. Its highlighting the environmental relevance of traditional teachings, forgotten texts and religious virtues is very helpful. We need this retrieval as we begin the work of shaping a theology appropriate to the contemporary crisis.

Moreover, a good dose of apologetics is certainly called for today in the face of many incredibly simplistic complaints by some historians that Christianity is the sole or major cause of the environmental crisis. A sober analysis of the historical roots of the crisis will show that some of the antinature attitudes associated with Christianity comprise only one aspect of a very complex set of ingredients leading to the present destruction of the ecosphere. An unbiased historical analysis can also demonstrate that major aspects of Christianity
have firmly resisted the dominating practices that led us to the present situation. Thus, some defending of Christianity seems entirely appropriate.

However, I do not think that this apologetic type goes far enough in opening Christian faith to the radical renewal the ecological crisis seems to demand. I seriously doubt that we can adequately confront the problems factoring our natural environment, theologically speaking, simply by being more emphatic about familiar moral exhortations or by endlessly exegeting scriptural passages about the goodness of nature or the importance of stewardship. Such efforts are not insignificant; indeed they are essential. But I wonder if they are fundamental enough. In the face of the chastisement Christianity has received from secular environmentalists, the apologetic quest for relevant texts, teachings and virtues does not go far enough. I doubt that even the most impressive display of biblical or patristic passages about God and nature will allay this criticism or, for that matter, turn many Christians into serious environmentalists. In order to have an adequate environmental theology Christianity, I think, will need to undergo a more radical internal change.

THE SACRAMENTAL APPROACH

The beginnings of such a change are now taking place in what I shall call the sacramental approach to Christian ecological theology. This second type focuses less on normative religious texts or historical revelation than does the apologetic approach, and more on the allegedly sacral quality of the cosmos itself. It is more willing to acknowledge the revelatory character of nature. It comes in a variety of theological forms ranging from what has been called “natural theology,” which focuses on the apparent evidence for God’s existence in nature, to the cosmic spirituality of Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox and their followers. In its typical form this sacramental approach interprets the natural world as the primary symbolic disclosure of God. Religious texts and traditions are still important, but the cosmos itself is the primary medium through which we come to know the sacred. Today the sacramental approach usually accommodates evolutionary theory and aspects of contemporary physics. It embraces a holistic view of the earth as an organism comprised of a delicately balanced web of interdependent relationships. Rejecting mechanism, it regards the entire universe organismically, that is, as an intricate network of dynamic interconnections in which all aspects are internal to each other. Hence, it also places particular emphasis on the continuity of humans with the rest of the natural world.

Accordingly, it views our spiritual traditions not as activities that we humans “construct” on the face of the earth, but as functions that the cosmos performs through us. According to Thomas Berry, for example, the universe is the primary subject, and humanity is one of many
significant developments of the universe. Cultures and religions are simply natural extensions of the cosmic process rather than unnatural creations of lonely human exiles on earth.

In the Christian context today I think this revisionist approach finds its most compelling expression in what has been called “creation-centered” theology. As the prime example of our second type it goes beyond the apologetic variety of environmental theology by arguing that our present circumstances require a whole new interpretation of what it means to be Christian. In the face of the environmental crisis it will not do simply to take more seriously our inherited texts and teachings. These are still important, but they must be carefully sifted and reinterpreted in terms of a cosmological, relational, nonhierarchical, nonpatriarchal, nondualistic and more organismic understanding of the universe. We must pay more attention to the sacral quality of the universe and not place such a heavy burden on premodern religious texts to give us the foundations of our environmental ethic.

In Christian circles this creation-centered outlook accepts the doctrines of the creed but gives them a cosmological interpretation. It may be helpful to look briefly at several of the results of its recosmologizing of traditional Christian teachings.

1. As the label suggests, this new theological emphasis brings the biblical theme of creation to the center of theology instead of subordinating it, as it has been in the past, to the theme of redemption. Theology’s focusing primarily on the redemption of a “fallen” world has distracted us from an adequate reverencing of the intrinsic goodness of nature. Moreover, our understanding of redemption has been too anthropocentric. We have been so obsessed with overcoming our human sinfulness and suffering, that we have forgotten about the travail of nature as a whole.

2. Creation-centered theology also argues that we need a correspondingly broader understanding of that from which we are said to be redeemed, namely, sin. It insists that sin means not just our estrangement from God or from each other, but also the present condition of severe alienation of the cosmos from ourselves. Reconciliation then implies not only the restoration of human communion but, just as fundamentally, our reintegration with the earth-community and the whole of the universe. In order to experience this reconciliation we must abandon all forms of religious dualism which have sanctioned our self-distancing from nature.

3. Creation-centered theology insists also that we need to rethink what we mean by revelation. Revelation is not just God’s self-manifestation in history, let alone the communication of divine information in propositional form. We need to think of revelation in more cosmic terms. The universe itself is the primary revelation. In its 15 billion-year evolution the cosmos is the most fundamental mode of the unfolding of divine mystery. The mystery of God is revealed gradually in the evolution of matter, life, human culture and the religions of the world (and not just in biblical religion either). Viewed in terms of cosmic evolution our religions can no longer be explained or explained away as simple heartwarming gestures that
estranged humans engage in on an alien terrain as we look toward some distant far-off eternity. Rather, religions are something that the universe does through us as it seeks to disclose its mysterious depths. The fact of there being a plurality of religions is in perfect keeping with evolution's extravagant creation of variety and difference. Hence, an ecological spirituality should be no less committed to preserving the plurality of religions in the world than it is to the salvaging of biodiversity. We should lament the loss of religious diversity since religions are also products of cosmic evolution and just as deserving of conservation as the multiple species of plants and animals.

4. Viewing things in this cosmological way, creation-centered theology appreciates both ancient and modern efforts to understand the Christ also as a cosmic reality, and not simply as a personal historical savior. Cosmic Christology, already present in ancient Christian theology, needs to be recovered today in terms of an evolutionary and ecological worldview. The entire cosmos (and not just human society) is the body of Christ. A cosmic Christology then provides the deepest foundations of a distinctively Christian environmental spirituality. And in keeping with this cosmic Christology the eucharistic celebration ideally represents the healing not only of severed human relationships, but also of the entire universe.

5. The theological experiment of creation-centered theology culminates in an ecological understanding of God. Here the trinitarian God is the supreme exemplification of ecology, a term which refers to the study of relationships. Creation in the image of God then means that the world itself has being only to the extent that, like God, it exists in relationship. An ecological theology is congruent both with contemporary science and the classic doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine which renounces the idea that God exists only in isolated asery.

6. This ecological contextualization of Christian teaching leads us in the direction of a whole new spirituality. Creation-centered theology encourages an enjoyment of the natural world as our true home. Traditional spiritualities, often characterized by a discomfort with bodily existence, received parallel expression simultaneously in the sense of humanity's fundamental homelessness in nature. The classic texts of Christianity have unfortunately been tainted by a dualistic bias that has sanctioned our hostility toward nature and the body. For this reason a purely apologetic type of environmental theology is inadequate, for it is not sufficiently alert to such ideological flaws in the classic sources.

7. Moreover, an ecological spirituality requires its own kind of asceticism. This asceticism prescribes a renunciation not of the natural world but of the Enlightenment ideal of autonomous, isolated selfhood. It subjects us to the arduous discipline of taking into full account the fact of our being inextricably tied into a wider earth-community. A full life, one in which we acknowledge our complex relation to the universe, widens our sense of responsibility toward ourselves and others. Above anything else, this means adopting a continually expanding posture of inclusiveness toward all otherness that we encounter, including the wildness of the natural world.
8. Creation-centered spirituality in turn inspires a restructuring of Christian ethics in terms of an environmental focus. Ethics cannot be grounded only in the classic moral traditions which usually left the welfare of the cosmos out of the field of concern. An environmental awareness gives a new slant to social ethics and life ethics. In place of (or alongside of) social justice, it advocates a more inclusive “eco-justice” according to which we cannot repair human inequities without simultaneously attending to the prospering of the larger earth-community. And being “pro-life” means going beyond the focus simply on the ethics of human reproduction. An environmentally chastened life ethic questions aspects of current moral teachings that tolerate policies which, while protective of human fertility, ignore the complex life-systems in which human fertility dwells.12

9. Finally, creation-centered theology advocates the reshaping of education from the earliest years so that it pays closer attention to the natural world. At the level of secondary and college education, including the core curriculum, this would mean making environmental education central and not just an afterthought. Our students should be required to look carefully at what both science and religion have to say about the universe, and yet remain critical of scientism and materialism, both of which are no less ecologically disastrous ideologies than are dualistic and patriarchal forms of religion.

The most characteristic feature of this contemporary revision of theology is its focus on the sacramentality of nature. (By “sacrament,” let us recall, we mean any aspect of the world through which a divine mystery becomes present to religious awareness.) Ever since the Old Stone Age aspects of nature such as clean water, fresh air, fertile soil, clear skies, bright light, thunder and rain, living trees, plants and animals, human fertility, etc., have symbolically mediated to religious people at least something of the reality of the sacred. As we saw in the previous chapter, sacramentalism recognizes the transparency of nature to the divine, and it therefore gives to the natural world a status that should evoke our reverence and protective-ness. The sacramental perspective reads in nature an importance or inherent value that a purely utilitarian or naturalist point of view cannot discern. Nature, then, is not primarily something to be used for human purposes or for technical projects. It is essentially the showing forth of an ultimate goodness and generosity.

In principle the sacramental features of Christianity (and of other religions) protect the integrity of the natural world. According to our second type of environmental theology, therefore, the nurturing of a sacramental vision is one of the most important contributions Christianity and other religions can make to the preservation of the natural world. If biodiversity eventually decays into a homogeneity similar, say, to the lunar landscape (and this is the direction in which things are now moving) we will lose the richness of our sacramental reference to God. And if we lose the environment, Thomas Berry is fond of saying, we will lose our sense of God as well.
By way of evaluation, I would say that this second type of environmental theology is another important step toward an acceptable Christian environmental theology. It goes beyond the more superficial efforts of our first type which consist primarily of an apologetic search for texts that allegedly contain a ready-made environmental theology adequate to our contemporary circumstances. Our second type seeks a radical transformation of all religious traditions, including Christianity, in the face of the present crisis. The creation-centered approach is aware that religious texts, like any other classics, can sometimes sanction policies which are socially unjust and ecologically problematic. So it allows into its interpretation of the classic sources of Christian faith a great deal of suspicion about some of the same motifs that our first approach holds to be normative.

To give one example, the ideal of human dominion or stewardship over creation, which is fundamental in our first type of environmental theology, turns out to be quite inadequate in the second. Stewardship, even when it is exegetically purged of the distortions to which the notion has been subjected, is still too managerial a concept to support the kind of ecological ethic we need today. Most ecologists would argue that the earth's life-systems were a lot better off before we humans came along to manage them. In fact, it is almost an axiom of ecology that these systems would not be in such jeopardy if the human species had never appeared in evolution at all. So, even if we nuance the notions of stewardship and dominion in the light of recent scholarship, the biblical tradition is still too anthropocentric. And since anthropocentrism is commonly acknowledged to be one of the chief causes of our environmental neglect, creation-centered theology seeks to play down those theological themes that make us too central in the scheme of things. In the shadow of the environmental crisis it seeks a more cosmic understanding of Christianity.

At the same time, this approach acknowledges that we humans still play a very important role in the total cosmic picture. Our presence enriches and adds considerable value to life on earth. However, the concept of dominion or stewardship, important as it is, fails to accentuate that we belong to the earth much more than it belongs to us, that we are more dependent on it than it is on us. If in some sense we “transcend” the universe by virtue of our freedom and consciousness, in another sense this same universe is taken up as our constant companion in our own transcendence of it. Christian theology now needs to emphasize more than ever before the inseparable and (as we shall develop in the next chapter) the everlasting connection between ourselves and the cosmos.¹³

**THE ESCHATOLOGICAL APPROACH**

As I have already hinted, I have much stronger sympathies with the second approach than with the first (although the exegetical work that accompanies the first is also quite fruitful).
Any attempt to construct a Christian environmental theology today must build on the sacramental interpretation of nature. Today Christianity desperately needs to bring the cosmos back into the center of its theology, and creation-centered theology is an important contribution to this process.

However, if we are looking for Christianity's possible significance in the global project of bringing an end to the crisis that threatens all of humanity as well as life on earth, I think in all honesty we have to ask whether the Bible's most fundamental theme, that of a divine promise for future fulfillment, is of any relevance here. In other words, we need to ask whether the eschatological dimension of Christianity, its characteristic hope for future perfection founded on the ancient Hebrew experience of God's promise and fidelity, can become the backbone of an environmentally sensitive religious vision. If a return to cosmology is theologically essential today, then from the point of view of Christian faith, we need assurance that this cosmology remains adequately framed by eschatology.

During the present century, we have rediscovered the central place of eschatology in Christian faith. Hope in God's promise upon which Israel's faith was built is now also seen to be the central theme in Christian faith as well, a fact that bonds Christianity very closely to its religious parent. The faith of Jesus and his followers was steeped in expectation of the coming of the reign of God. Reality is saturated with promise, and the authentic life of faith is one of looking to the fulfillment of God's promise, based on a complete trust that God is a promise keeper. True faith scans the horizon for signs of promise's fulfillment. For this faith present reality, including the world of nature in all of its ambiguity, is pregnant with hints of future fulfillment.

Until recently this way of looking at the cosmos, namely, as the embodiment of promise, had almost completely dropped out of Christian understanding. It had been replaced by a dualism that looked vertically above to a completely different world as the place of fulfillment. The cosmos itself had no future. Only the immortal human soul could look forward to salvation, and this in some completely different domain where all connection with nature and bodiliness would be dissolved. That such an interpretation of human destiny could arise in a community of faith which from the beginning professed belief in the resurrection of the body is indeed ironic. But more than that, it is tragic. For by suppressing awareness of the bodiliness of human nature dualism was inclined also to disregard the larger matrix of our bodiliness, the entire physical universe which is inseparable from our being. By excepting nature and its future from the ambit of human hope Christianity left the cosmos suspended in a state of hopelessness. It had forgotten St. Paul's intuition that the entire universe yearns for redemption. Fortunately theology has begun to retrieve this inspired idea. Now any ecological theology worked out in a Christian context must make this motif of nature's promise the very center of its vision.
It is easy enough to argue that Christianity's sacramental quality, which it shares with many other religions, affirms the value of nature. But the Bible, because of the multiplicity of traditions it embodies, has an eschatologically nuanced view of sacramentality. It is aware, for example, that something is terribly wrong with the present world and that any sacraments based on the present state of nature inevitably participate in this imperfection. Pure sacramentalism, therefore, is not enough. Biblical faith looks less toward a God transparently revealed in present natural harmony than toward a future coming of God in the eschatological perfection of creation. It is especially this hopeful tone, and not just its sacramentalism, that can ground an ecological spirituality. As we seek a Christian theology of the environment, therefore, we need to ask how the future-oriented, promissory aspect of this tradition connects with contemporary ecological concern. Most recent attempts by Christians to build an environmental theology have made only passing reference to the eschatological vision of nature as promise.¹⁴

Hence, as an alternative to the apologetic and the sacramental types, I am proposing a more inclusive eschatological cosmology as the foundation of a Christian environmental theology. Here the cosmos is neither a soul-school for human existence nor a straightforward epiphany of God's presence. Rather, it is in its deepest essence a promise of future fulfillment. Nature is promise. If we are sincere in proposing a theology of the environment that still has connections with biblical religion, we need to make the topic of promise central, and not subordinate, in our reflections. In order to do this in an ecologically profitable way we must acknowledge that the cosmos itself is an installment of the future, and for that reason deserves neither neglect nor worship, but simply the kind of care proportionate to the treasuring of a promise.

A Christian environmental theology, I am maintaining, is ideally based on the promissory character of nature. But some religious thinkers will complain that the biblical theme of promise is not very helpful in theological efforts to ground ecological ethics. Following Arnold Toynbee, Thomas Berry, for example, argues that it is precisely the biblical emphasis on the future that has wreaked ecological havoc. For Berry the future orientation of the Bible has bequeathed to us the dream of progress, and it is the latter that has caused us to bleed off the earth's resources while we have uncritically pursued an elusive future state of perfection. Berry holds that biblical eschatology, with its unleashing of a dream of future perfection, is inimical to environmental concern. According to this leading creation-centered geologist, hoping in a future promise can lead us to sacrifice the present world for the sake of some far-off future fulfillment. Although he is a Catholic priest himself, Berry considerably distances himself from the prophetic tradition that many of us still consider to be the central core of biblical faith and the bedrock of Christian ethics.¹⁵

But would our environmental theology be consonant with biblical tradition if we left out the prophetic theme of future promise? The sacramental accent taken by Berry and many
other religiously minded ecologists has the advantage of bringing the cosmos back into our theology, and this is essential today. But Berry seems to be embarrassed by eschatology. Hence, in spite of his many valuable contributions to environmental thinking, I would have to question whether his and some other versions of creation-centered theology have adequately tapped the ecological resources of biblical eschatology.

In the preceding chapter's general depiction of religion I argued that the sacramental component present in Christianity and other religions is ecologically significant. Preserving religion's sacramentality contributes to the wholeness of both nature and religion. But we cannot forget that in the Bible sacramentality is taken up into eschatology. Biblical hope diverts our religious attention away from exclusive enrapturement with any present world-harmony and from nature's alleged capacity to mediate an epiphany of the sacred through its present forms of beauty. Instead, the Bible's eschatology encourages us to look toward the future coming of God. In terms of this particular religious accent any reversion to pure sacramentalism is suspect. It has, in fact, been condemned outright by prophets and reformers as faithless idolatry.

Christianity, aided by its roots in biblical monotheism, and owing to its unique emphasis on the promise of history, may itself be partly responsible for the demotion of the sacramental attitude which some religious ecologists now wish to make paramount. By understanding the promising God of history to be alone holy, Judaism and Christianity (as well as Islam) seem to have divested any present state of nature of its supposedly sacral character. Belief in God's radical transcendence of nature, and the location of absolute reality in the realm of the historical or eschatological future—these seem to have relativized present cosmic realities, at times to the point of insignificance. The biblical desacralization of nature may even have helped open up the natural world to human domination and exploitation. Biblical religion expels the gods from the forests and streams once and for all, and because of its "disenchantment" of nature, along with its focus on the historical future, it is problematic to some religious ecologists of a more sacramental or cosmological persuasion.

Adding to this environmentally controversial character of biblical religion is the fact that, in terms of the fourfold typology of religion presented in the previous chapter, prophetic faith falls predominantly in the active or transformative type. The Bible not only gives thanks for present creation, but it also seeks to change it. It celebrates the Sabbath on one day, but it permits work on the other six. Because it is based fundamentally on the sense of promise it can never remain totally satisfied with present reality, including any present harmoniously balanced state of nature. This is because it looks toward the future perfection of creation. That is, it moves beyond any merely vertical sacramentalism that seeks to make the divine fully transparent in presently available nature. It acknowledges the imperfection of the present state of creation and seeks to reshape the world, including the natural world, so that it will come into conformity with what it takes to be God's vision of the future. Some writers
have sensed herein an ecologically dangerous feature of Christianity. The Bible's prophetic tradition is then itself blamed for unleashing the dream of a transforming "progress" that has ended up wrecking the earth rather than perfecting it.

This is a serious charge, and I simply cannot respond to it adequately here. I might just point out that apologists of our first type rightly indicate that though the biblical texts emphasize God's transcendence of nature they do not sanction the kind of exploitation of nature that some historians have traced to this doctrine. Even so, it seems appropriate for us to ask whether a pure sacramentalism would itself guarantee that we will save the environment. And, on the other hand, is it self-evident that actively transforming nature will lead inevitably to its degradation? John Passmore, whom I quoted earlier, says that

... the West needs more fully to "glorify" nature. But it cannot now turn back [to a sacralization of nature]; only by transforming nature can it continue to survive. There is no good ground, either, for objecting to transformation as such; it can make the world more fruitful, more diversified, and more beautiful. 16

At the same time, he goes on to say that

... societies for whom nature is sacred have nonetheless destroyed their natural habitation. Man does not necessarily preserve ... the stream he has dedicated to a god; simple ignorance ... can be as damaging as technical know-how. 17

Thus an immoderate sacramentalism may be not only religiously but also environmentally irresponsible. If carried to an extreme, Passmore insists, the sacramental view can even precipitate environmental neglect. It may do so by causing us naively to trust that nature can always take care of itself. And he argues that one of the main causes of ecological destruction is the human ignorance which only a heavy dose of scientific learning can help to dispel. 18

While many ecologists will certainly take issue with Passmore on this matter, he helpfully forces us to ask whether we need to think of nature itself as sacred, as many religious environmentalists are now suggesting, in order to ground its intrinsic value. Can the sacramental vision proposed by Berry and creation-centered theology all by itself motivate us religiously to take care of our planet?

My own suggestion is that, without denying the ecological importance of the sacramental approach, we may follow the Bible's lead by holding close to the theme of promise. For to suppress the theme of hope and promise whenever we do any kind of theologizing from a Christian point of view, no matter what the occasion or the issue, is to fail to engage the heart and soul of this tradition. I am more sympathetic, therefore, with the theological program of Jürgen Moltmann who for almost three decades now has consistently argued that all Christian theology must be eschatology. 19 Theology must be saturated with hope for the future. And what this means for our purposes here is that environmental theology must also
be future oriented, no matter how tendentious this may initially appear from the point of view of a pure sacramentalism.

I am afraid that the creation-centered approach, valuable as it is in retrieving the cosmos that has been tragically lost to our theology, has not paid sufficient attention to the radically eschatological, promise-laden, character of Christian faith. It has helpfully promulgated what has been called a “lateral transcendence,” that is, a reaching out beyond the narrow boundaries of our isolated selfhood in order to acknowledge the ever-expanding field of present relationships that comprise the wider universe. But this horizontal transcendence must be complemented by a looking-forward-beyond-the-present. Transcendence, understood biblically, means not only a movement beyond narrowness toward a wider inclusiveness, but also a reaching toward the region of what Ernst Bloch calls “not-yet-being,” toward the novelty and surprise of an uncontrollable future.

Consequently, I would like to persist in my suggestion that the distinctive contribution Christian theology has to offer to ecology (since many of its sacramental aspects are present in other traditions) is a vision of nature as promise. A biblical perspective invites us to root ecology in eschatology. It reads in cosmic and sacramental reality an intense straining toward the future. It obliges us to keep the cosmos in the foreground of our theology without removing the restlessness forced on the present by a sense of the yet-to-come.

The Bible, in fact, includes not only human history but also the entire cosmos in its vision of promise. The universe, as St. Paul insinuates, is not a mere point of departure, a terminus a quo, which we leave behind once we embark on the journey of hope. Modern science has also demonstrated that our roots still extend deep down into the earth and fifteen billion years back in time to the big bang. Hence, our own hoping carries with it the whole universe’s yearning for its future.

The natural world is much more than a launching pad that the human spirit abandons as it soars off toward some incorporeal absolute. Through the sacramental emphasis of creation-centered spirituality (as well as the powerful voices of deep ecology, ecofeminism and the many varieties of contemporary naturalism) the cosmos now claims once again that it, too, shares in our hope. Billions of years before our own appearance in evolution it was already seeded with promise. Our own religious longing for future fulfillment, therefore, is not a violation but a blossoming of this promise.

Human hoping is not simply our own constructs of imaginary ideals projected onto an indifferent universe, as much modern and postmodern thought maintains. Rather, it is the faithful carrying on of the universe’s perennial orientation toward an unknown future. By looking hopefully toward this future we are not being unfaithful to the cosmos, but instead we are allowing ourselves to be carried along by impulses that have always energized it. If we truly want to recosmologize Christianity then we do well also to “eschatologize” our cosmolo-
Eschatology invites us to make more explicit nature's own refusal to acquiesce in trivial forms of harmony. It persuades us to understand the universe as an adventurous journey toward the complexity and beauty of a future perfection.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS**

In the light of an eschatological cosmology let us then ask once again: why should we be concerned about our natural environment? Not only because it is sacramentally transparent to the sacred, but even more fundamentally because it is the incarnation of a promise yet to be fulfilled. It is because nature is not only sacrament but also promise that we are obliged to revere it. In the sacramental view we condemn environmental abuse because it is a sacrilege. But in the eschatological perspective the sin of environmental abuse is one of despair. To destroy nature is to turn away from a promise. What makes nature deserve our care is not that it is divine but that it is pregnant with a mysterious future. When looked at eschatologically its value consists not so much of its sacramentally mediating a divine "presence," as of its nurturing a promise of future perfection.

Nature is not yet complete, nor yet fully revelatory of God. Like any promise it lacks the perfection of fulfillment. To demand that it provide fulfillment now is a mark of an impatience hostile to hope. Nature is wonderful, but it is also incomplete. We know from experience that it can also be indifferent and ugly at times. A purely sacramental or creation-centered theology of nature cannot easily accommodate the shadow side of nature. By focusing on ecological harmony it expects us to see every present state of nature as an epiphany of God. This is a projection which neither our religion nor the natural world can bear.

An eschatological view of nature, on the other hand, allows ambiguity in as a partner to promise. Nature's harshness, which so offends both religious romantics and cosmic pessimists, is entirely in keeping with its being the embodiment of promise. The perspective of hope allows us to be realistic about what nature is. We do not have to cover up its cruelty. We can accept the fact that the cosmos is not a paradise but only the promise thereof.

The world, including that of nonhuman nature, has not yet arrived at the final peace of God's kingdom, and so it does not merit our worship. It does deserve our valuation, but not our prostration. If we adopt too naive a notion of nature's significance we will inevitably end up being disappointed by it. If we invest in it an undue devotion we will eventually turn against it, as against all idols, for disappointing us—as it inevitably will. For that reason an exclusively sacramental interpretation of nature is theologically inadequate, and it can even prepare the way for our violating the earth. I think that a biblical vision invites us to temper our devotion with a patient acceptance of nature's unfinished status. Understanding the cosmos as a promise invites us to cherish it without denying its ambiguity.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Christian story of hope embraces the entirety of cosmic occurrence as part of its promise. Looking toward the future in hope requires that we preserve nature for the promise it carries. A religion of hope allows us to accept nature as imperfect precisely because it is promise. A sacramental theology is all by itself unable to accommodate the fact of nature's fragility. To accept nature's intrinsic value we can learn from primal sacramental traditions much that we had forgotten. But in order to accommodate both its ambiguity and its promise we are usefully instructed not only by the spirituality of primal traditions, but also by the story of Abraham.

NOTES

4. Very early in the history of Christianity there appeared the "heresies" of docetism and monophysitism, which denied the incarnation of God in Christ, and gnosticism, which advocated escape from the allegedly evil material world. In spite of their being officially condemned by the Christian church, however, docetism and monophysitism still hover over our Christology, and gnosticism continues to infect Christian spirituality. The previous failure of Christianity effectively to confront the ecological crisis is in part the result of its continuing flirtation with these excessively spiritualist perspectives, both of which are embarrassed at our historicity, our "naturality" and our embodied existence.
7. One of the best examples of the apologetic type, from a quite conservative Catholic standpoint, is Charles M. Murphy's At Home on Earth (New York: Crossroad, 1989). From a more "liberal" Catholic perspective, but still within the framework of what I am calling the apologetic kind of environmental theology, is John Carmody's provocative Religion and Ecology (New York: Paulist Press, 1983). Most current Christian theology of the environment is apologetic in nature.
12. Whenever it ignores the fact that overpopulation adds enormously to every kind of ecological degradation, Christian moral teaching ironically contributes to what the Irish missionary to the Philippines, Sean McDonagh, has called the “death of birth,” and therefore does not deserve to be called “pro-life” in the deepest sense of the term. See his *The Greening of the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 38–73.


15. Berry, p. 204.


17. Ibid., pp. 175–76.

18. Ibid.


20. The concept of lateral transcendence is that of Linda Holler, cited by Spretnak, p. 155.