

In God's ecology: A revisionist theology of nature

by [H. Paul Santmire](#) in the [December 13, 2000](#) issue

In his book *Earth in Balance*, Al Gore asks, “Why does it feel faintly heretical to a Christian to suppose that God is in us as human beings? Why do our children believe that the Kingdom of God is up, somewhere in the ethereal reaches of space, far removed from this planet?” Gore expresses here the yearning of many Christians for resources in the faith that will equip them for engaging environmental issues. In an era when the earth seems out of balance, how can Christians commit themselves to socially and environmentally responsible public policies and ecologically sensitive individual and communal lifestyles? Many theologians as well as laypeople have decided, along with Al Gore, that we need a “fresh telling” of the old religious stories.

Over the past three decades, numerous Christian thinkers have called for a new theology of nature and a new ethic for the earth. The discussion of environmental issues has expanded so much that a recent bibliographical study cited more than 500 entries on the topic of ecology, justice and Christian faith.

Several schools of thought have emerged, the two most formidable being what I call the reconstructionists and the apologists. The reconstructionists insist that a totally new theological word about nature must be spoken in our time. Reconstructionists take it as a given that traditional Christian thought offers few if any viable theological resources to help people of faith to respond to our global environmental crisis. Instead, a new edifice of thought must be designed from the ground up, with new foundations and new categories.

Some reconstructionists, including those who espouse New Age thinking, have turned away from Western religious traditions and have embraced insights from primal and Eastern religions. This is happening with increasing frequency in numerous church camps across the country, where Native American culture is a priority, and in parish settings, where interest in “new” spiritualities is booming.

These protagonists blend such materials as Taoism from the East, alchemy from the West, and a neolithic spirituality that they claim to find in various Native American traditions.

The most illustrious reconstructionist is Matthew Fox, who draws extensively from mystical traditions in the Christian West as well as from the spiritualities of primal religions. Other reconstructionists, including Catholic writer Thomas Berry, project theological arguments based on findings of the natural sciences that are sometimes enhanced by philosophical or literary insights.

Still others draw on the insights of feminist thought, often with the intent of breaking away from what they perceive to be the patriarchal tyranny of classical Christian theology. Ecofeminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sallie McFague are committed to a radical reconstruction of traditional Christian thought, and sometimes, as in the case of Mary Daly, to its total deconstruction. Some authors find inspiration in the insights of primal religious experience, often invoking the name of a newly celebrated mother earth goddess.

For reconstructionists, the primary perspective may be New Age thinking, the sophisticated insights of Western or global mystical traditions, the projections of a new scientifically oriented ecotheology, or the imaginative, groundbreaking constructions of ecofeminism. But the result is the same: a conscious or unconscious rejection of the classical kerygmatic and dogmatic traditions of Christianity as the primary matrix of theological knowing.

In contrast to the reconstructionists, the apologists underscore what they consider to be the Christian faith's positive ecological implications, above all the tradition's encouragement of "good stewardship of the earth." The apologists work out their insights in terms of theological anthropology and ethics. They define environmental issues by referring to the themes of social justice. Their primary concern is for wise management of the resources of the earth for the sake of the people of the earth, especially "ecojustice" for the poor.

So, for example, the World Council of Churches has called for a "just, participatory and sustainable society," and ecumenical theologians like Thomas Derr and Douglas John Hall focus on environmental issues and place them in the context of the North-South divide between rich and poor. Their concerns were publicized at the WCC's 1991 Seventh Assembly in Canberra, when the WCC lifted up the theme "Justice,

Peace and the Integrity of Creation” and the prayer, “Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation.”

These two theological schools occupy most of the discussion in Christian circles. Yet something is awry. If the Christian community is to equip its members for political engagement or to enter into serious theological dialogue with other faith traditions about environmental issues, it must address the liabilities of both the reconstructionists and the apologists.

The reconstructionists characteristically truncate the discussion of the cosmic vocation of Jesus Christ. Theirs is not a cosmic Christology as expressed by Paul in the Letter to the Colossians or the Letter to the Ephesians. Instead they typically advocate a “christic cosmology.” Matthew Fox and Sallie McFague play down and even reject what Emil Brunner calls “the scandal of particularity”: the Word becoming flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:14). For McFague, Jesus Christ is not the body of God, surely not in any singular or unique sense. For her, the cosmos is the body of God. Jesus is “paradigmatic of what we find everywhere; everything is the sacrament of God” (the universe as God’s body). For Fox, Jesus Christ is an example of the relationship of indwelling that exists between God and every creature.

It is no surprise that our churches have been slow in appropriating these theological projections. On Christmas Day congregations celebrate the Word made flesh. During the Epiphany season, they announce the manifestation of the Word to the whole world, and during Lent and Easter they proclaim the death and resurrection of the incarnate Lord for the salvation of the whole creation. Is a new edifice of theological thought, one that tends to deconstruct biblical and classical Christology, a theology that the Christian community requires in our time?

The efforts of the apologists are scarcely more helpful for a community seeking to come to terms with the global environmental crisis. A theology that works mainly with an anthropological framework and that accents the idea of good stewardship cannot inspire the faithful in our ecological era with new minds and hearts.

“Stewardship” is too functional, too manipulative, too operational a term, and too tied in with money. This approach does not allow the faithful to respond to the earth and to the whole cosmos with respect and with wonder. A theology focused anthropologically on ethical issues remains anthropocentric, not theocentric or christocentric. The idea has outlived its usefulness, especially in a North American

context, where it carries strong connotations of “managing our own resources” regardless of the mandates of God or the divinely ordained rights of natural systems themselves.

The reconstructionists fail to connect with the core convictions of the Christian community, while the apologists fail to address that community’s need for a theology of nature shaped by central Christian faith commitments.

But these are not the only theological options available. A third approach is possible and urgently needed—and it already exists. A “revisionist” tradition of orthodox but innovative theological reflection about environmental issues has flourished since the 1960s. The revisionists work within the milieu of classical Christian thought as defined by the ecumenical creeds. And since the Old and New Testaments are the font of the classical theological tradition in the West, and since those scriptures are the chief norm for all teachers and teachings in this tradition, the revisionists have given the highest priority to biblical interpretation.

At the same time, however, the dynamics of the classical tradition call for a re-forming of the tradition itself. The revisionists tend to see themselves as reformers. From their vantage point, what the theology of justification by faith meant for a church in need of reformation in the early 16th century is precisely what the theology of nature must mean for a church in need of reformation in the 21st century.

The revisionist school surfaced with Joseph Sittler’s 1961 address to the World Council of Churches in New Delhi. “Called to Unity” was an exposition of the cosmic Christology of the Letter to the Colossians. Sittler also helped shape the 1972 social statement of the Lutheran Church in America, “The Human Crisis in Ecology.” Sittler published his own study, *Essays in Nature and Grace*, in 1972. Following Sittler, I researched an historical base for environmental theology in my 1985 book *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*, which explored theologies of nature in the work of such classic theologians as Irenaeus, Origen, Karl Barth and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

By 1992, revisionist thinking about the theology of nature reached a culminating point with the publication of James Nash’s *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility*. Its argument is rooted in the classical theological tradition, and mediated by the neo-orthodox theology of Reinhold Niebuhr.

There were also signs that scholarly biblical exegesis had taken a major turn in the direction of affirming creation-history—not just human redemption-history—as the primary biblical “horizon.” These trends were best expressed by Old Testament scholar Terrence Fretheim in his 1991 essay, “The Reclamation of Creation.”

This reemergence of creation theology in biblical studies has been paralleled and partially sustained by an expansion of scholarly interest in Old and New Testament biblical theology of wisdom. That interest helped set the stage for new developments in theological reflection about nature. The most forceful and focused expression, firmly rooted in both biblical exegesis and classical christological and trinitarian theology, was the 1995 study by Australian Catholic theologian Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the Wisdom of God*. We can think of Edwards’s work as the emergence of a neo-Catholic revisionism in ecological theology. Drawing on the thought of Karl Rahner, Edwards picked up and developed many of the themes that preoccupied Sittler 30 years earlier.

The entire discussion has been shadowed (if not always illuminated) by the powerful but elusive revisionist theology of ecology developed by Jürgen Moltmann. While Moltmann’s works have been widely read in North America, his revisionist theology of nature, complexly woven into the entire body of his writings, has not had the kind of direct impact on the discussion of ecological theology that it merits. Many who have helped to keep Moltmann’s works on the theological best-seller list have had other, nonecological interest in his work. Many with ecological interests, on the other hand, have not read his works or not appreciated the ecological saliency of his theology. (An exception is the recent book by Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltmann*.)

What does a theologically sound and accessible revisionist theology of nature look like? It must be biblical, christological, ecological and ecclesiological. Following Luther and Calvin, and informed by Karl Barth, revisionist theology will first and foremost be an exposition of the Word of God, attested to by the scriptures. That we must search the scriptures for insights that were not at the heart of the Reformers’ theology and perhaps even less of concern to Karl Barth does not make this focus any less important; on the contrary, it means that our encounter with the written Word of God will be more critical.

Second, biblical interpretation will have, as did the theologies of Luther, Calvin and Barth, a christological focus, even, in Barth's language, a christological concentration. This christocentrism will take on a more universal scope than it did in the works of the Reformers and Barth, and will highlight, as Sittler did, the cosmic creational and salvific purposes of God with all things, *ta panta*, according to the schema of Colossians 1:15ff. Here I would highlight the insights of Teilhard de Chardin, whose evolutionary christocentrism is in its main lines profoundly biblical and profoundly relevant for our ecological concerns.

This biblical and christological theology of nature will also be ecological in the sense that the objects of theological reflection will be holistically envisioned: God, on the one hand, and humanity and nature, on the other hand. Both humanity and nature will have their own integrity in the plans and purpose and providence of God. No longer can theology written as exposition of the scriptures be, as Barth said it must be, the-anthropocentric: focusing on God and humanity, with nature included only in some instrumental sense or even as an afterthought.

A theology of nature that is biblical, christological and ecological will also be ecclesiological. It will be incarnate in the life of the Christian community. In worship, the community of faith will form its identity and the theological matrix of its spiritual and ethical praxis in the world. Revisionist ecological ethics will be first and foremost communitarian and only secondarily principled and prescriptive.

A revisionist theology of nature will then be free to explore the following theological insights in conversation with the scriptures:

- 1) God has a universal, evolutionary history with all things—with many communities of being, large and small. God is not just interested in human beings and human well-being.
- 2) God actualizes universal, evolutionary history from alpha to omega, immediately and intimately, by the agency of God's creative word and within the energizing matrix of God's life-giving Spirit.
- 3) Within the universal history of God, God calls forth the human creature in the midst of a world of living creatures, all of whom have their divinely allotted and protected places and vocations.

4) Humans are called by God to care for the earth, not only for the sake of their own being and well-being, but so that the biosphere might flourish for its own sake. Amassing of wealth from the earth for the sake of self-aggrandizement is thereby excluded. Any attempt to dominate the earth is likewise excluded.

5) Humans are also called by God to live within divinely mandated limits. Since humans are earth-creatures, not gods, they must live with, and can only flourish within, limits of knowledge, capacity and environmental niche. Hence humility and restraint before all the creatures of the earth are divinely mandated virtues.

6) God places the human creature—the only creature fashioned according to “the image of God”—in the human community for a unique life of praise, communion and self-giving. In this community, the blessings of the earth are to be regarded as a commonwealth given by God in abundance for the sake of constant sufficiency and seasonal festivity, and to be shared equitably with all other members of the human family. Humans are also blessed with a certain communion with all the other creatures of the earth. In this respect, humans are free to take the lead, in solidarity with all other creatures, in giving praise to God the Creator.

7) Since the divinely covenanted, universal goal for all things is *shalom*, the divinely mandated life for humans in this world is a life of shalom, with God, with each other and with all creatures, in anticipation of the dawning of the great and glorious seventh day, the eternal sabbath of God, when all the hungry shall finally be fed and all relationships of domination will finally be overcome, when the lamb will lie down with the lion, death shall be no more, and all things shall be made new.

8) Since throughout their history as a species humans have turned away from God, self-conscious violence has become the de facto norm of their relationships with one another and with other creatures. The fatal flaw in human history is located in the human heart, not in the finitude of the earth, nor in some imagined fallenness of the cosmos. This is the crisis that lies at the root of the desolations of human history.

9) This is the crisis, also, that God has struggled to resolve beginning with the promise to Abraham concerning the land, and concluding in the mission of the Christ of God. Christ died on the cross to make peace with all things, rose again to inaugurate the coming of the New Heavens and the new Earth, and will come again to hand over his rule to the Father, so that God may be all in all.

This is the shape and content of a revisionist Christian theology that seeks to announce the rebirth of nature in a time of global environmental crisis.