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The Role of Nature in Spiritual Formation

Timothy H. Robinson

Alexander Campbell begins *The Christian System* this way: “One God, one system of nature, one universe.” The universe is “composed of innumerable systems,” he explains, “which, in perfect concert, move forward in subordination to one supreme end.” The purpose for which this cosmic system exists is the pleasure of God, the One who “inhabits eternity and animates the universe with his presence.” Within this “system of systems” the human person stands as a microcosm: “in the person of a single man we have an animal system, an intellectual system, a moral system, running into each other, and connecting themselves with everything of a kindred nature in the whole universe of God.” Campbell explains that no single system is “insular and independent” and that every system must be understood within the context of the other systems in which they are embedded.¹ Thus, at the beginning of his most comprehensive statement of Christian doctrine, Campbell implies an ecological understanding of faith. As the material existence of the human person is embedded within and interdependent with the life of the physical universe, so the spiritual journey of the human person occurs within “the system of material nature,” as Campbell calls it, and is shaped by it. “Nature” and “religion” are both systems reflecting their Creator. Both nature and religion bear the image of God as “twin-sisters of the same divine parentage,” according to Campbell.²

Campbell would not allow that the message of the Bible concerns itself with nature per se, except insofar as it implicates human “origin and destiny.” In this sense he reflects the anthropocentric readings of Scripture that have dominated Christian thought about the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation.³ Nevertheless, in the first pages of *The Christian System*, Campbell suggests that the cosmos is an interdependent web of life, animated by God’s presence, shaping the human religious quest. Campbell provides a starting point to reflect on the role of “nature” or “creation” in Christian spiritual formation.

As Campbell’s insights suggest, the Christian spiritual life is never lived apart from particular contexts. A number of contextual factors shape the human religious experience including, among others, the psychological and physical condition of the individual, the family system of which one is a part, the religious and social institutions in which one participates, and the explicit and implicit theological teachings to which one is exposed. The widest context of the spiritual life is ecological; this includes the biological and physical makeup of the human body, the local ecosystems within which we live and upon which we depend for survival, and the ways in which human communities interact with those ecosystems. If nature reflects the image of God and the human religious quest is embedded within and shaped by the physical and biological systems of our planet, then a complete understanding of spiritual formation requires a consideration of the ecological dimensions of Christian spirituality.

1. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (1839; repr., Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1956), 1.

2. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

3. For a critical appraisal of the ways that biblical scholarship has often regarded creation as an ancillary theme in Scripture, subordinate to redemption experienced through human history, see Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist’s Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 3–29.

In recent decades ecology has become a prominent field of inquiry for theology and religious studies. Christian theologians have developed an enormous body of literature exploring the implications of ecology, the natural sciences, and the current ecological crisis for theological reasoning and for Christian ethics. Scholarship in Christian spirituality has also begun to engage ecological issues.⁴ However, attention to ecology is mostly absent in literature attending specifically to spiritual formation. Works on spiritual formation in both evangelical and mainline Protestant contexts barely mention nature or creation.⁵ In this essay I begin to address that omission by exploring some foundations for viewing spiritual formation ecologically.

Despite the lack of attention to creation or nature in the literature, some common themes run through works on spiritual formation that can be extended and interpreted from an ecological perspective. These themes include a conviction that the Holy Spirit is the primary agent of formation, the importance of engaging in spiritual disciplines like prayer and worship in order to hone attentiveness, an emphasis on conformity to the image of Christ as the goal of formation, and the expression of our sanctification through redemptive action in the world.⁶ In what follows I will briefly reflect on the ecological implications of each of these dimensions of spiritual formation.

The Spirit of Life and Spiritual Formation

At one level, spirituality can be understood as a fundamental human capacity for transcendence. There is an innate dimension of the human person that enables us to conceive of something beyond our own immediate physical needs and to enter into relationships with other persons, with other creatures, and with a realm beyond sensory reality. Spiritual formation is the process by which human persons actualize this capacity for transcendence through attentiveness, relationship, and disciplined practice. A specifically Christian spirituality seeks relationship with the God known through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Throughout Christian history and in contemporary literature on spiritual formation, the Holy Spirit is understood to be the primary agent of formation. That is, God's Spirit is the source and initiating agent of our sanctification. The work of the human partner in the process of formation is to become increasingly aware of and responsive to the Spirit's work. Joann Wolski Conn describes this process as "cooperation with the Spirit's action" in our lives. This cooperative process takes place over the course of a lifetime, she explains, "transforming our desires, our deepest self, into the relationship Christ has with God, our Parent, toward all humanity and the cosmos."⁷ As Conn's definition suggests, the process of spiritual formation, while helping us to become more attuned to the inner depth dimension of the self, also helps us to participate more deeply in the communities of which we are a part, both human and more-than-human.

Authentic spiritual formation invites the Christian believer into deepening relationship with and participation in the world of other humans and nature because the Spirit who forms us is the Spirit who enlivens the whole creation. In the Bible, *ruah* and *pneuma* are the Hebrew and Greek words translated as "spirit." Both of the words mean "breath" or "wind." As the Australian theologian Denis Edwards points out,

4. For example, Timothy Hessel-Robinson and Ray Maria McNamara, *Nature and Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality in a Time of Ecological Urgency* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011); Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for A Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford: University Press, 2013); Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford: University Press, 1998); Kathleen Fischer, *Loving Creation: Christian Spirituality: Earth-Centered and Just* (New York: Paulist, 2009).

5. One recent exception is Steven Chase's *Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

6. The works I focused on include Jeffrey Greenman and George Kalantzis, eds., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010); Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005); Mark Maddix and Diane LeClerc, *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2010); Sondra Higgins Matthaie, *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000); James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); Bradley Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

7. Joann Wolski Conn, "Spiritual Formation," *Theology Today* 56:1 (April, 1999): 88.

these words suggest that the Spirit of God is the “breath of God.” The Holy Spirit is “the life-giving Breath of God” who “animates all things with his presence,” to recall Alexander Campbell’s phrase. According to Edwards, the Spirit is the presence and power of God in creation.⁸ The same Spirit who hovered over the watery chaos in the first chapter of Genesis as God’s agent of creation is the Spirit who breathed into the first human the breath of life (Gen 2.7) and who enlivens “all flesh” under heaven (Gen 6.17).

Jesus’ conception in Mary’s womb occurs by the power of the Holy Spirit (Matt 1.20; Luke 1.35). As Jesus emerges from the Jordan River, newly baptized, the Spirit rests upon him, confirming his identity and mission (Matt 3.16; Mark 1.13; Luke 3.22). According to Paul, God raised Jesus from the dead through the life-giving power of the Spirit and that same Spirit resides in believers (Rom 8.11). The Spirit is promised to those who will be baptized on the day of Pentecost, enlivening and commissioning them as a community of faith (Acts 2.37–42). Thus, the Spirit of God is the power of life, the source of resurrection and redemption, and the agent of God’s mission in the world.

In Christian formation the believer strives continually to give herself over more completely to the influence of the Spirit, the One who breathes life into all the creatures of the Earth. The same Spirit who dwells in us (Rom 8.11) enlivens the magnificent redwoods, the bottlenose dolphin, the endangered gray bat, and the ubiquitous European starling. Denis Edwards calls the “Creator Spirit” the “immanent presence of God who empowers the process of self-transcendence and the emergence of a life-bearing universe.”⁹ One and the same Spirit guides the human subject in the ongoing process of transformation and the process of renewing all of creation.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann has called the Spirit “the unspeakable closeness of God” in creation.¹⁰ This suggests that the Spirit is experienced in encounters we have with other-than-human creatures. Encounters with the aesthetic beauty of wild nature are important moments of encounter with God and thus vital components of our spiritual formation. The sublime beauty of mountainscapes and prairie views, the sensuous serenity felt while swimming in a calm lake, the surge of adrenaline and excitement experienced when rafting in wild white-water, and interactions with animals, both wild and domestic, can be viewed as opportunities for experiencing the life-giving Spirit of God who is ever-present in the creation of God. Edwards suggests that experiences of nature “in all its forms can lead to a deepened sense of the incomprehensible and uncontrollable Spirit of God.”¹¹ Arthur Holder defines Christian spirituality as “the intimate loving relationship between God’s Holy Spirit and the spirit (animating life force) of believers.”¹² This implies that the human relationship with God involves an intimate connection to all other creatures who also share a relationship with the Spirit of God.

Learning Attention From Nature

Attentiveness is fundamental for spiritual formation. In her wonderful essay “On the Right Use of School Studies,” Simone Weil writes, “prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God.”¹³ She suggests that any time we engage in the study of, say, French or mathematics (her examples), we are honing our capacities to pay attention. It is the same kind of attention, Weil insists, that when developed and directed toward God is “the very substance of prayer.”¹⁴

Learning how to pay attention to our lives, the lives of others, and to the presence of God is becoming increasingly difficult in the age of digital media when everyone owns smart phones, tablets, or computers that put us instantly and constantly in touch with innumerable sources of information and communication. The constant lure of our technology often distracts us from the work of giving careful and sustained attention to the presence of the life-giving Spirit. Learning how to pay attention in the way that Weil describes is vital for the

8. Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 27–28.

9. *Ibid.*, 37.

10. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 10.

11. Edwards, 46.

12. Arthur Holder, “Introduction,” *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 1.

13. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951), 105.

14. *Ibid.*, 106.

work of spiritual formation but it may be more difficult than ever now. Where do we look for instruction and inspiration about how to pay attention?

While riding my bicycle to work one muggy early summer morning, I crossed a low water dam over the Trinity River. Standing near the dam in a shallow pool was a juvenile great blue heron. The heron was absolutely still, its neck slightly bent, its face peering intently into the water. The young bird was obviously stalking its morning meal and had fixed its attention on some aquatic creature below the water's surface. The heron was not distracted from its pursuit as I passed, although I came within just a few feet of where it stood and stopped to observe its hunt. I watched the heron for at least five minutes and it never moved a muscle. It stood at rigid attention until, in a flash, it stabbed the water with its bill and came up with a small fish.

Other-than-human nature can teach us to pay attention, especially animals. An intriguing passage in Job suggests as much. In Job 12.7–8 Job chides his visitors for their sense of proud confidence in their own innate wisdom. Job urges them rather to pay attention to their experience of the world: “But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.”¹⁵

Medieval theologians like Saint Bonaventure regarded nature and scripture as a “double book” of God's revelation. God creates the universe as a reflection of “Godself” and a means of self-revelation to humanity. “The creation is a kind of book in which the Trinity shines forth,” wrote Bonaventure.¹⁶ Of animals he said, “Every creature is by its nature a kind of effigy and likeness of the eternal Wisdom.”¹⁷ Puritan theologians in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries also referred to nature and scripture as “twin books” of revelation. Each “book” revealed aspects of the creator's purpose and will and should be read as mutually interpretive. Careful attention to the natural world, according to the “two books” traditions, can inform our understanding of scripture and form us more completely for relationship with God. In fact, for Puritan theologians, attention to the beauty of the sensory world does more than instruct: it stimulates our longing for the beauty of God. Both medieval and Puritan writers affirmed that contemplation of the creatures and of nature's beauty leads to communion with God.¹⁸

Observing a blue heron, a cheetah stalking a gazelle (or a housecat stalking a mouse), or the constant vigilance of a rabbit chewing clover, ever on the alert for predators, is instructive for the work of spiritual formation because spirituality is, in the first instance, about paying attention. The ancient Christian traditions of contemplative prayer—including *lectio divina*, centering prayer, the Ignatian exercises, Puritan practices of self-examination, and the Hesychastic tradition—developed techniques for paying careful attention to one's interior experience in order to make oneself more available to the Spirit's presence and guidance. Paying careful attention to the more-than-human creation and observing its ways can instruct us in the art of paying attention itself. In the Reformed tradition, experiences of awe and wonder at the beauty, magnificence, and complexity of creation also evoke praise for the Creator. Thus, the practice of worship, itself a primary means of spiritual formation, often emerges from careful observations of nature.

Conforming to the Image of the Cosmic Christ

Passages like Romans 8.29 and 2 Corinthians 3.18 are often cited in spiritual formation literature to present the goal of spiritual formation as being conformed to the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. Jeffrey Greenman, for example, calls this transformation “our eschatological destiny as Christians.” Being conformed to the image of Christ “means participating in the salvation accomplished by Jesus—knowing Christ in ‘the power of his resurrection’ and in

15. For an ecological reading of this passage see Alice M. Sinott, “Job 12: Cosmic Devestation and Social Turmoil,” in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*, Normal Habel and Shirley Wurst, eds. (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 78–91.

16. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, trans. Erwin Esser Nemmers (London: Herder, 1947), 73–75.

17. Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist, 1978), 77.

18. For an excellent study of this theme, see Belden Lane, *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

‘fellowship of his sufferings’ (Phil 3.10).”¹⁹ Greenman continues, “Spiritual formation into Christlikeness therefore is an extension of the logic of the cross and is impossible apart from the reality of Christ’s atoning work.” This Christlike conformity “involves embracing a ‘cruciform’ way of life with a distinctive shape expressed in obedience to God, which is marked by self-sacrifice and humble service for the sake of others, a way that Jesus demonstrated during his earthly ministry and commended to all his followers (Mk 10.42–45; Jn 13.12–17; Phil 2.1–11).” Greenman concludes that “the necessary result of spiritual formation is active participation in serving God and sharing in God’s work in the world.”²⁰ Greenman’s—and others’—perspective on Christian spiritual formation focuses narrowly on the human subject with little reference to the larger ecological contexts of religious experience. However, this understanding of the goal of spiritual formation can be interpreted ecologically.

The ancient Christian hymn quoted in Colossians 1.15–20 is suggestive here. The passage declares first that Christ is the “image” of the invisible God and the “firstborn of all creation.” Thus, the beginning of the hymn establishes a link between Christ and creation. It goes on to declare that *all things* were created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. The Greek term *ta panta*, “all things,” understood to mean the entire created order, is repeated six times in the hymn, celebrating Christ as “both the *source* of creation and its *goal*: all things have been *created* in Christ and all things are *reconciled* in him.”²¹ Thus, the scope of God’s redemption in Christ is not limited to human beings. In this magnificent early Christian hymn of praise to Christ, we encounter a sweeping, universal vision of salvation that includes everything in creation. The saving work of God in Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection includes the whole Earth and all its creatures. Commenting on this passage, Edwards writes, “Every Easter is a celebration of the whole of creation transformed in the light of the risen Christ. Far from being restricted to human beings, the Christ-event involves everything on Earth, from ants to beetles to pelicans and whales.”²²

Some textual scholars have debated whether the phrase in verse 18, *the church*, was a later addition to the hymn by a writer uncomfortable with the implication that Christ was head of *the body* since *the body* was understood as the material world in many ancient Hellenistic philosophical and religious contexts. Whether or not the hymn was edited in this way, the claim that Christ is head of the church does not negate or contend with the wider cosmic claims of the preceding verses. The New Testament scholar James Dunn writes, “To assert that Christ is head of the church does not narrow his cosmic mediatorial role; rather, it expands the significance of the claims made for the church.”²³ Taken as a whole, the hymn makes the point that the crucified and risen Christ, as experienced in personal and communal encounter by the earliest Christians who sang it, is also the one understood by them to be the agent and the fulfillment of God’s creative and redemptive activity in the church and in the world. As Alexander Campbell suggested, we must not view the life of faith or the Christian community where it is lived out as opposed to or separate from the wider Earthly and cosmic contexts of which they are a part. Christian spirituality lived out in the community of faith participates in the saving, sustaining, and redeeming work that God is accomplishing in, with, and for *all things*.

I return to Greenman’s understanding of being conformed to the image of Christ as “participating in the salvation accomplished by Jesus” in light of the declaration of Colossians 1 that salvation includes the whole of the cosmos. In baptism, Christians participate with Christ in his death and resurrection. We are united with the One in whom God is reconciling all things. The power of the life-giving Spirit nurtures our formation as people who participate in Christ’s work of renewing the face of the Earth. As we are conformed to the image of Christ, we recognize our common destiny with other things in creation and we participate in Christ’s life-giving mission of reconciliation for all creatures.

19. Jeffrey Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective: Classic Issues, Contemporary Challenges,” in *Life in the Spirit*, Greenman and Kalantzis, eds., 25–26.

20. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

21. Edwards, 56.

22. *Ibid.*, 57.

23. James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 96.

Sanctification as Engagement in Redemptive Action

Our conformity to the image of Christ is marked, as Greenman reminds us, by sacrificial service for the sake of the world. Our conformity to the image and likeness of the Christ of Colossians 1.15–20 includes an ethic of creation care. It involves a transformation of lifestyle toward sustainability and active participation in the work of ecological justice. Our baptismal identity implicates the whole of our lives: the amount of fossil fuel energy and water we consume, the way we fertilize our lawns, the kinds of food and clothing we buy, and the economic and social policies we support.

John O’Keefe, in reading the Desert Fathers as a resource for ecological spirituality, notes that those early Christian spiritual masters regarded their ascetic practices as helping them to experience the fullness of redemption in the present life. They were attempting to display in their lives and bodies a vision of the human person completely renewed and redeemed in the life to come. Similarly, O’Keefe reasons that when contemporary Christians practice ecologically responsible lifestyles, we are anticipating and embodying the fullness of God’s redeeming, healing work.

When we eat locally and bike to work we are not simply encouraging local agriculture and saving energy; we are also trying to reveal with our bodies and our actions some glimpse of God’s promise of a world renewed. If I plant a garden and raise chickens I may do so because I wish to resist the industrial food industry, but I may also do so as a way to both model and experience a deeper sense of the relationship God intended between humans and the rest of creation. When I install a geo-thermal heat pump I may do so to save money and to reduce my carbon footprint, but I may also do so as a conscious act of making more concrete the kind of world that God intended.²⁴

As the desert monks regarded their ascetic practices as a kind of “spiritual training,” says O’Keefe, so we might view ecologically sustainable lifestyle practices as such. “Like the ancient monks who labored through their ascetical practices to reveal the divine promise that they perceived,” he writes, “so also Christians attempting to live sustainably can, through their labor, reveal the divine promise of creation renewed that they perceive.”²⁵ Further, while participating in concrete practices that contribute to the redemption of creation, and precisely *because* we are engaging in these practices, “Christians who live sustainably can become increasingly conscious of God’s intimacy with creation.”²⁶ Authentic Christian spiritual formation results in humble, self-sacrificing service toward the more-than-human creation, thus contributing to the redemptive work of God on earth.

Conclusion

Christian spirituality is the intimate, loving relationship between the human spirit and the Spirit of the One who “animates the [whole] universe with his presence.” Thus, Christian spiritual formation must attend to the ways that nature shapes our responsiveness to the Spirit of Life as well as to the ways our growth into the image and likeness of Christ contributes to the full flourishing of creation. This brief essay has only begun to describe the ecological dimensions of spiritual formation. There is much work to be done toward a fuller understanding and embodiment of spiritual formation that contributes to the redemption and healing of creation.

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24. John O’Keefe, “Spiritual Practice and Sustainability: Resources from Early Christian Monasticism” in *Spirit and Nature*, Hessel-Robinson and McNamara, eds., 65.

25. *Ibid.*, 65–66.

26. *Ibid.*, 66.