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Mark I. Wallace

Swarthmore College, mwallac1@swarthmore.edu

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Peter Scott, *A Political Theology of Nature*

A Political Theology of Nature by Peter Scott,

Review by: Mark I. Wallace

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friars. His task was to provide the friars with a convincing argument for the existence and mission of the Order of the Friars Minor as an alternative to the Joachite movement.

In his discussion of the issues involved here, Anderson refers to various modern interpretations of Bonaventure, arguing that the Seraphic Doctor seems to go as far as possible with the Joachite movement among the friars. But while Joachim looked toward a perfect church in a future age of the Holy Spirit, Bonaventure looked to the original historical form of the church as the model to which reform should be moving. He is concerned with the apostolic church, and even with the prelapsarian state of Adam and Eve, to provide appropriate insights as to what a reformed church should be like. In this way Bonaventure differs significantly from the Joachite movement of that time. He is also concerned with a healthy relation of the friars to the secular clergy, even if the latter are problematic in many ways.

Thus, in Anderson's view, Bonaventure is addressing questions that are very similar to issues in the experience of the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II. How are we to understand the mission of the church in the world? How are we to understand hierarchy and authority in the context of church reform? Bonaventure sees Christ as the model for how a reformer should act: with humility, patience, and obedience. He tells the friars that they can expect resistance, but they should respond with love and forgiveness. This will enable them to become ever more deeply conformed to the mystery of Christ.

Anderson singles out the meaning of piety in Bonaventure's thought. As a gift of the Holy Spirit, piety is expressed in a form of self-giving that imitates God's own self-diffusive goodness and finds its primary realization in the call for unity and obedience. It is a quality that was crucial for the friars' ministry of reform within the church. Anderson's argument is presented in a style that is clear and thoughtful but not cluttered with highly technical language. His presentation opens a very complex medieval text to the modern reader in a helpful way. The possibility of parallels between the situation of Bonaventure and that of the church today is striking. This might lead us together with Anderson to ask Bonaventure's question in our own time: "Where is piety today?" (198).

ZACHARY HAYES, OFM. *Catholic Theological Union*.

SCOTT, PETER. *A Political Theology of Nature*. Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xiii+275 pp. \$65.00 (cloth); \$24.00 (paper).

This new work by Peter Scott makes a powerful case for a social and political basis for ecological theology. Scott analyzes the necessary social conditions for just and equitable relationships between humanity and nonhuman nature. The task of theology is to articulate the Trinitarian and Eucharistic basis for reordering the social production of nature in a manner that is coparticipatory and liberatory for all beings, human and nonhuman. The book is elegantly written and precise in its criticisms of contemporary theologies influenced by deep ecology.

Drawing on neo-Marxist theory, Scott shows that capitalism is a contradictory system that both produces extravagant wealth for a select few and grinding poverty and environmental degradation for most others (136–56). Christian

faith stands in prophetic judgment against this system. Faith undergirds a positive social exchange between humankind and otherkind by sacramentally pointing to the manner in which nature can be productively changed—or transformatively produced, to use Scott's materialist vocabulary. Eucharistically speaking, nature is teleologically unfulfilled apart from its capacity to signify Christ. In ritual bread and wine, its point is to aim beyond itself to the God of Christian faith. "What is the theological concept of nature operative here? We might call it a concept of un/natural nature: although eucharistic practice is founded on material elements which are social productions, yet the theological point is that the Eucharist represents the resurrection and crucifixion and thereby the sociality and openness of nature. . . . Once more, immersion in nature—some naturalistic fantasy—is ruled out" (250). Nature needs to be transformed because in and for itself it is incomplete. The point of nature, as "un/natural" rather than simply "natural" and sufficient in itself, is not simply to be but to witness symbolically to the liberating truth of the Gospel message; in this witness just social relations are enacted.

Scott's argument against valorizing nature for its own sake in favor of its symbolic potential is a searching challenge to contemporary nature-based ecotheology. He derides "immersion in nature" as a "naturalistic fantasy" that fails to understand nature's true purpose as a sign pointing beyond itself to something else (250). He approvingly cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer's comment that the sacraments "set free" the "dumbness" of the natural world; now "enslaved nature" can speak God's Word (244).

The point Christian deep ecology makes, however, is that nonhuman nature is complete and fulfilled in itself. It does not need the mediation of human symbol-making to speak; its voice is not dumb and enslaved but is already loud and clear for those who have ears to hear. Instead of relegating nature to playing a mediatory role as a witness to the Gospel, Christian deep ecology celebrates nature itself—the well-being of all things in their fecundity and diversity—as the basic thrust of the Christian message. It is not nature that needs to be liturgically fulfilled but the Gospel that needs to recover its earthen ancestry. Until and when the Gospel becomes reattached to its roots in the world of nature and flesh—the story of the good creation in Genesis, the ecological message of Job, the saving truth of the Christian witness that God embodied Godself in Jesus—it will not achieve its true purpose in a world bent on ecocide for all of its inhabitants, human and nonhuman alike. "Immersion in nature," far from being a "fantasy," is the demand of our time.

But nature immersion theologies, according to Scott, ignore the ontological differences among God, humanity, and nonhuman nature in favor of a non-hierarchical respect for all life-forms (221). Such theologies see God in all things and the natural world as sacramental, even holy ground. Yet for Scott nonspeciest equal regard blunts sharp political analysis concerning, for example, energy use and resource extraction that is crucial for democratically robust theology. Theology influenced by deep ecology cannot make these nuanced judgments and degenerates into a totalitarian juggernaut fueled by a politics of sameness and identity (63–88). Is this a fair criticism? It strikes me that the most potent theologically engaged political criticism today is advanced by those who are motivated by a sense of the omnipresent sacred, and who call for sustainable lifestyles and an equal regard for all species. Some of these concerns are resonant with Scott's political theology of nature, and some are

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not. Could it be that ecomysticism and Christian materialism are not such strange bedfellows after all?

MARK I. WALLACE, *Swarthmore College*.

SUCHOCKI, MARJORIE HEWITT. *Divinity and Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003. 125 pp. \$18.00 (paper).

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki sets forth in this work to ground a commitment to religious pluralism in the fundamental beliefs and concepts of the Christian tradition. To do so, she must steer between the dogmatism of Christian exclusivism and the paralysis of cultural relativism. Suchocki finds many resources within the Christian tradition to support a commitment to pluralism. Relying heavily on a process-relational theological framework, she devotes a chapter each to a theology of creation, a theology of incarnation, a theology of the image of God, and a theology of the reign of God.

Creation (chap. 2) is understood in call-and-response terms. God called the world to creation, and the world responded. However, creation is not a completed task. God continues to call the world, and the world continues to respond. In the process, both God and the world develop creatively. But the response of the world is not a single response. The response is varied depending on the object or organism. Even among specific organisms it varies. For example, human beings have responded differently to God's call. The world's religions represent varied responses to God's call. Yet they all are worthy and valued responses, and thus pluralism can be affirmed.

Similarly, Suchocki interprets incarnation (chap. 3) in a radical fashion. As religious cultures respond to God's call, they also incorporate God's influence. In this sense, the incarnation of God is not a unique historical moment that focuses on the life and death of Jesus Christ but an ongoing and culturally diverse experience occurring around the world and throughout history.

Suchocki turns to the concept of the Trinity to interpret the image of God (chap. 4) in pluralistic terms. God cannot be reduced to one aspect of the Trinity. A Christian's image of God is necessarily of a complex or pluralistic unity. Similarly, human beings, created in God's image, form a complex or pluralistic unity. No single religion or culture should be reduced to another. Just as God can be understood by virtue of the complexity of the Trinity, so what it means to be human and to respond to God's call can be understood through religious and cultural diversity.

Given the arguments of chapters 2–4, it becomes clear why the reign of God (chap. 5) should be understood very differently than it traditionally has been in the Christian faith. No longer is it about establishing a particular system of belief around the world. Instead it is the rejoicing in God's activity with and through the plurality of religious traditions contained in the world.

It is clear that Suchocki rejects any form of Christian exclusivism. Christianity has no exclusive claim to the truth and thus no monopoly on the path(s) to salvation (chap. 6)—however that concept is defined. Instead, Christianity should embrace the pluralism represented by the world's religious traditions—seeing them as partners in the investigation and presentation of truth as well as viable paths to salvation. This is what missionary work (chap. 7) is all about. One does not go out to convert the other but to befriend the other in all of his or her uniqueness.