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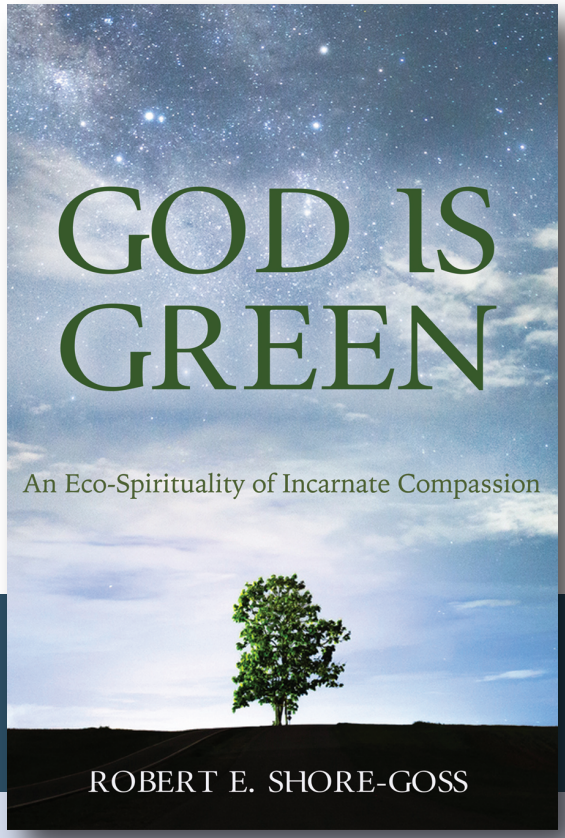
GOD IS GREEN

An Eco-Spirituality of Incarnate Compassion



ROBERT E. SHORE-GOSS

At this time of climate crisis, here is a practical Christian ecospirituality. It emerges from the pastoral and theological experience of Rev. Robert Shore-Goss, who worked with his congregation by making the earth a member of the church, by greening worship, and by helping the church building and operations attain a carbon neutral footprint.

Shore-Goss explores an ecospirituality grounded in incarnational compassion. Practicing incarnational compassion means following the lived praxis of Jesus and the commission of the risen Christ as Gardener. Jesus becomes the "green face of God." Restrictive Christian spiritualities that exclude the earth as an original blessing of God must expand. This expansion leads to the realization that the incarnation of Christ has deep roots in the earth and the fleshly or biological tissue of life.

This book aims to foster ecological conversation in churches and outlines the following practices for congregations: meditating on nature, inviting sermons on green topics, covenanting with the earth, and retrieving the natural elements of the sacraments. These practices help us recover ourselves as fleshly members of the earth and the network of life. If we fall in love with God's creation, says Shore-Goss, we will fight against climate change.

Robert E. Shore-Goss has been Senior Pastor and Theologian of MCC United Church of Christ in the Valley (North Hollywood, California) since June 2004. He has made his church a green church with a carbon neutral footprint. The church received a Green Oscar from California Interfaith Power & Light. Shore-Goss's website, which includes a publication list, can be found at www.mischievousspiritandtheology.com.

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"If I had to recommend a single recently-published text as a 'must-read' for a course on Christianity and ecology, especially climate change, it would be Robert Shore-Goss's wide-ranging and clearly-written *God is Green: An Eco-Spirituality of Incarnate Compassion*. Not only does he include almost all important books from his preferred 'kenotic theology,' to rituals for embodiment and practice, but he also delivers a one-volume analysis and critique of the 'field.' We are all in his debt for a useful and passionate call for a theological 'conversion' with accompanying radical action to help save our planet."

—SALLIE MCFAGUE, Professor of Theology Emerita, Vanderbilt University Divinity School; Distinguished Theologian in Residence, the Vancouver School of Theology, British Columbia; author of *Blessed are the Consumers*

"Robert Shore-Goss has written a beautiful meditative overview of greening in Christianity. Not simply a fact-following-fact landscape, but a weaving of the reader and author as participants in contemporary Christian ecological locations. Like a Compostela pilgrimage, the journey of reading here is challenging, communal, and playful all the way."

—JOHN GRIM, Co-Director, Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale

"The Rev. Dr. Shore-Goss has pulled together a much needed and beautifully compiled message for Christians on ecological theology. *God is Green* will give the reader a true understanding of what the human role and relationship is with Earth. He points out Jesus' call for protection and love for Creation. This is a direct and honest look at God's intention for the human purpose supported by many theologians and including Francis of Assisi. He argues that we are the gardeners."

—SALLY G. BINGHAM, President, The Regeneration Project, Interfaith Power & Light

"An author known for his Queer Theology expands his horizons to find what spirituality can do to entice people of faith to Green the Earth. *God Is Green* traces the roots of human contact with the sacred all the way to our mythological roots from the soil, and fashioned by God's all-purposing hands, we embody the sacred's commitment to a life connected with all living things. Ignoring this rootedness, this connectedness, is a dangerous game played by industrial cultures. Robert calls us all back to the Earth and our inter-relatedness to all living things as essential to a healthy, whole, and full life.

—JOHN C. DORHAUER, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ

"There is a way of pushing the needed panic button with mere panic, and there is a way of pushing it with wisdom, scholarship, and compassion. We are blessed to have an excellent example of the latter here! Robert Shore-Goss is not preaching to the choir here but to anyone with a head, concern for the future, and even a bit of soul!"

—RICHARD ROHR, Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, New Mexico

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ROBERT E. SHORE-GOSS

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Dedicated to Rev. Joseph Shore-Goss,
G. T. Glander our Church Gardener
Allis Druffel an Earth Companion
the Valley Church in North Hollywood,
and to Earth-centered Heroes and Heroines in this book

If we fall in love with God's Earth,
we will fight to save the Earth.

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Introduction

God is a life that bestows life, root of the world-tree and wind in its branches. She is glistening life alluring all praise, all awakening, all resurrecting.

—Hildegard of Bingen[1]

There is no such thing as 'human community' without the earth and the soil and the air and the water and all the living forms. Without these, humans do not exist. In my view, the human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single sacred community or we will both perish in the desert . . .

—Thomas Berry[2]

There are three symbols that together describe my project. They are interrelated and indelibly impressed in my consciousness: It is Jesus' "Parable of the Wicked Tenants" (Mark 12:1–12; Matt 21:33–45; Luke 20:9–19, Thomas 65–66); the other is "The Green Christ of Breton Cavalry" painted by French Paul Gauguin; and finally, the notion of *viriditas* or "greening energy" in the visionary writings of the 12th century mystic and Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen. These three shape my ecospirituality

1. Hildegard of Bingen, *Smyposia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum*, 140–41.

2. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 43.

and a response to the challenges of climate change. The three combined articulate my journey of faith in the last eight years, but the seeds were sown years before in my spiritual formation through Ignatian spirituality, ordination as a Jesuit priest, Buddhist studies, and as an AIDS activist/theologian. This text is about my falling in love with God's Earth and a journey to envisioning God's Incarnated Christ in the world.

The Parable

The context of the "Parable of the Wicked Tenants" is set by Mark in Jerusalem after Jesus' provocative demonstration in the Temple and several challenges to the Jewish leadership. Jesus' original parable does not include the Markan edition of vs. 10–12 with the cornerstone saying function as a passion and passion prediction. The original parable, notes Steve Patterson, is not about the reign of God: "This is a parable about the world—the world as it really is when we dare to peak behind the carefully erected mythic façade, designed to protect our sensibilities from its brutalities."[3] The parable stripped of its Christological interpretation offers a scenario building on the allegorical verses in Isaiah 5:1–5, where God plants a vineyard, it does not bear fruit, and God destroys it. The Isaiah poem is applied to an unruly Jerusalem resulting from social oppression, revolt, and devastation brought about the politics of the Roman Empire and the co-opted Temple theocracy. This parable is told during the last days of Jesus in an escalating conflict with the Temple authorities and directed against "the chief priests, Pharisees, and scribes."

What if in our imagined reading, we understand God's Earth as the vineyard and humans as the tenants. It is a bleak vision of the brutal dynamics of Empire, resistance, religion, and destruction in first-century CE Palestine. The leading tenants are prosperous amidst the poor subsistence of the other tenants around them. It is a safe to assume that many tenants are poor or perhaps day laborers. For today, the comparable elites consisting of the 1% and fossil fuel billionaires whose greed for profit at all cost ravage the Earth, compliant politicians and church folks denying climate change, unbridled consuermism, and globalized capitalism seeking to expand. The vineyard owner sends slaves to collect his share of the harvest. The tenants at behest of their leaders take those sent from Greenpeace, Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund, and Interfaith

3. Patterson, *The God of Jesus*, 140.

Power & Light beat them and/or kill them. Then the owner sends his own beloved child, saying "they will respect my heir."[4] But the leaders seize the heir, murder him, and throw him out of the vineyard. This parable has become all too real to mysef when two environmentalists in the Amazon were recently murdered, and the numbers of murdered environmentalists between 2002 -2013 in Brazil total four-hundred forty-eight.[5] They were killed by loggers, prompted by elite corporate interests, for their work for conservation of the Amazon rainforest, and they are martyrs for God's Earth.

Steve Patterson's conclusion about Jesus' glum parable seems still applicable to us today:

> One needs only play by the rules, accept your assigned role and everything will work out fine . . . Jesus lived among persons for whom the world never worked. He knew that the justice and fairness of the workday was an illusion. The nihilistic parable exposes it as such. In it, no one errs . . . Can a world so hierarchical in assumptions as to accept without question the existence of landlords and tenants ever offer more than this? Jesus' parables were not just a visionary glimpse of the Empire of God. They represent an all-out offensive against the world as it was conventionally conceived. Before the Empire of God can capture the imagination and become a reality, the old world of conventional assumptions must be undermined to the point of collapse.[6]

Jesus uses a readily understood social metaphor of the oppressive dynamics of tenant farming to delineate the counter-forces to God's reign. At the end of the parable, the owner destroys the tenants and gives the vineyard to others. Our planet has evolved into a globalized plutarchical Empire of the 1% of the population that own 40% of the world's wealth, and they continue to inflict violence against the Earth through reckless exploitation of resources, ruthlessly horizontal fracking the Earth, mountain top harvesting of coal, polluting the soil, air, and water. We live in world dominated by human greed, globalized over-consumption of the earth's resources, short-term profit over long-term harmful consequences to the

4. A good summary of a wide range of interpretations of this parable. See Paul Y. Chang," Listening to the Listeners," 165–86.

5. These are saints and martyrs for the Earth. Sister Dorothy Stang, a 73-year-old nun, was assassinated by two gunmen because of her advocacy for small scale farmers in conflict with large corporate interests and cattle ranch owners. Michael Miller, "Why are Brazil's Environmentalists Being Murdered?"

6. Patterson, *The God of Jesus*, 141.

Earth, humanity, and other life. Everything is for their benefit, profit, and rule. Those poor residents in the vineyard continue at their subsistent levels, but they do not matter. It mirrors our own world addicted to fossil fuels, driven without regard to the consequences to the ravages of the Earth, the poor and vulnerable other life. Millions, if not hundreds of millions of humanity along with other, will be sacrificed for greed.

There is, however, a Christological reference in the parable of the vineyard to the owner's son. Mark further attempts to salvage the parable by adding a Christological affirmation of hope: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes" (vv. 10–11). The addition is a sword with a twofold edge, for it heightens the Christological reference of the owner's son; secondly, it places the conflict of Jesus within the sequence of conflictive encounters with the Temple—starting with Mark 11:38, where Jesus angers the Temple authorities and ends with his arrest, the legal proceedings against him, and handing him over to Pilate. Pilate then offers the crowds in Jerusalem a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, and the Temple leaders incite the crowds to choose Barabbas.

I have heard too many times from both Christian environmentalists, despondent about our current climate crisis: "Humanity may not survive, but the Earth will survive!" Some environmentalists candidly speak of the possibility of an impending sixth extinction. These comments of friends and activists draw me to this glum parable of Jesus and the last line of story: "The owner will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others." When I ask myself, "where do I see myself in this troublesome story?" The dynamics of Empire and oppression in early first century CE Jerusalem have been recycled over the two millennia to human apartheid from nature, the industrial domination of the Earth, an addiction to fossil fuels and economic over-consumption of resources disproportionate to the seven billion people and project rapid growth of population to fifteen billion by the end of the century. If I follow my usual practices of exegetical unpacking a scriptural text and contemplative placement within the text, I envision myself as a tenant in the vineyard or other times a slave sent by the owner to claim a share of the produce struggling against an overwhelmingly oppressive system with two billion or more people with inadequate food or clean water or little water, species extinction accelerating, and the possibility that life in the oceans may come to an end this century. The Earth may have her last say in judging humanity for its crimes against life.

What gives me hope is my faith in Mark's addendum to the parable of the cornerstone saying. It transforms the parable from a fourth passion prediction with the addition of the allusion to the resurrection in the cornerstone saying. The message of the cornerstone is God's reign. Mark's solution to this parable is to choose to follow Jesus' non-violent ministry of challenge and co-empowering disciples to resist the power dynamics of Empire in a time of crisis and Jesus' trust in Abba.

The Painting of the Green Christ

Now we turn to the portrayal of "The Green Christ of Breton Cavalry" painted by French impressionist Paul Gauguin in 1889. Gauguin's painting opens me emotionally and contemplatively beyond the gloominess of Jesus' parable, and visualization of the painting in meditative practice creates new incarantional dimensions of hope in our climate change crisis. Gauguin portrays the women at the foot of cross, tenderly carrying the body of Jesus, the vineyard heir down from the cross. The crucified Jesus is contextualized in the wild Breton landscape of France. Christ's body is green, prophetically signifying for myself that his death was green—bringing life to all. Three women are colored the same shade of green as Christ's dead body, while the vertical timber of cross remains a dark brown color. There is a woman in typical Breton dress with a sheep in the foreground of three women holding the body of Christ. The green shading from women and the body Christ appear to be spilling green from themselves to the grass or ground. There is some green shading of the hills in the background with the shore line.

I have found this painting profoundly symbolic of the ecological Christ, crucified and interwoven within "this-worldly" Breton landscape. His body's green coloring signifies growth and life and the women and the Earth herself accept the murdered and ravaged body of Christ. The eventual of entombment of Christ into the Earth evokes the second creation of Adam, for the Genesis 2 creation account associates the earthling (*adamah*) or soil creature. Daniel Hillman writes,

> The ancient Hebrew association of (hu) man with soil is echoed in the Latin name for man, *homo*, derived from *humus*, the stuff of life in the soil. This powerful metaphor suggests an early

> realization of a profound truth that humanity has since disregarded to its own detriment.[7]

Hillman associates the Latin word for humanity, *homo* with humus soil, the organic matter formed from the decayed leaves or plant material. It is hard not to associate humus further with the cognitive derived Latin word "humble" or "humility" as well as the early Christian hymn in Philippians 2:6–11, where Christ empties himself of equality with God to take on the form of a slave. This kenotic aspect is correlated with the "humus" dimensions of Christ and his entombment provides me with intimations of resurrected life, a second Adam created from the humus of the Earth. The Christian hymn celebrates a divine kenosis self-emptying relationship with Earth and provides hope.[8]

For myself, Gauguin's Green Christ incorporates the multiple levels of notion of green grace and its greening consequences, and it highlights Christ death for healing and life—with a clear assertion that the cross of death is transformed into the tree of life. There are shades of greening in the background landscape, and the greening emerges from the green Christ. I identify myself contemplatively with one of three women who tenderly hold the body of the green Christ taken down from the cross. As I place myself in the painting, I imagine myself touching the dead body of Christ, but it spills greening life to those holding on to him, greening the foreground and background. I imagined an embodied greening pulse of energy streaming into myself and generating sparks of hope and faith in the green Christ's cross into the Tree of Life. Greening energy pulses with hope inspite of death.

Greening Grace

But there is an additional theo-spiritual and contemplative trajectory woven into Jesus' parable and Gauguin's Green Christ, for I turn to the twelfth century Benedictine mystic visionary, poet, musician, and theologian, Hildegard of Bingen. She wrote of about the green power of God's Spirit, coining the word *viriditas* from "greening" and "truth." It was for her a divine attribute, the divine greening power or life force that animates creation's fecundity from the beginning, planting, nourishing, and flourishing. She envisioned God's gracious energy as a green fire or

7. Hillel, *Out of the Earth*, 14.
8. See McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers.*

energy spilling out from the triune community of love. Greening was her metaphorical language for speaking of the green presence God's Spirit in humanity and creation. Christian theologian Veli-Matti Karkkainen writes, "For this spiritual mystic, *viriditas* was a key component of spirituality that expressed and connected the bounty of God, the fertility of nature, and the enlivening, fresh presence of the Spirit."[9] The Spirit's greening presence sustains and transforms all creation towards the incarnational transformation and flourishing intended by the triune God.

Hildegard was a uniquely gifted mystic and prophet, and she envisioned the inner life of the Trinitarian God as pouring out grace to the world. She calls this gracious love and energy *viriditas*, greening power. *Viriditas* represents the principle of life, growth, and fertility flowing from the life-creating power of God into Earth and life. Grace is green for me, and it leads us to see God as greening energy of love. The life of God as Creator, Christ, and Spirit expresses the heart of *viriditas* as creative interrelatedness, mutuality and fecundity. God births *viriditas* as interrelatedness, Christ incarnates as *viriditas*, and the Spirit germinates as the greening power of life. For Hildegard, *viriditas* emerged from her bodily experience as a woman and imaginative engagement with the land as a Benedictine nun committed to a vow of stability and a member of the soil community. It also evokes a woman's ability to bear life in the womb as a wonderful metaphor for grace. Hildegard understood God's Incarnation as the green source of flesly life, and she drew her inspiration of *viriditas* from her interactions with the rural countryside. God's greening power shapes, nourishes, and confronts us. It is God's inner interrelatedness, interrelated with us, and all life. Hildegard states, "everything exists to respond to the other."[10] For Hildegard, "to be green was to be more receptive to the Divine Presence in humanity and in creation."[11]

Viriditas is Hildegard's description of God's grace as greening power, profound interrelatedness, and fecundity. Renate Craine explains *viriditas*,

> This intense stirring calls us to wake up to its presence and to become conscious participants in the interrelated web of life that reveals the mystery of Trinitarian God. Her theological

9. Karkkainen, *Pneumatology*, 51.

10. Craine, *Hildegard*, 41,

11. Kujawa-Holbrook, *Hidegard of Bingen*, Loc. 1737.

> term for this profound interrelatedness is *viriditas*, a mutuality and fecundity that is the work of Christ and the human task.[12]

The greening power of God interrelates with our lives and all fleshly life, and we become connected to the green web of life. It reveals something of the mothering nature of God, in whose image we are made green. It taps the reservoir of greening power within ourselves, for when we engage it, we are, in turn, changed and find ourselves in love with God and all life. There is a birthing of this greening life and fecundity within the "wombs" of our lives. And it spills out into awareness of interrelatedness.

Viriditas is the interpretative lens through which I experience Gauguin's "The Green Christ" with hope. There is an added agency, the greening death of Christ and the greening interrelatedness of Christ that counters greed and self-centeredness of the tenant leaders' move towards annihilation. Christ becomes God's "green word" and "greening energy" interwoven with all fleshly life. Gauguin's green Christ and Hildegard's notion of *viriditas* draw fleshly or incarnational interconnectedness between the Earth as the Body of Christ.[13]

Many of us have lost a reverence for life and for the Earth, and we have collectively created cultural-spiritual apartheid between ourselves and the Earth. And we are all paying for this apartheid from nature. Hildegard would be quick to point out that such self-centeredness short-circuits or disrupts the flow of *viriditas.* She would be the first to understand that our Earth crisis has closed us to the web of divine interrelatedness in creation and ourselves. And Gauguin's painting in "The Green Christ of Breton Cavalry" furthers my dream that God's greening of Easter will triumph over the Wicked Tenants. Theologian Jay McDaniel looks to God's green grace:

> Green grace is the healing that comes to us when we enjoy rich bonds with other people, plants and animals, and the Earth. It is a kind of grace celebrated by ecofeminists, native peoples, deep ecologists, and sacramentalists. It is green because as the green color suggests, it engenders within us healing and wholeness, a freshness and renewal that lead us into the very fullness of life . . . In a world torn asunder by violence, forgiveness is a most precious form of green grace.[14]

12. Craine, *Hildegard*, 39.

13. I also acknowledge McFague's identification of the Earth as God's Body. McFague, *The Body of God.*

14. McDaniel*, With Roots and Wings,* 44.

A similar notion of hope is expressed by Mark Wallace when he writes,

> The cross is green. It is green because Jesus' witness on the cross is to a planet where all of God's children are bearers of life-giving Spirit. It is green because the goodness of creation is God's here-and-now dwelling place where everyday life is charged with sacred presence and power.[15]

Mark Wallace involves the green cross in planetary healing, for we face a self-inflicted theodicy that may result in extinction of life, but God's power of resurrection will harness the greenness of the cross and unleash its resurrection power of divine compassion through the Spirit.

Ecological Location

Ethicist Daniel Spencer insists that we include "ecological location" to rethink theology:

> By ecological location, I mean enlarging the term social location to include . . . where human and non-human creatures and communities are situated with respect to other members of the biotic community as within human society and within the broader biotic community as well as conceiving other members of the biotic community and the biotic community itself as locatable active agents that historically interact with and shape the other members of the ecological community, including human beings.[16]

Here Spencer de-centers the anthropocentric context of most theologies by providing an ecological location comprehensive the interactive reality of ourselves in a web of interrelated environmental relations, including other life and the biotic processes of the Earth herself. He takes the theological notion of the social context for particular theologies to widen it to include ecological location: how the particular geographies, environmental factors, local wildlife and planted life, and local environmental processes shape us and how we shape the local environment. Spencer underscores five elements of ecological location:

15. Wallace, *Green Christianity*, 38.
16. Spencer, *Gay and Gaia*, 295–296.

1. Nature's agency and humanity's unique agency within nature;
2. Both differences within human communities and between humanity and other parts of nature;
3. The variation and particularity of human power and privilege vis-à-vis nature;
4. The historical dimension of ecology and nature;
5. Recognizing the spiritual dimension of human interactions and histories with particular places, habitats, and geographies.

Eco-theology starts with these specific features of eco-location just as a variety of contextual theologies start with personal social context. Take a moment and be mindful of your eco-location as you start to read. I will likewise describe my own in the next section. Eco-location forces us first to look at our interrelationships with nature and make us less the center but focus on the network of ecological interrelationships. This remains the greatest challenge to move or ego-centric priorities over the environment and other life. Thus, Daniel Spencer provides a wider and interactive theological framework for an eco-theological spirituality. Spencer invites us to listen to our ecological backdrop as expressed by John Muir's words: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything in the universe."[17] Listening to the backdrop of nature hearkens to what Buddhists call mindfulness. For example, Buddhist environmentalist Stephanie Kaza points out that trees and animals can be wisdom teachers; they can teach us much it we attempt to listen:[18] She notes,

> Trees, plants, animals, places—I am naming these possibilities to illustrate the many options for green mentoring within the streaming field of wisdom in the great web of life . . . there is an arresting garden of seven stones placed in a raked sand field, sixty feet wide and forty feet deep. Every time I visit, I want to stop and stay with these stones, listening, sensing: *What are they saying? What is it about how they are placed? Why is it so compelling?*[19]

17. Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra,*110
18. Kaza, *The Attentive Heart,* 1993.
19. Kaza, *Mindfully Green*, 91.

Mindfulness is listening to the many voices of nature. In Job 12:7, we read, "Ask the animals, and they will teach you, ask the birds, and they will teach you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you." Job asks us to expand our perspective by listening to the text of nature. By listening to nature, Celtic and Orthodox Christians, Francis of Assisi and his successors led them to deep contemplative and incarnational experiences of Christ and the Spirit. By the time of Galileo, some Christians spoke of two books of revelation: the Bible and the Book of Nature. Contemplative strands of Christianity—Celtic and Orthodox Christianities, Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, Ignatius Loyola, and Sallie McFague—found God very present within nature. I have learned through the years that *Lectio Divina*, a contemplative tradition to engage scripture, is equally applicable to listening and learning from nature.[20] Listening to nature is a sacred and different experience from ordinary listening and engaging nature, for it is unlike listening to human speech. It is a silent, untranslatable language of encounter and appreciative attentiveness to surrounding life and noises. The language of nature is entered into with silence, to experience the plants and the beauty of a nature and the community of life, and experience the network of interconnected life.

Just as I slowly and mindfully read scripture several times, I translate this practice daily, sitting outside in an amazing church garden often with my companion dog Friskie, I mindfully attend to the trees, the flowers, the succulents and desert-scape plants. I watch and listen to the birds and the insects in the garden. Within the voices of trees, flowers, and cacti and the desert succulents, there is also a deep and life-giving presence of God.[21] Such contemplative encounters have the impact of creating wonder and generating a deep love for God within nature. It has not limited to religious contemplatives but includes conservationists and naturalists who love the natural world. For instance, John Muir describes from his first exploration of the Sierra Mountains: "Oh, these vast, calm measureless mountain days, inciting at once to work and rest! Days in whose light, everything seems equally divine, opening a thousand windows to show us God."[22] Muir portrays mountains as "monuments of

20. Fischer, *Loving Creation*, 116–120.

21. See Mark Wallace for finding God in the particularities of the natural world: *Finding God in the Singing River*, 2005.

22. John Muir, "My First Summer in the Sierra," http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/flashbks/muir/muirfeb.htm; see also, The Nature Mysticism of John Muir, http://hummingbirdworld.com/spiritnature/Muir.htm.

love," and he intuited in his mystical engagement with nature that we are interrelated with everything else in the universe and beyond

My Ecological Location

I came to the Valley Church of North Hollywood in 2004, and I have served as Senior Pastor for more than twelve years, but as the Spirit works mischievously, when doors are shut from a homophobic tenure battle, the Spirit creates unexpected new possibilities. Briefly, I am writing this in Southern California where I live in a semi-arid environment, where the majority of water is transported from the Northern California, and we experience a severe drought. Severe water drought measures are in effect in the whole state, and tens of millions of trees have died directly from drought or the dryness of the landscape leading to destruction of large tracts of forest, wildlife, and human property through wild fires.

In 2006, we, as a congregation, watched the Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* documentary on global warming and climate change. We started on the road to listen to the Spirit and to listen to the Earth. And we incorporated a *tonglen* (Tibetan, "giving/receiving") meditation into our communion practice before the servers and celebrant received communion: "We offer the grace of this communion for the poor, the homeless, those suffering from war and hunger, and of the Earth so exploited, ravaged, and harmed by humanity." We remembered the Earth each week, and thenby 2007.it was natural to add the Earth to our membership roster. This compassionate communion meditation reminds us of our responsibility to suffering people and the vulnerable Earth.

Pastoral care for the Earth and other life has become a central ministry for our church. It originates from the notion that we as members of the Christ's church, including the Earth, are covenanted together. We took steps to covenant also with California Interfaith Power & Light, reducing our energy usage and offsetting our carbon footprint with a number of environmental conserving measures over several. First, I showed after service for six weeks one of the six short segments from the video *Renewal*.[23] After these 10–15 minute short clips, we discussed what might we do. The films sparked creative responses to stop buying styrofoam cups to bringing coffee cups, to recycling, to composting, to growing organic vegetables fruits from our gardens, to replacing bulbs with CFL(s)

23. *Renewal: Stories from America's Religious-Environmental Movement*(DVD).

and led(s) wherever possible. The congregants came up with the idea of energy-saving measure of a tankless water heater to replace a water heater that required energy all to heat the water. We were determined to model what it might look for a Christian community to live responsibly and sustainable with the Earth. Some congregants adopted these habits in their homes. We secured 90 solar panels through a lease program, saving from $500–800 per month on energy costs. We incorporated more educational programs around Earthcare, included worship and sermons about the Earth, and invited speakers to meet with us to learn more about our responsibilities to the Earth. Three years previously, we scored 75 on the UCC Green Justice Congregation scale, we now score over 140.[24] We use the scale as diagnostic tool for measuring our progress in reaching a carbon neutral footprint as a congregation. It took years to attain this because we realized that solar panels were wonderful for energy conservation, but the real work was our eco-conversion to Earthcare.

Originally, my spirituality developed from the incarnational roots of Ignatian daily practice of finding God in all things, but that spirituality picked up the bodhisattva practice of compassion and the Buddhist notion of interbeing along the way. I retrieved the spiritualities of Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, Teihard de Chardin, and Albert Schweitzer, and I cherished new saints: Rachel Carson, John Muir, Thomas Berry, Thich Nhat Hanh, Sallie McFague, and Leonardo Boff. Each morning, I sat in our church meditation garden with my dog Friskie, listening mindful through my daily *lectio divina* practice God's presence in the garden. God revealed Godself as a Gardener.

Falling in Love with God and Earth

As we mindfully engage nature, we meet God. We intuit a connectedness with everything, and we no longer experience separateness as individuals, for at the heart of the universe, nothing exists in itself but exists interrelated to something else and through the infinite reaches of the universe. Prayer and contemplation allows us to enter the heart of the universe and experience the Spirit, the incarnated Christ and Creator interrelated within nature. This book attempts to spark "an environmental imaginary" of liberative eco-spirituality that re-contextualizes and re-envisions the

24. Green Justice Congregations: http://www.ucc.org/environmental-ministries_just-green-congregations.

sources of Christianity as interrelated with the Earth and the web of life.[25] My ecological imaginary has re-shaped my spirituality by expanding my prayer to become an eco-contemplative in compassion for the Earth. I am part of the Earth and interelated community of life.

The greening of our Christian imaginations deepens our relationship with God, the risen Christ as Gardner, and provides the foundation of Christian ecological practice. There are many Christians and churches turning to Earthcare in the form of ecojustice movements and committed to Earthcare My hope is to awaken our Christian awareness of our injuring the Earth and our failure to hear God voice, saying "These are my beloved children." The late Thomas Berry called for an "ecologically sensitive spirituality."[26] Berry devoted much of life's work, writings, and mentoring scholars, Christians, and non-Christians to promote a "life-enhancing" spiritualities with "wonder-filled intimacy with the planet."[27] Brian Swimme writes,

> The great mystery is that we are intersted in anything whatsover. Think of your friends, how you met them, how interresting they appeared to you. Why should anyone in the whole world interest us at all? Why don't we experience everyone as utter, unendurable bores? Why isn't the cosmos made that way? Why don't we suffer intolerable burden with every person, forest, symphony, and sea-shore in exitence? The great surprise is that something or someone is interesting. Love begins there. Love begins when we discover interst. To be interested is to fall in love. To become fascinated is to step into a wild love affair on any level of life.[28]

If we fall in love with God's Earth, then we will fight to preserve what God loves and we love.

25. Peet and Watts, *Liberation Ecologies,* 263.
26. Berry, *Sacred Universe* loc. 2110.
27. Ibid., 2031 & 1759.
28. Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon,* 4.

1

Snakes, Worms, and Compassion: *The Legacy of Saint Francis of Assisi*

Do people have ethical obligations toward rocks? To almost all Americans, still saturated with ideas historically dominant in Christianity . . . the question makes no sense at all. If the time comes when to any considerable group of us such a question is no longer ridiculous, we may be on the verge of a change of value structures that will make possible measures to cope with the growing ecologic crisis. One hopes that there is enough time left.

—Lynn White[1]

I could say I want to imagine the world as it has never been.

—Leonardo Boff[2]

In 1968, at UCLA, a medieval European historian—Lynn White Jr. shook the Christian churches with a published article entitled "The Historic

1. White, "Continuing the Conversation," 63.
2. Boff, *Virtues*, x.

Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."[3] White argued that Judeo-Christianity was at fault for the impending environmental crisis that started with the Industrial Revolution whose cultural perspective comprehended the Earth was there for human consumption and exploitation. White writes, "Popular religion in antiquity was animistic. Every stream, every tree, every mountain contained a guardian spirit who had to be carefully propitiated before one put up a mill in a stream, or cut the tree, or mined the mountain."[4] Christianity became an urban movement and stood contrary to the agrarian religions of the Mediterranean in the first century C.E.[5] In its opposition to competing religions, Christianity replaced all the ancient deities connected to nature and thus de-sacralized the natural world. He observes:

> To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West. For nearly two millennia, Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature.[6]

He faults readings of the Bible that justify human domination over nature and establish human privilege over and against nature. White points out that Christianity made a distinction between humans formed in the image and likeness of God and the rest of life and creation. Anthropocentrism is the particular worldview that non-human beings (animals) and nature are instrumentally available for human flourishing and well-being. In other words, it reduces the status of all creation and elevates humanity as the purpose of creation. Humans have souls, other life does not. In other words, nature is soul-less, and nature and other life are inferior to humanity with a spiritual soul. Humanity was made to dominate and subdue creation. Thus, two simultaneous correlations—the strong stress on anthropocentrism and the degradation of the material world for the spiritual—became a strong theological combination that contributed to Christianity's ecological harm.[7] Humanity, on the hierarchical scale of being, remains under just God and angels (spiritual beings) and above other life and plants and the Earth (material reality without a soul).

3. White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."
4. Ibid., 1205.
5. Stark, *Cities of God*.
6. White, "The Historical Roots," 1205.
7. Kinsley, *Ecology and Religion*, 103–14.

In the last four centuries, Christian writers and theologians believed that nature and the animal world had no value except for humanity's use and disposal. Humanity was uniquely and solely made in the image of God:

> Especially, in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen . . . Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence in nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions . . . not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.[8]

Humans have understood themselves on hierarchical scale to animals as God is to humans. Some understood that we were God's vice-regents on Earth, and Earth was to be subdued, conquered, ruled, and exploited for human purposes. This anthropocentrism has contributed to the environmental crisis and the reckless arrogance of human technology and fossil fuel industry without regard to the environmental consequences.

Lynn White firmly claimed that science and technology will not solve our environmental crisis: "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."[9] Since he faulted "Christian arrogance toward nature" as the source the contemporary ecological crisis, White logically concluded that the remedy had to be religious and had to be a spiritual antidote for such arrogance. The remedy to our crisis called for a change of human hearts and minds about nature—requiring us to abandon our contempt for nature and other life, an indifference to using the Earth for our slightest needs and whims or for profit. It required religious values to provide personal and social change from its anthropocentric perspective. White argued for humility as a virtue to provide an antidote to an arrogant Christian anthropocentricism that has precipitated and contributed to the environmental crisis. He proposed the model of St. Francis of Assisi, "the greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history," a model of humility and fellowship with nature.[10]

8. White, "The Historical Roots," 1207.
9. Ibid., 1207.
10. Ibid.

Critique of White

But nearly five decades earlier hundreds of church leaders, biblical scholars, and theologians attacked White's argument and, of course, painted him personally with the epithets as "godless," "secular" or a "junior antichrist" in the employment of Communist Russia.[11] White's seminal article, however, had a catalytic impact upon biblical and theological scholars in the development of ecological theology. Hargrove contends that White's complaint was essentially correct and his arguments generated vigorous religious debate.[12] White unfortunately laid blame on Christianity with no viable solutions for many, and Hargrove wished the debate never occurred.[13] A few scholars perceived that White's article was a turning point in the Christian environmental movement, launching an explosion of scholarship refuting White or recovering ecological issues from the biblical and theological tradition.[14] Others noted that the arguments against White fixated on his initial article and criticism of Christianity and the dominion-stewardship debate.[15] Few ever read White's follow-up articles. I intuited that his answer had origins in his youth and expressed a credible solution to the environmental crisis. White's solution resonated with my Catholic and Buddhist theological roots, and I discovered that my intuition was correct.

What he did, however, was to introduce "ecology" into theological discourse, an accomplishment itself. Ecology was, for the most part, ignored in biblical and theological discourse in the late 1960s. White goaded an active apologetic response from biblical scholars to refine their interpretation of the Genesis texts, theologians to develop Christian traditions that surfaced and valued nature in a positive light, and ethicists to engage and re-think environmental issues. Some Christian scholars and ethicists understood that there was a brewing ecological crisis, and they began to re-examine the interpretations of the Genesis text about being created in the image and likeness of God and God investing man with dominion over the animals and the Earth. American naturalist historian Roderick Nash calls attention to this verse in Genesis: "Be fruitful and

11. Nash, *The Rights of Nature,* 92.

12. Hargrove, "Introduction," *Religion and Environmental Crisis.* xvi–xvii.

13. Ibid., xvii.

14. Gottlieb, "Introduction," 17–18; Nash, *The Rights of Nature*, 92–95.

15. Whitney, "Lynn White Jr.," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, 1736; Willis Jenkins, "After Lynn White," 285–86.

multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over every living thing that moves over the earth" (Gen 1:28). The verbs to "subdue" (*kabash*) and "have dominion over" (*radah*) were understood by Christian tradition as meaning "to conquer" and "have dominion over nature"—to make nature humanity's slave. Humanity is a species separated from nature and possessed with unrestricted right to exploit nature for human benefit. Nature is simply matter, resources awaiting human development and use. Roderick Nash says such a Christian interpretation served as the "intellectual lubrication for the exploitation of nature."[16] Human beings understood themselves as divine rulers over nature. After all, the story of creation is human-centric, and humanity was made after all creation and other creatures, for humanity alone carried the likeness and image of God. The principle of human hierarchy was embedded in what has become an arrogant logic of human domination of nature. Christian clergy, theologians, and leaders, for the most part, felt that humans had the right to do whatever they want to inferior animals or soul-less Nature. They had no rights or purpose, other than serving the needs of humanity. This position is both arrogant and selfish, and it breeds greed and reckless actions directed to nature.

Many biblical and theological scholars attempted to correct White by arguing that God's command is to have dominion is similar to a king's entrusting his administrative rule to a steward or viceroy. A steward, Christians argued, is one who has taken God's place for earth and creatures. But this modern reading still placed humanity at the top of the hierarchy as mini-divine rulers in God's place. It was an unsatisfactory, half-way solution that still privileged humanity in the hierarchy but also gave humanity the responsibility to care for nature.[17]

Christian ethicist James Nash took a modified view of White's ecological complaint by arguing that Christianity does bear some responsibility for propagating an anthropocentric perspective.[18] It is true that Christianity bears a partial guilt for its share of the ecological crisis. He traced it to Christianity's asceticism, its disdain for the world (*contemptus mundi*) and its obsession for the salvation of the soul. Such dualism was carried to an extreme that has neglected and disvalued nature, resulting in an ecological sin of omission. James Nash noted that White's ecological

16. Nash, *The Rights of Nature*, 90.

17. Ibid., 96.

18. Nash, *Loving Nature*.

complaint against Christianity also suffers from a serious historical oversimplification and "is an exaggeration of religious influence on culture."[19] There is no single cause for how we got into this ecological crisis, citing Carolyn Merchant's detailed history, *The Death of Nature*. Merchant covers the trajectory of the emergence of science and technology from 1500 to 1700 and thus refutes White's ecological complaint.[20] Merchant challenges White's notion, pointing out that the feminine images of mothering and nurturing nature gave way to the notion of nature as wild, untamed, and threatening and the need for control and domination of nature. There is a transition from organic and feminine notions of nature to the masculine technological and scientific domination of the natural world.[21] Paul Santimire traces the problem to modern secularism, not Christianity, as the culprit for the contemporary environmental crisis.[22] All the above arguments point to the need for a more detailed account for the development of Western anthropocentrism.

Elspeth Whitney provides a balanced summary of the impact of White's original article:

> Biblical scholars and eco-theologians, among them James Barr, Carl Braaten, John Cobb and Joseph Sittler could argue that the Judeo-Christian tradition could be more accurately described as mandating a care-taking or stewardship relationship to the natural world: Christianity, therefore, was not part of the problem, but part of the solution to environmental solutions . . . .Nevertheless, White's powerful and original reading of history, which has shaped a generation of scholarship, remains the touchstone for current and future discussion.[23]

But the impact of White's complaint against Christianity opened responses beyond Christianity, for Sallie McFague aptly summarizes the widening debate,

> If Christianity was capable of doing such immense damage, then surely the restoration of nature also must lie, at least in part with Christianity. I believe that it does, but also with other world religions as well as with education, government, and science.

19. Ibid., 77.

20. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature.*

21. Nash also cites:Glacken,*Traces on the Rhodian Shore* and R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*.

22. Paul Santimire, *Nature Reborn*, loc. 214.

23. Elspeth Whitney, "Lynn White," 1736.

> The environmental crisis we face—and which is epitomized by climate change—is a planetary agenda, involving all people, all expertise, and all religions.[24]

McFague's observations hold true fifty years after White offered his initial critique of Christian anthropocentrism. It involves not only Christians but all other communities of faith, and this becomes evident in the publications from conference at the Center for the Study of World Religion at Harvard University.[25] Many faith communities have realized that we will share the climate ravages and impacts in the twenty-first century, and we see faith based environmental groups in each of the world's religions.

White's Solution: Later Conversations

Most Christians who initially reacted to White's indictment ignored his final statement of his hope for Christianity. A few scholars took White serious in suggesting that Francis of Assisi as model for ecological responsibility and hope.

> The key to an understanding of Francis is his belief in the virtue of humility not merely for the individual but for man as a species. Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures. With him the ant is no longer simply a homily for the lazy, flames a sign of the thrust of the soul toward union with God; now they are Brother Ant and Sister Fire, praising the Creator in their own ways as Brother Man does in his.[26]

For White, Francis of Assisi's humility and kinship model with nature and animals provides a corrective to the extravagant Christian anthropocentricism above the nature.

> However, the present increasing disruption of the global environment is the product of a dynamic technology and science which were originating in the Western medieval world against

24. Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 84.

25. See: The Harvard Book Series: The Religions of the World and Ecology, http://fore.research.yale.edu/religions-of-the-world-and-ecology-archive-of-conference-materials/; Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, http://fore.research.yale.edu/publications/books/book_series/cswr/index.html.

26. White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1207; Kiley, "A Spiritual Democracy," 241–60; Sponsel, *Spiritual Ecology*, 43–48.

> which Saint Francis was rebelling in so original a way. Their growth cannot be understood historically apart from distinctive attitudes toward nature which are deeply grounded in Christian dogma.[27]

He set out an ethics based on humility, spiritual courtesy, and compassion to embrace the egalitarian vision of Francis of the biotic community. He noted that, "The profoundly religious, but heretical sense of primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point the way."[28] White indicates that a renewed kind of Franciscan spirituality—focusing on humanity's kinship with all other creatures and nature in a community of creation—would disrupt Christian anthropocentrism. It would help humanity to co-exist with nature and other life as spiritual equals. Many Protestant critics generally overlooked Francis of Assisi as a solution to the environmental crisis, rejecting a Catholic sacramental and contemplative approach to nature.

White's ethical model was, in fact, very Buddhist at its core in my initial reading, and this was later confirmed in his later articles, but was not generally embraced by Christian ethicists. It led me to wonder if they ever read his later articles. By investigating more of White's later conversations after his bombshell article, I discovered a significant event in White's youth when he traveled to Ceylon. He noticed that Buddhist workers building a road around earthen cones or snake nests rather than through them. Lynn White later reflected, "They were spared not because workmen were afraid of snakes but because of a feeling by the workers that the snake had a right to its house so long as it wanted to stay there."[29] Buddhists have a different view of the interrelatedness of all life from the dominant views of other life held by most Christians. He noted that "if the men with shovels in their hands had likewise been Presbyterians, the snakes would have fared less well."[30] White traces his connection of religion to ecological attitudes to this early event with Buddhists in his life. Matthew Riley points out,

> A close reading of White's texts reveals a surprising abundance of creatures through the entire body of his work. His writings on

27. White, "The Historical Roots," 1207.

28. Ibid.

29. White, "Continuing the Conversation," 55. Snakes (*nagas*) were understood as protectors of the Buddha.

30. Ibid.

> religion and ecology, in particular, seem to have animals leaping out from nearly every page.[31]

White was searching for a theological language to ground a Christian animism that would value other life: "I am searching for ways to regain perception of the spirituality of all creatures and to demote modern man's absolute monarchy over nature."[32] There was no coincidence that White gravitated to St. Francis of Assisi and Buddhist notions of compassion. His later writings expounded a general metaphysics of compassion, and he develops a biophilic proposal for a spiritual democracy of all creatures, akin to Francis of Assisi but also revealing a nascent Buddhist–Christian spirituality.

But Lynn White was also a Christian who profoundly believed that the Holy Spirit "is still whispering to us."[33] Though there was more than 1500 years of reading Genesis from the perspective that nature was created to serve humanity and that all creatures were created to serve human need, he believed that there was a biblical basis for an ethic of environmental care. White had also made a suggestion on how humans might model themselves after Francis of Assisi. By imitating St. Francis, we could imagine a "democracy of creation" or community of the Earth whereby all creatures and the elements of nature are perceived within a kinship model as reflected in his "Canticle of Brother Sun."[34] He valued no hierarchies in nature, no chain of being—addressing non-human beings as brothers and sisters. Francis accorded value to non-human beings and earth systems from a theo-centric perspective.

White takes Francis' spiritual democracy or kinship model seriously as he later writes, perhaps taken as an absurdity by Christian ethicists, critics of his seminal article, and those who denigrate the material world:

> Do people have ethical obligations toward rocks? . . . To almost all Americans, still saturated with ideas historically dominant in Christianity . . . the question makes no sense at all. If the time comes when to any considerable group of us such a question is no longer ridiculous, we may be on the verge of a change of value structures that will make possible measures to cope with

31. Riley, "A Spiritual Democracy of All God's Creatures," 247.
32. White, "Snakes, Nests, and Icons," 61.
33. Ibid., 63.
34. Doyle, "Canticle of Brother Sun," 155–74.

> the growing ecologic crisis. One hopes that there is enough time left.[35]

White's conversation explored his desire to reform, not destroy Christianity as critics had rushed to an apologetic defense of Christianity. He writes, "Since the roots of our trouble are religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious."[36] He pointed to St. Francis of Assisi as the greatest spiritual revolutionary in western history and who would challenge Christian anthropocentrism and arrogance. Francis used the term "Mother Earth." His spiritually had no hierarchies, and he addressed non-human beings as brother or sister. White writes, "Believing that they (all life) all independently praised and magnified God, Francis implicitly accorded to all creatures and natural processes a value entirely separate from human interest. Everything had a direct relationship to God." White called for "morality based on disinterested love of nature, which, in turn, derived from nature's membership in God's world."[37]

Francis' notion of a spiritual democracy with the Earth and all life is one of the most radically inclusive spiritualities that have evolved. Francis is a model of a Christian spirituality that has potential to generate an Earth-centered, thus a theo-centric spirituality that leads to Earth Care. Implicit in his proposal was to move Francis' theo-centric model to an eco-centric model of relating to a community of life, uniting the two into a singular ethical vision of compassionate care for all life. White was so personally transformed as a Christian to such a depth of compassion that he defended the rights of life-forms hostile to humanity, like smallpox (Variola).

> We humans reached the ability to exterminate smallpox . . . From our standpoint, the advisability of the action is beyond debate. What the God who created both homo sapiens and Variola thinks about this, we do not yet know.[38]

He understood the dilemma that a lethal virus created by God had value to God. In another essay, he concluded,

> Christian compassion must be based on an ascetic and self-restraining conviction of man's comradeship with other creatures

35. White, "The Future of Compassion, 109.
36. White, "The Historical Roots," 1207.
37. Nash, *The Rights of Nature*, 94.
38. White, "Compassion," 109.

> . . . Today we have the creaturely companionship not only of the flowering tree that so enraptured Schweitzer, or the earthworm that he removes from the perils of the sidewalk; we can sense of our comradeship with a glacier, a subatomic particle or a spiral nebula. Man must join the club of creatures. They may save us from ourselves.[39]

It is in the life of Francis of Assisi that Lynn White finds the most revolutionary Christian spirituality filled with love for and solidarity with nature, and he looks also a modern re-iteration of such a reverence for nature and animals in Albert Schweitze. For White, Francis had inspired a "spiritual democracy" as one of the most radically inclusive ethical systems.[40]

White has had a lasting significance for ecology and religion but, in particular, to my focus on Christian theology and ecology. He cared enough for the environment and hoped for a reformation of Christianity to face the ecological crisis. White's critics read his seminal article but not in light of his further conversations. Others picked up his challenges, apologetically defending Christianity by unpacking the environmental elements within scripture and theological tradition. Leslie Sponsel notes,

> White also stimulated an initial surge of interest in the relationship between religions and ecology more generally . . . White's ideas continue to be reflected in numerous works in philosophy, ethics, history, religion, and other studies relate to the environment and ecology. In short, his article was also a major catalyst in the development of spiritual ecology, especially, its intellectual component.[41]

Lynn White's consequences were far more reaching than he ever imagined. Sponsel traces a revival and strengthening of what he terms as "a spiritual ecology," an umbrella term for religion and ecology and spiritual environmentalists. In 1986, the World Wildlife Fund celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary at the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi. The conference looked to religious solutions for the environmental crisis, and White's dream of reforming Christianity with ecology was well on its way.

39. White, "Future of Compassion," 106–7.
40. Nash, *The Rights of Nature*, 95.
41. Sponsel, *Spiritual Ecology,* 78–79.

A Revolutionary Legacy

Francis' extreme lifestyle and spirituality bordered on heretical and extreme for its age. Francis of Assisi was canonized as a saint in recognizing his "out of bounds" spirituality, and this was a church attempt to domesticate his radical spirituality. His spirituality is deeply incarnational, focused on the crucified Christ in the poor, the vulnerable, and creation and creatures. He had compassion for the poor and for God's creatures, and these were intertwined in his spirituality. Franciscan theologian Ilia Delio links Francis' vision of compassion and biophilia together:

> Francis' compassion was grounded in his depth of vision. As he shifted from ego centrism to a relational self through the deepening of love, he released control of his life and the lives of others. The knowledge and freedom became deep and wide enough to invite others into his life. Francis grew into an ecological person because he grew into a God-centered person. His "biophilia" began with the poor, the sick, the weak and fragile, and as he grew in relationship with them, he came to know God in a new way. He accepted the leper as a brother, as one related to, and this acceptance broadened relatedness to others. The weak and fragile creatures of the earth spoke to him most clearly of the presence of Christ.[42]

Compassion is directed to the other, and there is a compassionate identification with the other through love. For Francis, it was his devotion to and relationship with Christ that his vision of cosmic interrelatedness is born. His devotion to the crucified led him to identify the poor and the vulnerable as Christ. When he witnessed the vulnerability or suffering of another creature, whether human or other, he experienced the passion of Christ. Thomas Celano, Francis' biographer, details his creation spirituality:

> Even for worms he had a warm love, since he had read this text about the Savior: "I am a worm and not a man." That is why he used to pick them up from the road and place them in a safe place so they would not be crushed by footsteps of passersby . . . Whenever he found an abundance of flowers, he used to preach to them and invite them to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason.[43]

42. Delio, *Compassion*, 85.

43. Thomas of Celano, *Life of Francis*, In FA, ED, 1, 250–251. Quoted in Delio, *A*

Francis understood that the sacredness of creation and all creatures originated from a relationship to God as Creator and the incarnate Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit. John Hart comments on the radical challenge of Francis: "He (Francis) transcended the anthropocentrism of his time when he called animate and inanimate beings "brother" and "sister." There is no rivalry among these siblings but rather a mutuality of interests in a family relationship.[44] Francis' incarnational stress on Christ enabled him to find God in creation and in all creatures. All creatures became his family, and he intuited a cosmic interconnectedness of creatures and creation with the triune God.

Francis composed his Canticle of Creation" (*Praised be, You, Laudato Si*) that expresses the goodness of creation and "cosmic interdependency."[45] Everything is interrelated. Sallie McFague suggests that Christians should love nature similarly to the spirituality of Francis of Assisi, who "epitomizes this sensibility ('to love nature in all its differences and detail, in itself, for itself') in his praise of the sun, moon, earth, and water as his brothers and sisters."[46] His sacramental vision of nature accepts nature as it is, reflecting the presence and image of God. Franciscan theologians are remaining at the forefront theologies of Creation such as Franciscan scientis, theologian, and nun Ilia Delio, who bridges creation theology and emergent evolution.[47] Her creative theology of evolution and cosmology is deeply embedded in the tradition of Francis of Assisi and Teilhard.

Leonardo Boff, former Franciscan and Brazilian liberation theologian, looks to Francis' practice of poverty in the formation of a kinship model with nature:

> Possession creates obstacles to communication between persons and with nature . . . Possession represents human "interests"—*inter-esses*—that is, what is placed between persons and nature. The more radical poverty is, the closer humans come to raw reality, and the more it enables them to have an overall experience for otherness and difference. Universal kinship results from the practice of essential poverty. We feel truly brother and sister

Franciscan View of Creation: loc. 423

44. Hart, *Sacramental Commons*, 33.

45. Delio, *Compassion*, 88.

46. McFague, *Super, Natural Christians,* 27.

47. Delio, *Christ in Evolution*; *The Emergent Christ*; *From Teilhard to Omega*; *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love.*

> because we can experience things with no more concern for possession, profit, and efficiency. Poverty becomes a synonym for essential humility, which is not one virtue among others but an attitude by which we stand on the ground alongside things. From this position, we can be reconciled with all things and begin a cosmic democracy.[48]

For Boff, it is Francis' poverty and humility are critical to developing our kinship with nature: "Poverty is a way of being by which the individual lets things be what they are; one refuses to dominate them, subjugate them, and make them objects of the will to power. The more radical the poverty, the closer the individual comes to reality, and the easier it is to commune with all things, respecting and reverencing their differences and distinctions. Universal fraternity is the result of the way-of-being-poor of Saint Francis."[49] Francis' love for Christ opened himself to a profound sense of compassionate kinship with nature and other life, letting nature and creatures to be themselves. Poverty and humility opens human beings to an appreciation of the radical interdependence and interrelatedness with the web of life.[50] Sallie McFague, likewise, notes that Francis of Assisi's voluntary poverty created a "wild space," "a space where one is available for deep change from the conventional model of living to another one."[51] Often people in wild space do not fit into conventional culture. His "possessionlessness" created such a wild space but involved not only giving up some possessions but also the claims of human exceptionalism.[52] Against Christian theological anthropocentrism, the Franciscans preserved the notion of humans as a part of the biotic community. And most importantly, his legacy was his vision that the natural world sacramentally mirrored the presence of God while other life revealed a kinship community of creatures between humanity and animals.

White's proposed solution to the environmental crisis, however, was taken up by an unexpected ally. He made a nomination to the Vatican for making Francis of Assisi the patron saint for ecologists.[53] In 1979, Pope John Paul II designated Francis of Assisi as the patron saint of ecology, for

48. Boff, *Cry of the Earth,* loc. 4587–4801.
49. Boff, *Saint Francis,* 39.
50. Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, loc. 2972.
51. McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers,* xii; ibid. 46–47.
52. Ibid., 10.
53. Riley, "A Spiritual Democracy," 146 n41; Nash, *The Rights of Nature*, 93.

he refers to Francis' marvelous gift of "fostering nature."[54] But Francis of Assisi has become an inspirational, ecological model for many Christians and non-Christian. Francis' deep love of God overflowed into love for all God's creatures in his sermons preached to animals and his insistence that all creatures are brothers and sisters under God. Eric Doyle writes his observations on Francis 'spirituality about God and creation:

> To love is to be in relation with another, creating a bond between the self and a part of the world, and so ultimately between the self and creation. If one person can love one person, one unique animal, one flower, one special place on this earth, there is no reason in principle why that love cannot stretch out to embrace every single creature to the furthest reaches of space.[55]

Through compassionate love and example of Christ, Francis attains a vision and spirituality of the interrelatedness of all life, a vision and spirituality that many Buddhists would feel at home.[56] His kinship or family model of Christ, creation, and all life places himself outside of the medieval Christian view of hierarchical chain of being with a new transfigured vision of the unity of all life through God, Christ, and the Spirit.[57]

The Feast of St. Francis (October 4) comes at the end of the newly celebrated Season of Creation with the, the blessing of the animals. Personally, it is one of the most enjoyable functions as clergy, blessing householders and their companion animals. I bless companion animals and the household, and then give a blessed scapular medal with St. Francis. I celebrated such blessing of animals at church and at pet shops, and no matter what spiritual tradition that the householder of the companion animal, each wants the medal for their pet.

More recently Pope Francis I took the name of the St. Francis of Assisi to re-iterate the importance of human environmental responsibility.[58] He told reporters he chose Francis after St. Francis of Assisi, "the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation," the same created world "with which we don't have such a good relationship."[59]

54. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Inter Sanctos*, AAS 7, 1979, 1509f. Thomas Murtagh, "St. Francis and Ecology," 143. Delio, Warner, & Wood, *Care for Creation.*

55. Doyle, "The Canticle of Brother Sun," 160.

56. See Nhat Hanh, *Love Letter to the Earth.*

57. See the remarkable volume: Delio et al., *Care for Creation*, 65–104.

58. Boff, *Francis of Rome, Francis of Assisi*.

59. Cindy Wooden, Pope Francis explains why he chose St. Francis

In fact, Francis I has named human exploitation and harm of the Earth as the "sin of our time":[60]

> This is one of the greatest challenges of our time: to convert ourselves to a type of development that knows how to respect creation" . . . When I look at America, also my own homeland, so many forests, all cut, that have become land . . . that can [no] longer give life. This is our sin, exploiting the Earth and not allowing her to give us what she has within her.[61]

In his momentous encyclical on climate change, *Laudato si, mi Signore* (*Praise be My Lord*), from the title from the Canticle of Francis of Assisi, Francis I makes clear that the saint remains the inspiration within the letter when he states that St. Francis of Assisi is "the quintessential example of comprehensive care and ecology, who showed special concern for the poor and the abandoned."[62] He further writes,

> [St. Francis's] response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection . . . Such a conviction cannot be written off as naïve romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behavior.[63]

Near the end of the encyclical, Pope Francis encourages readers to follow the example of the ecological conversion embodied by the saint:[64]

> I ask all Christians to recognize and to live fully this dimension of their conversion. May the power and the light of the grace we have received also be evident in our relationship to other creatures and to the world around us. In this way, we will help

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of Assisi's Name," http://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/pope-francis-explains-why-he-chose-st-francis-of-assisis-name/13243

60. Catholic theologian Sean McDonagh contributed to much of the writing of the encyclical, but there is a definite strand of Boff's theology taken into Pope Francis' theology.

61. "Pope Francis News: His Holiness Calls Environmental Exploitation a Sin," *Latin Post*, July 5, 2014, http://www.latinpost.com/articles/16542/20140705/pope-calls-environmental-exploitation-sin.htm.

62. Pope Francis I, *Laudato Si, mi Signore*, June 2015, (n. 10., n 66).

63. Pope Francis I, *Laudato Si*, 2015, No. 11.

64. Horan, "The Franciscan Character of *Laudato Si*, http://americamagazine.org/issue/franciscan-character-laudato-si. There is the "greening" spirit of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises in the letter: James Profit, "Spiritual Exercises and Ecology.".

> nurture that sublime fraternity with all creation which Saint Francis of Assisi so radiantly embodied.[65]

Francis of Assisi provides a visionary model of ecological conversion and inspiration for people of faith who care for the Earth and all life. Christian discipleship in the twenty-first century includes not only God and humanity but all life in a theology of creation and justice.

Francis has been retrieved as model for ecological spirituality and biotic quality with the web of life. He teaches that God's compassion does not stop with human beings, for he taught us that Christ's gospel includes animals and birds. They are our siblings, our brothers and sisters. Each being—human, animal, and plant life—has a relationship to God as the source of life. Every creature was a mirror of divine presence, and possibly a step leading to God, and the mystery of God was at the heart of the created world, teeming with life. Francis had little possessions in the world, and he would spend five or six months a year in the wilderness for contemplation and living with God in nature. He expected his friars also to live lightly on the Earth.

Leonardo Boff: St. Francis

Leonardo Boff is one of my favorite environmental liberation theological heroes. What makes Boff's liberation theology attractive is his weaving Francis of Assisi, John Duns Scotus, Teilhard de Chardin, Bonaventure, Thomas Berry, and many others, and this theological lineage leads him to a more inclusive liberation/ecological theology. His books on St. Francis of Assisi united liberation theology's preferential option for the poor with the saint's stress on poverty and universal kinship. Boff writes, "Through his deep humanity, Francis of Assisi has become an archetype of the human ideal: open to God, universal brother, and caretaker of nature and of Mother Earth. He belongs not only to Christianity but for all humankind."[66] Francis of Assisi provided a paradigm for Boff's liberation theology's care for the poor and his care for the Earth.[67] Boff's theology is driven by "God's preferential option for the poor."[68] Liberation theology is not neutral, "Any such claim to neutrality is really admission of support

65. Pope Francis I, *Laudato Si*, 2015, No. 221.
66. Boff, *Francis of Assisi,* loc. 78.
67. John Hart: *Sacramental Commons;* Ilia, *Compassion*.
68. Boff, *Francis of Assisi*, loc. 940–1528.

for the established order that benefits a small portion of the population and marginalizes the vast majority."[69] The God of Jesus takes sides with the poor and the oppressed and Jesus' relationship with the poor is critical to his Franciscan-based theology. He states, "If we do not take the side of the wretched of the earth, we become enemies of our very humanity. By losing the poor, we also lose God and Jesus Christ, who chose the side of the poor."[70] Preferential option for the poor, however, requires a personal conversion to stand with and empower the poor, struggle for social justice, and engage society for revolutionary change. Standing with the poor is that "wild space" that Sallie McFague used to describe Francis of Assisi's poverty.

Boff's expansion of the preferential option to include the Earth originates in his Franscican spirituality:

> The Franciscan universe is never dead, nor are things simply placed within the reach of possessive human grasp or tossed one alongside of another, without interconnections between them. Everything makes a grand symphony—and God is the conductor. All things are alive and personal; through intuition Francis discovered what we now know empirically, that all living things are brothers and sisters because they have the same genetic code. Francis experienced this consanguinity in a mystical way. Because we are brothers and sisters we love one another; violence among family members is never justified.[71]

Francis' spirituality based his universal compassion in the passion and crucifixion of Christ. This same theological orientation structures Boff's theological commitment to the poor and nature grounded in Christ.[72] He insists that the poor are "the most threatened of creation."[73] These two orientations—the preferential option for the poor and for the Earth—are intimately entwined in Boff's later theological writings. In *Ecology and Liberation*, he boldly insists, "Social injustice leads to ecological injustice and vise-versa."[74] He comprehends sin as the social rupture among human relations while ecological sin is the rupture between humanity and

69. Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 67.
70. Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 100.
71. Boff, *Cry of the Earth,* 4502.
72. Boff, *Christianity in a Nutshell*; Boff, *Cry of the Earth,* loc. 4473–4516.
73. Ibid., loc. 2450–2502.
74. Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 101–2.

nature. Ecological justice is intimately intertwined with social justice. For Boff, ecology is about relationality and relationship.

In *Cry of the Earth,* Boff returns to Francis' incarnational spirituality:

> The option for the poor, against their poverty and for their liberation, has constituted and continues to constitute the core of liberation theology. To opt for the poor entails a practice; it means assuming the place of the poor, their cause, their struggle and at the limit, often tragic fate.[75]

Boff looks to the dynamics of compassionate identification and solidarity with the poor and with the vulnerable creation in life of Francis, for he identifies the suffering poor or suffering animals with the crucified Christ.

But with Francis' spiritual; democracy of humanity, other life, and the cosmos, it is natural for Boff to look around and perceive the same social systems that oppresses the poor also injures and exploits the Earth:

> The earth is also crying out under the predatory and lethal machinery of our model of society and development. To hear these two interconnected cries (the Earth and the poor) and to see the same root cause that produces them, is to carry out integral liberation.[76]

Liberation for Boff includes the poor andthe Earth but liberation depends upon us, becoming actively engaged in a biotic democracy. "a democracy that is centered on life, one whose starting point is the most downtrodden human life."[77] He includes the mountains and rivers, plants, animals and the Earth "as new citizens participating in human common life and humans sharing in the common life of nature."[78]

Boff retrieves a notion that is central to Celtic Christianity that the Earth and all life is not punished because of a primal human sin and develops a Franciscan notion inherited from Duns Scotus that God's incarnation in Jesus was not due to sin, but that God intended the incarnation of Godself before creation. South American liberation theology emerged from listening to the cry of the poor, and ecological theology originates from listening to the cries of the water, the forests the animals, and the

75. Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, loc. 2381.
76. Ibid., loc. 2473.
77. Ibid., loc. 2487.
78. Ibid.

Earth. Human poverty is closely interwoven with the domination and exploitation of the Earth. In a lecture, Boff observed that liberation theology was born from listening to the cries of the poor, water, the animals and the Earth:

> We need to express these cries. The greatest poor person is planet Earth, Pachamama, (Mother Earth) which is devastated and oppressed, and should be included in liberation theology. As Sobrino has rightly said, "the earth is being crucified."[79]

He points out the cries of the Earth and the cries of the poor are intertwined. He has always fought for the poor, especially, the indigenous tribes in the Amazon, which have undergone resettlement and often times extermination as the rainforests are cut down and burned to make room for cattle-raising. Global addiction to beef has led to the destruction of vast treks of the Amazon.

Finally, Leonardo Boff honors the indigenous peoples and their ancestral wisdom of living with the Amazon lands, for he believes that the experience of God of the original peoples provide lessons for us of sacramental universe and potential bearers of theophany. For Boff, a tree is not just a tree but a living being with many arms (branches) and thousands of tongues (leaves). God is everywhere immanent in nature, and if we recover such a kinship with life and the Earth from the life experiences of the original peoples, we begin to listen to the cries of the Earth, and we live out an ethics of unlimited compassion and shared responsibility for the care of the Earth. One of the strengths of Boff's liberation theology, inclusive of the poor and the Earth, is his awareness that as the Earth is harmed, so the poor suffer even more so. He boldly claims:

> Without a spiritual revolution, it will be impossible to launch a new paradigm of connectedness. The new covenant finds its roots and site where it is verified in the depth of the human mind. That is where the lost link that reconstitutes the chain of beings and the cast cosmic community begins to be refashioned. This link in the chain is anchored in God, alpha and omega of the principal self-organization of the universe. This is where al sense of connectedness is fostered, and this is the permanent basis for the dignity of the Earth.[80]

79. Wolfart, "Liberation Theology and Ecological Concerns."

80. Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 139.

He maintains that we can only transform the oppression of the poor and the Earth proceeds from a spiritual conversion. This includes a change of heart motivated by a realization of our interconnectedness with human, all life, and the Earth herself. It is solidarity with the nature of the perichoretic (interrelated self-emptying love) relationality of the triune God, and he envisions, "the entire universe emanates from the divine relational interplay and is made image and likeness of the Trinity."[81] At the heart of Boff's green engaged spirituality for the poor and the vulnerable Earth is what Boff reminds us, the wild space and vision of Francis:

> The West has never seen such loving kindness and tenderness, as a form of life and integration, as in Francis of Assisi. Therefore, he continues to act as a cultural reference point for everyone who tries to establish a new alliance with creation. Dante called him the "sun of Assisi" that continues to shine throughout our own times, awakening in us the power and inclination to become more aware of, allied to, and compassionate toward all beings in creation.[82]

John Hart also notes that Francis of Assisi can inspire contemporary Christians as a catalyst for ecological change and care for the well-being of the Earth and its biotic communities.[83]

81. Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 11.

82. Ibid., 53.

83. Hart, *Sacramental Commons*, 39.