

Chapter One

FIND GOD EVERYWHERE



*“But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the
plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and
the fish of the sea will declare to you.” Job 12: 7-8*

Christian Animism

One morning, during a recent sabbatical in Costa Rica, my family and I sought a viewing of a quetzal in its natural habitat in the Monteverde Cloudforest Preserve. The quetzal is arguably the most beautiful bird in Central America. It is covered with shiny, metallic green feathers, bright red breast, and long streamers for its tail. Its glorious train is so long that when the male quetzal leaves its perch it often flies backward for a moment to avoid damaging its sweeping tail feathers. With the help of a guide, we found a female quetzal in the forest

working on preparing a nest in the decaying trunk of an old tree. Often aflight in the forest canopy, this resplendent creature had traveled down to the understory to make her nest. Glittering in the filtered light, the quetzal bounced from the tree trunk to a limb overhead while making a whining, plaintive song. Her call sounded like the yelp of a newborn puppy, yearning and soulful. We watched and listened to the quetzal for a long while until she sallied forth through the damp forest. I resonated deeply to the longing in the quetzal's song, and I wondered, Am I hearing God somehow in this mournful cry? In the haunting call of this bird, is God speaking to me as well, imploring me to open myself again to the beauty of creation—a beauty so movingly evoked by the quetzal's melody in the early morning of this montane forest? In the refrain of a Native American prayer,

Beauty is before me
And beauty is behind me
Above and below me hovers the beautiful
I am surrounded by it
I am immersed in it
In my youth I am aware of it
And in old age I shall walk quietly
The beautiful trail.¹

For me, the beautiful trail—the natural world—serves as the primary site for the sort of spiritual encounters observing the quetzal provided. Church sanctuaries and meditation rooms continue to be settings where such encounters take place, but I need to be outdoors or in a worship space that tracks the rhythms of the natural world in order to be brought

short and rendered expectant of a visit from another reality. “I enter a swamp as a sacred place—a *sanctum sanctorum*,” wrote Henry David Thoreau.² The whoosh of a strong wind, the taste of the salty sea on my tongue, the graceful movement of a monarch butterfly, the arc of the bright sky on a cold winter night, the screech of a red-tailed hawk—these events are preternatural overtures that greet me from another plane of existence. It is not that this other plane stands over and against everyday reality, but rather that commonplace existence is a window into another world that is *this* world but now experienced in its pregnant depths and always-already-there possibilities. Daily, embodied life is an icon through which the supersensible world is encountered in the here-and-now. Life is twofold. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke’s Gospel, who walked and talked with Jesus but did not recognize him until their understanding was changed—like the gift of bread and wine that is not experienced as God’s body and blood apart from its ritual transformation—the natural world stands mute until it is spiritually encountered as saturated with grace and meaning. In secular parlance, to be human is to dwell poetically on the Earth; in religious terms, to be human is to dwell mythically on the Earth.³ How to experience Earth mythico-poetically—how to find God through the daily miracle of ordinary existence—is the primary thrust of this book.

In the fourth century C.E., the theologian Eusebius wrote a massive multi-volume work titled *The Evangelical Preparation*. He argued that the pre-Christian Greek philosophers paved the way for the arrival of the Christian message. According to Eusebius, the writers of antiquity possessed an inchoate and rudimentary understanding of the nature of human longing for divinity that later Christian authors fully developed through

the teachings of the New Testament. Today, nature is my evangelical preparation for hearing the Gospel anew and afresh; it is the ground on which the biblical message makes meaning. Without the experience of creation as sacred place, the Christian story rings hollow and lacks the necessary resonance for my full comprehension of its power and scope. Long walks along the shoreline or sitting meditation in the woods opens me to the arrival of God's presence in a fashion that is always new and replete with unforeseen energy and opportunities.

The basic orientation that drives my appreciation of nature as fertile ground for receiving the Gospel teaching is what I call "Christian animism"—the biblically inflected conviction that all creation is infused with, or "animated," by God's presence. The term *animism* has its origins in the early academic study of the vernacular belief-systems of indigenous peoples in Africa and the Americas. It originated with nineteenth century British anthropologist E. B. Tylor, who used it to describe how primordial people attributed "life" or "soul" to all things, living and nonliving. Sharing resonances with the Latin word *animus*, which means soul or spirit, among other definitions, animism came to stand for the orienting worldview of indigenous communities that nonhuman nature is "ensouled" or "inspired" with sacred presence and power. As Graham Harvey writes, animism

is typically applied to religions that engage with a wide community of living beings with whom humans share this world or particular locations within it. It might be summed up by the phrase "all that exists lives" and, sometimes, the additional understanding that "all that lives is holy." As such the term *animism* is sometimes applied to

particular indigenous religions in comparison to Christianity or Islam, for example.⁴

What intrigues me about Harvey's definition is his assumption that monotheistic traditions such as Christianity should be regarded as distinct from animism. Initially this makes sense in light of the historic Christian proclivity to cast aspersions on the material world and the flesh as inferior to the concerns of the soul. Pseudo-Titus, for example, in an extra-canonical exhortation to Christian asceticism from late antiquity, urges its readers to cleanse themselves of worldly pollution by overcoming fleshly temptations: "Blessed are those who have not polluted their flesh by craving for this world, but are dead to the world that they may live for God!"⁵ At first glance, Christianity's emphasis on making room for God by denying the world and the flesh is at odds with the classical animist belief in the living goodness of all inhabitants of sacred Earth.

In the main, however, Christian faith offers its practitioners a profound vision of God's this-worldly identity. Harvey's presumption that Christianity and animism are distinct from one another is at odds with the biblical worldview that all things are bearers of divinity—the whole biosphere is filled with God's animating power—insofar as God signaled God's love for creation by incarnating Godself in Jesus and giving the Holy Spirit to indwell everything that exists on the planet. The miracle of Jesus as the living enfleshment of God in our midst—a miracle that is alongside the gift of the Spirit to the world since time immemorial—signals the ongoing vitality of God's sustaining presence within the natural order. God is not a sky-God divorced from the material world. As once God became earthly at the beginning of creation, and as once God

became human in the body of Jesus, so now God continually enfleshes Godself through the Spirit in the embodied reality of life on earth.

For many people, however, to identify Christianity as an animist religion is an odd connection to make. To make this identification, I am suggesting that the incarnational enfleshment of God in Jesus, and the biblical promise of the Spirit to indwell everything that exists, are the paradigmatic expressions of God's presence in all things throughout the created order. Christian animism, in a nutshell, is the conviction that everything God made is a bearer of the Holy Spirit. It is important to note, however, that Christian animism is not equivalent to other similar-sounding perspectives that are often equated or used interchangeably with the term *animism* in daily discourse. *Paganism* and *heathenism*, Latin and old English terms, respectively, stand for the *paganus* or country-dwelling people, and the "heathen" or people of the heath, both of which developed agricultural spiritualities of sacrifice and planting-and-harvest rituals prior to the arrival of Christianity in Western cultures. *Pantheism*, on the other hand, emphasizes that God and the cosmos are one and the same reality without remainder. Animism—now refracted through biblical optics—shares affinities with these viewpoints, but emphasizes with more force the indwelling of *Spirit* in all things—echoing its Latin root's notion of "soul" or "spirit"—so that the great expanse of the natural world can be re-envisioned as sacred and thereby deserving of our nurture and love.

Of the current models of the interconnected relation between God and Earth, *panentheism* is closest to Christian animism. Panentheist theologian Sallie McFague argues for the mutual, internal relatedness of God and creation but notes

that God is not *fully* realized in the material world; God is *in* the world, indeed, but God is not “totally” embodied within everyday existence. She says:

Pantheism says that God is embodied, necessarily and totally; traditional theism claims that God is disembodied, necessarily and totally; panentheism suggests that God is embodied but not necessarily or totally. Rather, God is sacramentally embodied: God is mediated, expressed, in and through embodiment, but not necessarily or totally.⁶

While my sensibility and McFague’s are deeply aligned, my Christian animism pushes her initial point further by suggesting that God is *fully* and *completely* embodied within the natural world. Here the emphasis does not fall on the limited relatedness of God and world such that God, finally, can escape the world. Rather the focus falls on the world as *thoroughly embodying* God’s presence. Unlike many Christian theologies which emphasize God’s *transcendence*, my position, akin to McFague’s, champions divine *subscendence*: God flowing out into the Earth, God becoming one of us in Jesus, God gifting to all creation the Spirit to infuse all things with divine energy and love. Now nothing is held back as God overflows Godself into the bounty of the natural world. Now all things are bearers of the sacred; everything that *is* is holy; each and every creature is a portrait of God.

This fully earthen enfleshment of God in nature hearkens back to language from the fourth of the seven great ecumenical councils of formative Christianity that continue to define the basic beliefs of Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians today. In 451 C.E., the ecumenical churches met in Chalcedon,

in what is today Western Turkey, to formulate a new understanding of how the divine and the human relate in Jesus of Nazareth. The historic churches decided that in the one person of Jesus, divinity and humanity are fully realized in an organic and permanent unity that admits no separation or confusion. The Chalcedonian Creed asks all Christians to confess to the “one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, alteration, division, separation; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved.”⁷ Jesus’ two natures—divine and human—come together in one personal life. Completely human and fully divine, the one whole person of Jesus of Nazareth is both a human being like the rest of humankind and, at the same time, the incarnation of God.

It is Chalcedonian Christianity’s theological grammar, so to speak, that shapes my model of how God and the Earth are inseparably unified. Without separation or confusion, God is fully embodied in creation, on the one hand, and God is still God, on the other. As Jesus is fully divine and fully human, so also is God fully God and fully infused within the lifeweb of our planetary existence. Like the union of divinity and humanity in Jesus, the natural world, while distinct from God with its own identity and integrity, is nevertheless fully interpenetrated by divine life. Creation, then, is God completely realizing Godself in carnal space in the same way that God fully realized Godself in the birth of Jesus. Jesus is the integrated person who unifies divinity and humanity; Earth is the ground that brings together material existence and God’s presence in unity and love. Or to phrase this point differently, as God’s Spirit *ensouls* all things with sacred purpose, so also are all things

the *enfleshment* of divine power and compassion on Earth. This dialectic of ensoulment (Earth is blessed as the living realization of divine grace) and enfleshment (God pours out Godself into the carnal reality of lived existence) is the main-spring of my Christian animist vision of reality.

The biblical ideas of creation, incarnation, and Spirit are the fountainhead of the Christian animist vision of the sacred character of the natural order. From this living source, to paraphrase Harvey, all that exists is alive, all that exists is good, all that exists is holy. We will not save what we do not love, and unless, as a culture, we learn to love and care for the gift of the created order again, the prospects of saving the planet, and thereby ourselves as well, are terrifyingly bleak. But insofar as God is in everything, and all things are inter-animated by divine power and concern, we can affirm that God is carnal, God is earthen, God is flesh. And with this animist affirmation, the will is empowered, and the imagination ignited, to fight against the specters of global warming and the loss of biodiversity as the great threats of our time.

Hungry for eruptions of the animist sacred, personally speaking, I mourn in our time the continued loss of the wider community of nature as the seed bed for full fruitions of God in my life. Selfishly, I don't want the natural world to suffer further degradation because I do not want God to die for me. For me, climate change and the loss of natural habitats mean that God's presence in the world is weakened and diminished as well. It is not that God is completely absent from me during this period of eco-squalor, but rather, as Martin Buber said about God in the death camps, I experience God in eclipse—I experience God being driven into hiding by laying waste to our common home.⁸ The burden of faith today is to maintain

the seemingly impossible contradiction between faith in God's earthen reality against the realization that Spirit is in retreat due to our continual assaults on God's fleshy presence.

In every respect, therefore, the Earth crisis is a spiritual crisis because without a vital, fertile planet it will be difficult to find traces of divine wonder and providence in the everyday order of things. When the final arctic habitat for the polar bear melts into the sea due to human-induced climate change, I will lose something of God's beauty and power in my life. When the teeming swell of equatorial amphibians can no longer adapt to deforestation and rising global temperatures, something of God will disappear as well, I fear. I am like the first peoples of the Americas who experienced the sacred within the Black Hills of what is now South Dakota, or on top of Mount Graham in southern Arizona, and then found that when these places were degraded, something of God was missing as well. Without these and other places charged with sacred power, I am lost on the Earth. Without still-preserved landed sites saturated with divine presence, I am a wanderer with no direction, a person without hope, a believer experiencing the death of God on a planet suffering daily from human greed and avarice.

Global Warming

If the current scientific consensus about climate change is accurate, then we are now living in an objectively apocalyptic situation in which our planet is teetering on the edge of disaster. Jim Hansen, top climate specialist at NASA, claims we have just ten years to reduce greenhouse gases before global warming reaches an unstoppable tipping point and transforms

our natural world into a “totally different planet.”⁹ Global warming—the trapping in Earth’s atmosphere of greenhouse gases such as CO² from car and power plant emissions—is causing air and ocean temperatures to rise catastrophically to new levels.

The specter of rising temperatures has recently been documented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a UN-sponsored group consisting of dozens of climate scientists from more than one hundred countries.¹⁰ While Earth’s temperature rose by one degree last century, the panel’s current predictions are that global temperatures will rise by three to ten degrees this century, resulting in the widespread melting of Arctic sea ice, mountain glaciers, and perhaps even the Greenland landmass. This mass melting could then raise sea levels, astonishingly, by one or two feet, or more, causing low-lying shore communities such as the San Francisco Bay Area and lower Manhattan to gradually disappear. Whole island chains, such as the Maldives off the coast of India, or the much-loved Venice, Italy, would eventually slip under water. Even now, climate change is contributing to a global die-off of species similar to the last mass extinction event over 65 million years ago when the great dinosaurs were wiped out. Today, biologists conservatively estimate that 30,000 plant and animal species per year are driven to extinction—even the polar bear is now proposed as a threatened species.¹¹

While science can analyze the record climate change since the industrial revolution—for example, that eleven of the last twelve years rank among the twelve warmest years of global temperature since 1850—it cannot provide the necessary moral foundation for answering the existential question—What difference does it make whether our children or grandchildren

survive the killer weather that our collective carbon dumping is destined to cause? Why care about future generations at all? In the words of the famous Schlitz beer ad of my youth, “You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can get!” Why not maximize one’s individual pleasure and stop worrying about possible consequences? Science cannot answer this question; only religion, or a value-system centered on higher goods, can provide this answer. While many scientists themselves are motivated by moral and even religious concerns, science cannot say—as the religions of Abraham claim—that the natural world is God’s creation, intricately designed for the sustenance and joy of all beings, and therefore humans are called upon to restrain their appetites in order to love and care for their planet home. In particular, science cannot assert, as religion can, that the Earth is *sacred* and therefore deserving of our protection. My assertion is that without such an all-encompassing, hyper-moral claim, the prospects for saving the planet are slim indeed. It is for this reason that I have written this book about Christianity and the rush to save the planet—to reshape our attitudes of indifference to the natural world by recovering the core biblical conviction that Earth is holy ground deserving of our love and protection.

In the face of this global crisis, therefore, science is not enough. Like our chronic smoking behavior from a previous generation, we now know that our consumer-oriented, carbon-intensive lifestyles are killing us—and many other species as well—but we cannot stop our behavior. We are falling-down carbon drunks, fossil fuel addicts who cannot break our collective addiction cycle. Only religion—or some alternative religion-like moral system with global interests—can save us now. Only religion—or some other overarching belief-system

committed to the health of all living things—has the moral authority and symbolic potency to break our shared carbon addiction cycle by motivating us to look beyond our private self-interest and to the greater good of the planet itself.¹²

It's not international terrorism, but global warming that is the most dangerous security threat to civilization as we know it. Yet, otherwise powerful nations seem impotent to stop the coming cataclysm. So, in the face of chronic political dysfunction, religious congregations are rising up to confront the challenge. These communities of faith have the power to gather the fragments of human vision for a just and sustainable world into a coherent moral narrative that can enable the type of revolutionary social change needed in this historical moment. Precisely at this point in our history when the Earth is most under siege, people of faith have become acutely aware of the ancient ecological wisdom at the roots of their religious traditions that can motivate the lifestyle and public policy changes necessary for saving the Earth. Religious communities are waking up to the tasks of climate rescue and planetary justice in our time.

While I will allude to different religions in this book, I primarily want to analyze how Christianity is awakening to its responsibility to fight global warming and save the planet. No longer relegated to a long list of special interests, today care for creation has become a core moral issue for biblically centered Christians concerned about climate change and the loss of global biodiversity. This newly embraced passion for the well-being of the natural world is provoking a seismic shift in values within American culture and politics. One of the reasons that Barack Obama won the 2008 U.S. presidential election is that the electorate was dismayed over the Republican Party's and

former President Bush's failure, among other issues, to break America's dependence on fossil fuels by developing a sustainable energy policy that could blunt the impact of climate change. Oddly, George W. Bush seemed both aware of the problem and helpless to stop it. "America is addicted to oil," Mr. Bush exclaimed in his 2006 State of the Union address, calling for new but vague forms of energy independence. However, this hazy call for a different energy policy was belied by the former president's cozy relations with Big Oil, his opposition to anti-pollution enforcement, and his ongoing receipt of tens of million of dollars in oil and gas donations during the time of his Texas governorship and U.S. presidency. Witnessing the president lecture American citizens about the country's dependency on fossil fuels ("America is addicted to oil") was like watching a recovering drunk opine about responsible drinking—hypocrisy of this sort renders such calls to change suspicious at best.

As he struggled to articulate a sound and sustainable energy policy, George W. Bush's evangelical Christian base began to crack early in his second term over which priorities should govern the conservative movement in coming years.¹³ The stress was due in part to conflicting attitudes about the nature of the biblically predicted "end times" and how Christians, and the politicians they support, should make policy in light of Christ's supposed imminent return to Earth in judgment. Some traditional Christians promulgate a belief in Dispensationalism that views the planet as dispensable within God's master plan—the belief that God has ordained history to unfold according to divinely prescribed ages or "dispensations" in which the final age, the end times, will be ushered in by Jesus' return, the rapture of true Christians, and the firey

destruction of the Earth.¹⁴ But many Christians, including many evangelicals, reject this sort of Dispensationalist apocalypticism in favor of a return to the biblical ideal of creation care: restoring Earth as a garden of beauty blessed by God and tended by God's special caretakers—us—the human community. As conservative activist Matthew Sleeth writes:

I am convinced that when the church becomes fully engaged in the problems of creation care, we will overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. As the thirty million evangelical Christians—and all those who consider themselves people of faith—grow in their understanding that God holds us accountable for care of his creation, we will begin to see positive changes on an unprecedented scale.¹⁵

Indeed, a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* featured interviews of so-called “green evangelicals” who now see a “biblical mandate for government action to stop global warming.”¹⁶ And a just-released national survey indicates that 35 percent of U.S. religious conservatives identify protecting the environment as a top priority.¹⁷ Moving beyond polarizing social issues, such as homosexuality, abortion, and stem-cell research, churches on the left *and* the right are articulating a Christian response to global warming by promoting renewable energy, community-based agriculture, and conservation of natural resources. This book, then, consists of both analysis *of* this change and advocacy *for* this change—a call to move beyond the impasse between *red* state and *blue* state politics by embracing the power of *green* religion to engender civic renewal and environmental health in our time.

The Greening of the Churches

The specter of global warming and ecological depredation haunt the contemporary landscape. But, practically speaking, what hands-on activities are Christian and other congregations doing to promote climate recovery and environmental justice? Today, many North American churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship are transforming themselves into forward-based earth-care centers committed to protecting God's creation, sustainable lifestyles, and safeguarding the public health.¹⁸ In the wider Christian community, powerful new voices for change and hope are emerging. The mission of the states-based Interfaith Power and Light is to blunt the impact of global warming by helping churches conserve energy resources; the IPL provides free energy audits, alternative power advice, and green building upgrades for religious centers seeking to overcome their reliance on nonrenewable energy. The National Religious Partnership for the Environment publishes green educational curricula for the major branches of the Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faiths; it also brings together religious leaders, corporate heads, environmental activists, and scientists to strategize about how faith-based public policy focused on sustainability can blunt the impacts of climate change. The Evangelical Environmental Network, in part, emerged from the 2002 "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign that linked transportation choices with following Jesus. Causing splits within the Republican evangelical voting bloc, the EEN recently called for mandatory greenhouse gas emissions caps based on the biblical precept that Christians should be good stewards of creation. Finally, the Sierra Club and the National Council of Churches have joined forces to mobilize

faith communities to stop drilling in Alaska and to promote clean water campaigns in the American Southwest. The Sierra Club's Faith Partnerships Program has created numerous faith-and-action cells to address immediate environmental problems and the long-term crisis of global warming.

Consider the following case study of a Protestant church in the upper Midwest as illustrative of the real changes that congregational environmental engagement can bring about in our time. This past fall I traveled to Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, to both participate in and witness the church's ongoing transformation into a green congregation. To this end, Frame Memorial is regularly incorporating environmental stewardship teachings into worship and educational programs; developing an extensive recycling program for paper, cell phones, and eyeglasses, among other items; reducing their own consumption of nonrenewable forms of energy by converting their incandescent light bulbs to compact fluorescents; and practicing good earth-keeping on their own grounds through the establishment of a native-plantings shade garden, the use of non-toxic cleaners and fertilizers, and the purchase of fair trade products. Frame Memorial's good example is spreading outward into the community. Church members employ Watts Up? meters to measure their electricity use in their homes. They have joined forces with a dozen other places of worship to form an Interfaith Community of the Earth to support other congregations' "green teams." They have partnered with the municipality of Stevens Point to implement a sustainability systems approach in all aspects of town planning, from land use and wastewater treatment to green building design and alternative modes of transportation.

What I find most striking about Frame Memorial is the implementation of a series of “Season of Creation” services and sermons in the fall of each year. Pioneered by Norman Habel, the Season of Creation has recently emerged as a new season in the church year when different communities of life-forms—oceans, sky, soil, wetlands, animals, birds, trees—are celebrated as the power and presence of God in creation.¹⁹ Pastor Susan Gilbert Zencka crafts six services in September and early October around the theme of the blessings of creation and our responsibilities towards its care and preservation. Not content with a once-a-year creation-based ritual or an occasional ecological service project, she has brought her passion for Earth community into the heart of the church’s liturgical calendar, core worship experience, and evangelical mission. Her sermons are both lyrically playful and morally serious. She includes conversations between God and an angel about the virtues of native grasslands, musings about the meaning of storms and floods in our lives, and a paean to the wonder of coral reefs and a lament about their degradation through our dumping of carbon into the oceans. One such sermon, “The Web of Creation and Dollar Stores,” is a powerful argument for the interconnectedness and inherent worth of all things. Building on her earlier sermon regarding the sacredness of wetlands, Zencka maintains that nothing within creation is a commodity per se because every biotic community is charged with sacred presence. All life is holy:

So what we have learned about wetlands on our own reveals the same truth that we see in the Bible—God values even that which humans do not value. Each piece of creation is good, and it is all of value to the whole

of it. We are only beginning to understand how life is interwoven, and how the web of creation cannot be disassembled without damage. . . . All creation is charged with divine presence—this is the understanding woven through Scripture, which is generally known as panentheism: God in all things. This is not pantheism, that God is the same as all things, but panentheism, God is in all things. This does not mean that everything is the same, as in the dollar store—everything a dollar, no matter what it is. No, in God’s economy, each thing has value in and of itself—they are not commodities for humans, everything is created, and has its own purpose. Light is good as light, water is good as water, earth is good, plants and animals and fish and birds are good, and humans too are good—there is intrinsic value to each thing in creation. . . . They have value in themselves, so we do not consume more than we need, we do not consume in a way that is unsustainable, we treat animals with respect and care, and we treat each other with respect and care.²⁰

Perhaps some Christians will think Pastor Zencka has gone too far in her valorization of creation as holy ground. To envision nature as sacred—or to say, as Zencka does, that “all creation is charged with divine presence”—may appear to undercut God’s role as the unique and absolute bearer of sacred worth in a world of diverse life forms that only have relative value in relation to God. Some may feel that only God is worthy of devotion and praise; only God has absolute value in a world of relative things. From this perspective, to venerate Earth community as sacred borders on the extreme of a type of paganism or idolatry that dare not speak its name.

It is instructive to contrast this potential criticism of Zencka's earthen spirituality with a recent article in *E: The Environmental Magazine* entitled "The Scoop on Dirt: Why We Should All Worship the Ground We Walk On."²¹ The article argues that soil, while generally unrecognized and taken for granted, is essential to the wellbeing of life on Earth. Soil traps and recharges rainwater for drinking purposes. It provides habitat for numerous plants and animals. It recycles decaying organic matter, which in turn becomes a source of new energy. And soil functions as a giant carbon sink for trapping dangerous carbon dioxide emissions that would otherwise escape into the atmosphere. As Lester Brown puts it, "The thin layer of topsoil covering the planet's land surface is the foundation of civilization."²² Unheralded and neglected, soil is worthy of our respect, even our adoration and reverence, because it is foundational to the life-sustaining ecosystems we rely on for daily sustenance.

I find it ironic that the modern secular environmental movement is attaching sacred significance to soil and earth—that we should, as it were, worship the ground we walk on—at the same time that some Christians remain troubled by the ascription of holiness to anything other than God. God's demand in the Torah that Israel should not worship the image of any earthen lifeform, and Paul's similar denunciation in the New Testament of idolaters who worship creatures rather than the Creator, seem to cut off any return path back to a view of God as fundamentally nature-centered and the Earth as holy ground worthy of our reverence and devotion. But the strange and wonderful biblical traditions of the green Jesus and the carnal Spirit within Christian testimony do offer resources for precisely this return route—a road less traveled, where Jesus

and Spirit are depicted as fully embodied in the Earth and the natural world itself is reenvisioned as sacred place.

The witness of Christian scripture and traditions is to the world as an abode of divinity, the home of life-giving Spirit, God's here-and-now dwelling place where the warp and woof of everyday life is sacred. God is not a dispassionate and distant potentate, as in classical feudal theology, who exercises dominion over the universe from some far-removed place. Rather, in and through this planet that is our common home, God, now grounded in the Earth, is earnestly working with us to heal the planet. It is not blasphemous, therefore, to say that nature is sacred. It is not mistaken to find God's presence in all things. To speak in the language of Christian animism, it is not wrong to reenvision Christianity as continuous with the worldviews of the first peoples who bore witness to and experienced divinity everywhere—who saw and felt the Spirit alive in every rock, tree, animal, and body of water they encountered. Christianity can now do the same, and Christians can say, “Sacred is the ground we stand on; holy is the land where we are planted; blessed is the Earth within which we live and move and have our being.” Without this affirmation—without the hope and energy and long-term staying power this affirmation brings to communities of faith—our capacity to heal the planet's ability to sustain future generations is badly undermined.

“We are on the precipice of climate system tipping points beyond which there is no redemption,” wrote Jim Hansen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, in 2003. As we reach these catastrophic tipping points, what will human existence on Earth look like in ten or fifteen years from now? Chronic heat waves will provoke megadroughts and render daily life unbearable at times. Arctic permafrost

and sea ice will crack and disappear, causing islands and shorelines to shrink and vanish. Continued carbon dumping will render the world's oceans more acidic and ultimately lethal to coral reefs and fish stocks. Melting permafrost in Siberia and elsewhere will release huge amounts of methane into the atmosphere, resulting in killer hurricanes and tsunamis. Biodiverse ecosystems will collapse and produce dead monocultures of invasive species, where the basic dynamic of plant pollination itself is undermined. And a hotter and less forgiving planet will cause crop failures and large stretches of arable land to become desert, mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue fever and malaria to reach epidemic proportions, and mass migrations of tens of millions of people as rising sea levels destroy homes and communities. In the near future, we will look back at greenhouse gas-induced events, such as the European heat wave of 2003 that killed 30,000 people or Hurricane Katrina in 2005—the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history that killed 1,800 people—as telltale portends of the coming storm. We will remember other positive environmental changes—the banning of DDT in the U.S. in the 1960s, the general eradication of ozone-depleting CFCs in the 1980s—and then wonder why we were not able to extricate ourselves from the Big Oil economy that was even then destroying the planet. In 2015, 2020, or 2025, we will rue the day that we allowed deniers of global warming to confuse the public into thinking that the current climate change is a natural cycle. We will recall the definitive reports by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2007, based on tens of thousands of studies by hundreds of climate researchers over many years of investigation, which made clear to us that our fossil fuel economy

is the most important factor driving the dangerous climate changes we now see all around us.

With an alarming sense of urgency, we will know then, even as we know now, that it is time to act.

Every generation, to borrow Thomas Berry's phrase, has its great work. Every generation has an overarching sense of responsibility for the welfare of the whole that gathers together people and societies across their cultural and ideological differences. In this generation, our great work will be to fight global warming by reenvisioning our relationship to Earth, not as exploiters but as biotic kinspeople with the myriad life-forms that populate our common home. This is the mandate of our time. As Berry writes,

The Great Work before us, the task of moving modern industrial civilization from its present devastating influence on the Earth to a more benign mode of presence, is not a role that we have chosen. It is a role given to us, beyond any consultation with ourselves. We did not choose. We were chosen by some power beyond ourselves for this historical task. We did not choose the moment of our birth, who our parents will be, our particular culture or the historical moment when we will be born. . . . The nobility of our lives, however, depends upon the manner in which we come to understand and fulfill our assigned roles.²³

Every generation has a sacred calling to seize the moment and battle the forces of oppression and degradation so that future generations can live richer and more meaningful lives. The great work of our generation will be to develop inspired

models of sustainable development that promote ecological and climate justice for all of God's children. Sustainability is a proleptic, forward-looking category that focuses on the long-term viability of working organizational models, namely: How can institutions today secure and manage the labor and environmental resources necessary for achieving their economic goals while also preserving the capacity of future human communities and ecosystems to survive and flourish? Native American folklore often speaks of animal and related resource management practices done with an eye toward their impact on the seventh generation to come. Seventh-generation full-cost business and accounting practices relocate the goal of financial profitability within the context of fair labor performance, responsible consumption of energy, and careful management of waste.²⁴ Sustainable development, then, articulates policies that address this generation's vital needs without sacrificing the ability of future generations to meet their own vital needs. For highly industrialized economies like our own, sustainability will be predicated on kicking our habits of dependence on fossil fuels, the primary source of global climate change. This book will provide the theological and moral foundations for practical responses to weaning ourselves off unsustainable coal, oil, and natural gas supplies in order to save the planet for future generations.

Religious faith is uniquely suited to fire the imagination and empower the will to make the necessary changes that can break the cycle of addiction to nonrenewable energy. Many of the great social movements in this country's history—the abolitionist groundswell of the nineteenth century, the suffragist associations of the early twentieth century, and, most notably in recent history, the civil rights movement in the 1950s and

1960s—were energized by prophetic Christian leaders who brought together their scriptural values and passion for justice to animate a moral force for change more powerful than any other force to stop them. To paraphrase William James, religion today, in the face of cataclysmic climate change, must become the moral equivalent of war by becoming more disciplined, more resourceful, and more visionary in fighting the causes of global ecological depredation. The supreme calling of our time will be for all of us to find a spiritually grounded and morally compelling approach to engaging the problem of climate change—and to do so now, before it is too late.