

Interview with Mark Wallace *Green Christianity*

FortressPress: What is Christian animism and what does sex have to do with it?

Mark Wallace: This book makes a case for Christian animism—the biblically inspired belief that all of creation is filled with and animated by God’s presence. This is my baseline conviction for doing theology in an age of climate change in particular and indifference to the needs and pleasures of the body in general. At first glance it may appear that classical Christianity, and the animist world-view of first peoples who regarded all things as “ensouled” with sacred presence, are polar opposites. In the main, however, Christian faith offers its practitioners a profound vision of God’s this-worldly identity. By taking up the “green Jesus” and the “carnal Spirit” traditions in this book, I hope to show, scripturally speaking, 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. 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 re-ality of life on Earth—including the many sensual pleasures of the flesh that accompany earthly life.

The book, therefore, oscillates between celebrating the good creation God has made and exulting in the desires of the flesh that characterize intimate, sexual relations between persons. In turn, it suggests that failure to love and pleasure the body has blunted the ability of people of faith to experience their organic kinship with the wider biotic order, thereby undercutting the spiritual basis of many persons’ attempts to live sustainably in Earth community.

The joy of sensual life is biblically rooted. In this regard, consider the Hebrew Bible book, Song of Solomon, a lyric poem between two lovers sated with lush erotic imagery. It begins in a gushing torrent of desire, “O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than wine!” (1:2), continues with impassioned descriptions of the beloved’s body, “Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand; your breasts are like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples” (7:2,8), and ends on a meditative note about the all-consuming power of love and romance, “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If someone offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned” (8:7). Rich amorous relations between lovers is God’s ideal of human fulfillment. Love songs such as Song of Solomon are the basis for the book’s call to Earth-centered, body-loving Christian faith. Faith that values God in all things—every animal, rock, tree, body of water, and airy atmosphere that makes up life on Earth—is faith that takes joy in the delights of bodily pleasure within human community as well.

FP: Why did you write *Green Christianity* and what are your hopes for it?

MW: My core hope in writing this book is to inspire readers to make joyous, sustainable living bedrock to their identities as people of faith. This is not a burden to be borne but a spiritual discipline of love and hope. Christianity, still the founding religious tradition in Western culture, is essential to converting Americans’ consumer-oriented lifestyles toward responsible Earth

stewardship. Large-scale change is difficult, but change is possible. Many of the great social movements in American history—from the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century to the civil rights movement in the twentieth—have been ignited by the moral vision of prophetic Christians. In turn, the green movement of the twenty-first century will only become successful when churches and places of worship everywhere make verdant living and body-centered values essential to their identity and mission. The day is coming when it will become as morally unthinkable for Christians to drive a gas-guzzling car or use inefficient fossil fuel-based energy as it would be for Christians today to own slaves or insist that women be denied the right to vote. Like these previous seismic shifts in Christianity’s moral topography, the green movement as a religious revolution is beginning to take shape as well.

Thomas Friedman writes that “green is the new red, white, and blue.” Crossing over the political divide that separates red state and blue state Christians, green Christianity brings together opposing parties into a common commitment to Earth-centered religious practice and civic engagement. The book articulates what I take to be the central claim of Christianity—namely, that God incarnates Godself in human flesh—which means that God exists in and through the planet, that Earth itself is divinely in-spir(it)-ed. The Earth, in a word, is sacred. Rediscovering the natural world and our bodies as holy ground is the baseline conviction that will sustain the long struggle by people of faith to build a livable, green, and durable world that future generations can enjoy.

I want this book to challenge some critics’ assumptions that religion is a strictly personal issue and thereby irrelevant or even hostile to community-based goods. Since the Enlightenment, religion’s cultured critics insist that faith is a sectarian, private matter unrelated to public life. And since 9/11, the cry by religion’s detractors is that “religion kills.” My case is that spiritually grounded environmental beliefs and practices are a positive social force because they encourage citizens to subordinate private concerns to larger goods. Such beliefs and practices have the potential to revive both Christian experience and liberal societies at a time when civic life is characterized by cynicism and despair. Indeed, my hope in writing this book will be to demonstrate how religious faith—now wedded to the green movement—can stimulate wider public commitments to sustainable living and democratic renewal at a time when global environmental deterioration is threatening the future of our planet.

FP: To your mind, what is the chief way Christianity has contributed to our current environmental crisis?

MW: The environmental crisis, in germ, has its origins in the embodiment crisis that defines Western culture. We are not at home on Earth because we are not at home in our own bodies. Because many of us have lost the capacity to love and pleasure our bodies, our ability to live humanely and sustainably within the wider body of nature has been blunted as well. Sadly, Christianity has inculcated in many of us hostility or indifference to everyday existence—life on Earth and in our bodies. Historically, Christian thinkers cast aspersions on the material world and the flesh as inferior to the concerns of the soul. *Pseudo-Titus*, for example, 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!” At first glance, Christianity’s emphasis on making room for God by denying the world and the flesh is at odds with my book’s focus on the living goodness, beauty, and sensual delights of inhabiting with others this sacred Earth.

But Christianity’s central belief focuses on the body—namely, that God became flesh in Jesus and thereby becomes one of us, a mortal, breathing life-form who experiences the joy and suffering of life on Earth. And Christianity’s primary sacred document, the Bible, is suffused with rich, ecological imagery that stretches from the Cosmic Potter in Genesis who fashions Adam from the dust of the ground to the river of life in Revelation that flows from the throne of God, bright as crystal, vivifying the tree of life that yields its fruit to all of Earth’s inhabitants. Christianity has long been a religion that invests the natural world with sacred meaning.

Christianity is also a religion that privileges amatory relationships, even though many people of faith have been trained to live the spiritual life drained of any erotic charge. Sexless, bloodless, humorless, divorced from all things fleshy and visceral—the life of faith often has been seen as a pitched battle between God’s ways and human lust, the divine order and the lower order of base instincts, the heavenly world of bodiless bliss and this world of earthly drives and passions.

The Bible—or its interpretations—has much to do with this ugly division. Traditions of biblical reading that ignore, or make war against, Earth-based and body-loving religion have contributed greatly to some Christians’ unease with locating physical pleasure on a spiritual foundation. Indeed, particular stories about the excesses of sexual license have been isolated to form an anti-sexual, anti-bodily template that shapes and deforms contemporary religious experience. The evils of unchecked sexual desire are purportedly illustrated in Adam and Eve’s recognition of their nakedness and sexuality in the garden after they have sinned; Queen Jezebel, stereotyped as a heavily made-up seductress, who manipulated the men around her; and Salome, who danced lasciviously before Herod and persuaded him to offer her whatever she wanted, which turned out to be the head of John the Baptist.

The irony, however, is that the Bible is suffused with stories about the warmth and beauty of sexual intimacy that move beyond these narratives’ prohibitions against lust and seduction. My book profiles some of these accounts of love and affection that run like a red thread throughout the biblical story, challenging the common notion that religion and erotic pleasure are a contradiction in terms. Correspondingly, and so the book’s thesis, my hope is that desire for bodily pleasure and well-being, in ourselves and others, will liberate us to nurture the health of our planet home as well.

FP: You espouse many local activities to address climate change, but will they even reach a scale that actually could save the planet? What are your true hopes for the “local movement”?

MW: I don’t know whether communities of faith can ramp up fast enough to join with other like-minded groups to save the planet, at least for human habitation. I do know that unless a massive social and religious movement to save Earth takes place on the scale of what William James called “the moral equivalent of war,” we will not be able to blunt the effects of global warming in our time and the times of our children and grandchildren. Only when religious

communities have joined forces with secular forces for change—think here again about the abolitionist or civil rights movements—will there be the moral capital in place to motivate people to look beyond their private interests to public goods. Protecting Earth is a public good. But since this task is wider and more complicated than most other regional public welfare tasks we perform (building roads, improving schools, even managing the global economy) it is hard for any one country or global organization to make this task central to their identity. Churches and other faith groups must make creation justice basic to their mission in order for this global work to be more than a mere political problem. Rather, it must become the driving moral challenge of our time. Only when we feel this sense of moral and spiritual urgency—only when the religious community commits itself wholesale to protecting the Gift of Life itself—will we be able to look beyond parochial interests to addressing this truly global problem.

The specters of global warming and ecological depredation haunt the contemporary landscape. Practically speaking, however, Christian and other congregations are now doing a lot 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, promoting sustainable lifestyles, and safeguarding public health.

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 American 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, for example, to stop energy firms from drilling in Alaska and 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.

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. Our challenge is: How can governments and 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. 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 provides 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. This is the great work of our time, and communities of faith are beginning to take strategic and tactical steps toward saving Earth as God's gift of joyous sustenance for all living things.

FP: What are you reading now?

MW: Three books come to mind. Margaret D. Kamitsuka's *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity* (Fortress 2010) is a stirring and edgy analysis of the place of love, desire and sexual expression within historical and contemporary Christian faith. Highly recommended.

Joanne Pearson's *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex, and Magic* (Routledge 2007) explores the points of intersection within, and important differences between, Paganism (or Wicca) spirituality and Christianity. Thought-provoking and beautifully written.

Finally, Ian McEwen, author of *Atonement*, has a new novel entitled *Solar* (Doubleday 2010), which is a hilarious and serious story of the life of Michael Beard, a brilliant, bumbling Nobel laureate physicist who seeks to save the planet from global warming in a high-tech scheme that just might work. Read it, laugh out loud, and see for yourself.