

## PREFACE



This book is an exercise in 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. The book will oscillate between celebration of the good creation God has made and exulting in the pleasures of the flesh that characterize intimate, sexual relations between persons. In turn, it will suggest 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 book is divided into six chapters. Chapters 1 through 5 each offers a model for Earth- and body-affirming living based on spiritual values, while chapter 6 is a commentary on the documentary film *Renewal*, which celebrates the

emerging religious environmental movement. This important film comes with the book. *Green Christianity's* core chapters provide five ways to a sustainable future and conclude with an analysis of the film's visually powerful case studies of practical green living.

While not obvious at first glance, Christianity, at its core, has always been a fleshly, earthly, material religion. Everyday, bodily existence—food and drink, life and death, humans and animals, land and sky—is recalled in countless rituals and stories as the primary medium through which God relates to humankind and the wider Earth community. Christianity's central ritual is a group meal that remembers the saving death of Jesus by celebrating the good gifts of creation—eating bread and drinking wine. Its central symbol is a cross made out of wood—two pieces of lumber lashed together as the means and site of Jesus' crucifixion. Its 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-body 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; Potiphar's wife, who tries to seduce Jacob and then accuses him of rape; 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. Consider the following 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.

In Genesis, Rebekah sees Isaac in the fields of the Negev one evening. She is intrigued by his presence. "Who is the man over there," she asks Isaac's servant, "walking in the field to meet us?" (24:65). When the servant tells Isaac of Rebekah's

interests, “then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (24:67). In the beginning, the narrative of Isaac and Rebekah is a love story of heart-warming longing and tenderness.

The Song of Solomon is a lyric poem between two lovers sated with lush erotic imagery. It begins in a gushing torrent of desire, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his 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 two breasts are like two fawns, and the scent of your breath like apples” (7:1,3), 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 one offered for love all the wealth of one’s house, it would be utterly scorned” (8:7). Rich, amorous relations between lovers is God’s ideal of human fulfillment.

In the New Testament, Jesus’ first miracle in the Gospel of John is changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana. When the wine ordered for the wedding runs out, Jesus transformed the contents of six large stone jars into an excellent *vino*. The wine steward then commended the bridegroom for his good taste: “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now” (2:10). Following this story, Jesus is called a bridegroom in John, and in the other gospels he self-identifies as such (e.g., Luke 5:33-39), and claims his mission is to come into the world “eating and drinking” (Luke 7:34), in order to rebut the criticism that he is not fasting enough and takes too much pleasure in life. At the inauguration of his

public ministry, Jesus blesses a marriage ceremony, celebrates God's good gifts of wine and food for human enjoyment, and names himself the groom (and by implication, the chef) in the gustatory, conjugal festival of loving relations between partners, family, and friends he seeks to lead.

The Johannine wedding miracle can be paired with another narrative about Jesus and amorous desire, the story of the unnamed woman who wets Jesus' feet with her tears and hair in the home of Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7. "And a woman in the city . . . stood behind [Jesus] at his feet, weeping, began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet, and anointed them with ointment" (vs. 37-38). At this point, Jesus senses Simon's disapproval of this action, and says to him, "You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, hence she has known great love" (vs. 46-47). Jesus luxuriates in this woman's touch. She comes to his feet—in the Bible, as we will see in chapter 3, feet is code language for genitals—and lovingly soaks them with her tears and wipes them with her hair. This transgressive act of brazen devotion stirs Jesus to rebuke his dinner host by publicly enjoying the kissing woman's lavish ardor.

Soul versus body, mind over matter, chastity against lust—the Bible has been read, wrongly, in my judgment, as undergirding the time-honored hierarchy that pits God and purity over and against sex and shame. But these stories of longing and desire—stories of holy lust, as it were—remind the faithful that sexual expression is one of the many gifts bestowed on the human family that binds us to the Earth and one another in mutual joy and soulful, heartfelt yearning.

The central claim of this book is that religion has a special role to play in saving the planet and loving the body. Religion, uniquely, has the power to fire the imagination and empower the will to nurture everyday sensual life. The embodiment crisis—the crisis of unsustainable living on Earth rooted in contempt of our bodies—is a crisis not of the *head*, but of the *heart*. The problem is not that we do not know how to stop climate change or love our flesh again, but rather that we lack the inner desire to redirect our culture toward a sustainable, body-affirming future. This book is a call to hope, not despair—a call for readers to discover meaning and purpose in their lives through a spiritually charged commitment to saving the Earth and loving themselves. Green desire for a verdant planet and bodily well-being are now possible because all things are envisioned as the enfleshment of God in the world around us.

The book is centered around an argument for “Christian animism”—the biblically inspired belief that all of creation is “animated” by God’s presence—as the baseline conviction necessary for doing theology in an age of climate change in particular and contempt for the body in general. Insofar as Christianity, at times, has stood for belief in a sky-God far removed from earthly concerns, 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 within the biblical witness, I will 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. 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—including the many sensual pleasures of the flesh that accompany earthly life.

The Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation, and Spirit, therefore, are the seedbed of my Christian animist vision of the sacred character of the natural order. From this living source, 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 interanimated by divine power and compassion, we will be on fire to fight against the specters of global warming and the accompanying loss of biodiversity as the great threats of our time.

As the bedrock religious tradition in Western culture, Christianity 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 everywhere make sustainable 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 standard light bulbs as it is 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, the new green Christianity brings together opposing parties into a common commitment to Earth-centered religious practice and civic engagement. Here I articulate again 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 inspir(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, verdant, and durable world that future generations can enjoy.

In this way I hope 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 is 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.