

Before Nature: A Christian Spirituality

H. Paul Santmire (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014)

Reviewed by Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig

When theologians teaching at Lutheran colleges, universities and seminaries held a conference in 2012 to assess and discuss ecological theology, they called upon H. Paul Santmire to review the emergence of ecological theology among Lutherans. Lutheran churches made the first public theological statements on ecology in 1970 and 1972. One of their theologians, Joseph Sittler, beginning in 1954, was the pioneer of earth-regarding theology. Santmire was a young theologian working alongside Sittler for the 1972 ecology statement by the Lutheran Church in America, having completed *Brother Earth: Nature, God and Ecology in a Time of Crisis* in 1970. By 1985 Santmire published his most important work, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*. With *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* in 2000, and *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* in 2008, Santmire finished his eco-theological corpus – except for a book that “has the feel of my last”: *Before Nature: A Christian Spirituality*.

Adapting the Jesus Prayer from Orthodox spirituality, Santmire offers a Trinity Prayer for daily practice that dwells within and upon the connections of Christian faith to the natural world. Santmire offers specific guidance for praying the Trinity Prayer in Chapter Two, Chapter Ten and the Epilogue of *Before Nature*. The Prologue and Chapter One introduce his personal connections to nature and Christianity, and his purposes for the book. Chapters Three, Four and Five frame the ambiguities and tensions of praying within the human condition, including doubt, a Christian sense of sin, and noetic limitations. The rest of the chapters discuss aspects of Trinitarian theology in relationship to creation and redemption, including interesting summaries of Santmire’s appropriations of Paul Tillich and

Gordon Kaufman, his teachers, and other favorite theologians: Elizabeth Johnson, Jurgen Moltmann, Martin Luther and others.

An accomplished preacher and teacher, Santmire fills the entire book with colorful imagery and stories to which almost anyone could relate. Yet in the discursive Chapters Six through Nine his review of significant theological issues could keep a discussion group of pastors or seminarians busy for a season. Theologians may spy unfinished and open issues that ecological theologians – not only Santmire – face. But it is interesting to see how Santmire makes associations between doctrines, biblical texts, liturgy and ethics in order to interpret his overall amazement and appreciation of nature and God.

The book therefore is like a walk or tour with Santmire along which he introduces theological observations and religious associations. For instance, he invites readers to a hand-mown field he loves, stops to tell a story, and shares his sense of how holy is the world. Or, readers ascend with Santmire in a tower above a prolific canopy over a cemetery. From that perch Santmire recommends incarnational theology and spirituality to defy any spiritual ascent toward disembodiment. One of Santmire's strongest sections is on the incarnational theology of Martin Luther (pp 135-143). Theologically-informed readers could use *Before Nature* to approach a string of conversation-starters about Trinitarian analogies; perception of the Trinity in God's created world; and related theological issues. Others, however, may simply find a kind voice framing Christian imagery and language with respect for the world that science and poetry also describe.

Santmire recommends his prayerful Trinitarian spirituality to all spiritual seekers in an environmentally troubled world. Early in the book Santmire makes a warm invitation to any who may be estranged or unfamiliar with organized Christianity. He suggests to church leaders that they could follow his example: to be interested in and engaged with the environmental plight of the world opens common cause with others. Like his previous works, Santmire's *Before Nature* honestly identifies neglect and culpability of Christians and Christianity toward the environmentally damaged and socially troubled world, but also details a wealth of Christian belief and practice which exhibits and enhances appreciation for nature and the here-and-now drama of God's abiding care for the world.

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