

A Sacramental Universe

The following is an adaptation from the chapter “The Sacred and the Commodified” in Larry Rasmussen’s newest book, Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key, published by Oxford University Press in November, 2012. Larry will be the keynote speaker at the Presbyterians for Earth Care Conference in October 2013.

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How can Christianity call itself catholic, if the universe itself is left out?
—Simone Weil

The most important thing to do for the planet is reinvent the sacred.
—N. Scott Momaday

“Saving Souls and Salmon” ran as a feature in the Sunday *New York Times*. What might this conjunction—salmon and souls—mean? Archbishop Alex Brunett led *Times* writer Jim Robbins to the baptismal font of St. James Cathedral in downtown Seattle. “The water isn’t just sitting there,” he said, pointing to its gentle movement. He explained, “We don’t baptize people in stagnant water, but flowing water, water that is alive.”¹ The waters of life (baptism) and the waters of life (in this case, the Columbia River and salmon) formed the connection. For the archbishop, the connection was sacramental. Saving souls and saving salmon belong to the same universe.

“The Columbia River Watershed: Realities and Possibilities” is a bioregional pastoral letter of Roman Catholic bishops in Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and British Columbia. A century of unbridled logging, mining, grazing, and dam building had left the great river and its basin in dire straits, if its emblem—the salmon—is any measure. As of 2000, the annual run of an estimated 16 million salmon had dwindled to about 700,000.²

No less arresting is the name given the endangered watershed: a “sacramental commons.” “We’re trying to establish a sacredness in the world around us,” the archbishop explained to Robbins. Establishing such sacredness assumes the lead tenet of all, not only Christian, religious sacramentalism: Material reality bears a value humans share and name but do not bestow. Such value is inclusive of all being and is the manifestation of “the life-creating, sustaining, and redeeming presence and promise” of the divine throughout creation.³ Sometimes called the “sacramental principle,” the conviction is that life-affirming grace is present to and through creation as God’s own abiding presence.⁴ In the symbolism of sacrament, some natural reality, such as water or the work of human hands (bread), becomes the means by which the divine “is experienced as being presently real.”⁵ Such symbols both point to and participate in the life and power they symbolize.⁶ Paradoxically they reveal the divine in a hidden way—hidden in creation, wrapped in nature, present to the senses.

Don Sampson, a Yakima Indian leader, chuckled in response to the bishops’ letter. “Maybe God has spoken to [the bishops],” he said. “I hope the pope gets on board.” In a more serious tone he

added, “The church is being upfront and dispelling the myth of Manifest Destiny and dominion over the Earth. That’s refreshing and welcome.”⁷

Earth as Sacrament, in Many Faiths

Earth is a sacrament here—a disclosure of God’s presence by visible and tangible signs, like the waters of baptism and the waters of the Columbia River and its salmon. Transcendent power is immanent, as close as the grain and the grape of the Eucharist, or the fields, forests, and waterways around us. Those who reverence God’s presence in creation and understand themselves as part and parcel of the world as sacrament will be moved to care for creation as “the sacred trust” it is, the bishops contend. In a time when humans are estranged from “the natural scale and rhythms of life on earth” by economic and technological super-development, “a vision of a sacramental universe... can contribute to making the earth a home for the human family once again.”⁸

None of this is far from the teachings of Islam. “The Earth is a mosque, and everything in it is sacred. I learned this basic tenet of Islam from my father,” writes Ibrahim Abdul-Matin as the first sentences of *Green Deen: What Islam Teaches about Protecting the Planet*.⁹

Nor is it far from Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh: “To me the Kingdom of God or the Pure Land of the Buddha is not a vague idea; it is a reality.” He explains: “That pine tree standing on the mountain is so beautiful, solid, and green. To me the pine tree belongs to the Kingdom of God, the Pure Land of the Buddha. Your beautiful child with her fresh smile belongs to the Kingdom of God, and you also belong to the Kingdom of God.” The conclusion? “If we’re capable of recognizing the flowing river, the blue sky, the blossoming tree, the singing bird, the majestic mountains, the countless animals, the sunlight, the fog, the snow, the innumerable wonders of life as miracles that belong to the Kingdom of God, we’ll do our best to preserve them and not allow them to be destroyed.”¹⁰

Judaism shares this sensibility. Wisdom (*hochma*) personifies the pervasive presence of the divine throughout the universe. Consider the rabbinical letter, “Wonder and Restraint”:

*The awakening we seek begins with wonder: the wonder that turned Moses aside to regard the burning bush and realize that he was standing on ‘holy ground’ (Exodus 3:3–5). That vision of light is what we all see every year in the buds of spring, the spawning of new generations, the migrations of birds, mammals, and fishes, the cleansing streams of atmosphere and oceans—in all of the miraculous processes by which life awakens from dormancy and recovers from stress, even from disaster, to recreate the world right before our eyes.*¹¹

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew also drew on sacramentalism at the 1997 Symposium on the Sacredness of the Environment: “The Lord suffuses all of creation with His Divine presence in one continuous *legato* from the substance of atoms to the Mind of God.” He said in closing, “Let us renew the harmony between heaven and earth, and transfigure every detail, every particle of life.”¹²

Perhaps little more need be said about creation as one continuous *legato* from the substance of atoms to the Mind of God unless it be to underscore several matters, one of which is creation’s

exuberance. “Extravagance! Nature will try anything once,”¹³ writes Annie Dillard. Or unless it be to mark the Patriarch’s conclusion in his *Wall Street Journal* editorial: “For if life is sacred, so is the entire web that sustains it.”¹⁴ Or unless it be to underline sacramentalism’s most emphatic note: This extravagant and indivisible life is a freely offered *gift of God* and the *medium of grace*, a gift ritually borne into the worshipful presence of God and renewed there in contemplative and liturgical practices. In this tradition, the drama of the liturgy is the ritual enactment or reenactment of cosmic community and the drama of creation’s redemption.

The Ethics of the Eucharist

The moral ethos of leaning into the world in this way is signaled in the word “Eucharist.” *Eucharistia* is Greek for “thanksgiving” and implies that liturgy and ritual represent both the people’s grateful response and a guide for their living. If the bread of heaven is shared freely and equally with all as God’s own provisioning way, and if all are welcome to this welcome table for a sacramental meal together, why do we not do likewise for the other tables of the world?

After all, tables are always microcosms of society. Decisions about who gets to sit at the table, in what places, and in accord with what table manners and social standing are reflective of the order of a community and society. So are choices about who cooks, who serves, who cleans up, who breaks the bread, and who initiates and steers the conversation. Which bodies are present at the table and which are absent, matters, as does their health or lack of it. Where does the food come from? Who raised it, in what way, and for what purposes? How was it harvested, transported to market, and sold, and at what price? What is the condition of Earth as a consequence of all this? Table fellowship is a reliable map of “eco-nomic” and eco-social well-being, just as it is a reliable map of discrimination, political order and differentiation, social hierarchy and caste. Tables encode how a culture communicates its values, priorities, and organizing systems. How people take, bless, break, and share bread mirrors their way of life. Likewise, the way different religions eat and drink together in their sacred practices reflects their way of life and its table-connection to the world around them. Is it a dominion connection or some alternative to that?

Web-of-life sacramentalism is one alternative. It is almost the antithesis of the working cosmology and theology of the institutions and practices that created the modern world. To them “nature” means natural resources and capital, now extended to human resources and capital, even moral and spiritual resources and capital. These definitions betray a mindset that is utilitarian with a vengeance and devoid of sacramental sensibilities. They belong to Max Weber’s “disenchanted” world¹⁵ in which the numinous is bled from the common, the holy is leached from the ordinary, and the mystical is cut away from the everyday. Use, utility, and possession measure all value, just as all are relative to human appropriation and significance. The (human) subject determines the worth of all else, as object, with “object” taking the form of commodities. This continues the master/slave ethic, with humans the master and the rest of nature the slave.

So what will it be for the living of our lives: sacramental ethics or commodity ethics?

¹ “Saving Souls and Salmon,” *New York Times Week in Review*, October 22, 2000, 5.

² *Ibid.*

³ Therese DeLisio, *Stretching the Sacramental Imagination in Sacramental Theology, Liturgy, and Life: A Trinitarian Proposal for a Cosmologically Conscious Age*, Ph.D. thesis, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 2007, 13. DeLisio's focus is the Triune God of Christianity. I have taken the liberty of extending her statement to all notions of divine presence.

⁴ Ibid, 226.

⁵ Ibid, 230.

⁶ Ibid., 233. DeLisio is drawing on the discussion of symbols in the work of Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich.

⁷ "Saving Souls and Salmon," *New York Times Week in Review*, October 22, 2000, 5.

⁸ U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on the Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*, Section III. D (U.S. Catholic Conference, 1992). Available online at <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/bishopsstatements.html>. My thanks to Drew Christiansen, S.J., for pointing me to these passages in *Renewing the Earth*.

⁹ Ibrahim Abdul-Matin, *Green Deen: What Islam Teaches about Protecting the Planet* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publications, 2010), 1.

¹⁰ Reprinted from *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology* (2008) by Thich Nhat Hanh, with permission of Parallax Press, Berkeley, California, www.parallax.org., 97–98.

¹¹ The work of two Roman Catholic priests, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry, is an effort to shift sacramental ethics from anthropocentrism to eco- and cosmo-centrism.

¹² The address of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Environmental Symposium is available in Chryssavgis, ed., *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*. This citation is from 166 of the republication manuscript, courtesy of John Chryssavgis.

¹³ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek: A Mystical Excursion into the Natural World* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 67. Another passage reads: "This, then, is the extravagant landscape of the world, given, given with pizzazz, given in good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over" (149).

¹⁴ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Our Indivisible Environment," *Wall Street Journal*, October 25, 2009, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704500604574485341504345488.html>.

¹⁵ This is a reference to the famous description by Max Weber at the conclusion of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and to which we will refer in the discussion below. We discussed it in part in chapter 8 "Asceticism and Consumerism."