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The Greening of the Liturgy: Christian Worship and the Care of the Earth

At least since the middle of the twentieth century, Christian have been accused of bearing a large portion of human responsibility for ignoring and thus contributing to the degradation of the environment of the earth. The prestigious journal *Science*, for example, published in 1967 an article entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (155:1203-7), in which Lynn White, Jr., essentially argued that the Christian doctrines of "salvation" and "election" carried such deleterious effects. If the idea of *salvation* is construed as a promise of certain people going away to somewhere else called "heaven," and if the idea of *election* identifies those certain people as God's own people, destined for such escape, then the resultant effect is that the earth itself hardly matters. Even for people not schooled in doctrine, a Western world formed by the widespread presence of these Christian ideas can be seen to have turned these doctrines into an accent on the well-being of humankind above all else and, especially, the well-being of certain privileged ones — northern and western wealthy people, for example — as the modern secular inheritors of the old idea of the "elect."

The accusation is not entirely unfounded. In the United States, there have been evangelical Christians who have argued fiercely for the idea of the "rapture," a particularly dramatic form of one reading of the doctrines of salvation and election, who have also drawn the conclusion that true Christians need not care about the well-being of the forests or the waters of the earth, since they themselves are getting out of here and since the world, as we know it, will be burned up. Or, on the other side of the spectrum of Christian opinion, there have also been Christians who have understood the entire Christian project as help — indeed, *techniques* — for the well-being of the self. Such techniques leave little religious room for concern about the well-being of anything else beyond the self. The Yale University literary scholar and social critic, Harold Bloom (in *The American Religion*) argues that primary religion of America is gnosticism, a religious stance that accentuates the negotiations of the individual with the divine powers and the *knowledge* the individual needs to be spiritually successful, even if it means "getting out of here." The strong popularity in America of the so-called gnostic gospels and the popular

excitement about the *Da Vinci Code* can be read as evidence that Bloom is right. Here, *salvation* and *election* come to mean an accent on the self, instead of the elect community, but the result for the environment is the same.

I think that perhaps you will tell me that this gnostic reading of Christian meaning, this interest in the well-being of the self, this popularity of the gnostic gospels is not alone an American phenomenon — that it also has its popularity here in the Nordic countries.

The newly identified and publicized *Gospel of Judas* can serve as a case in point. The book identifies the true spiritual people — individuals like Judas — who will ultimately learn the technique and knowledge needed to get out of here, to return to the true Light God who is utterly beyond this fleshly world and its fleshly people. That world and those people — our inhabited earth! — have been made by a lesser god, an ultimately evil god. Thus, in the first dramatic scene of this probably second century book, Jesus comes into a room where the disciples are gathered at table, giving thanks for food. Jesus laughs in scorn. They ask him why he laughs and he tells them that they are praying to their god and foolishly giving thanks for food. For this gnostic Jesus, the disciples are mired in the flesh, unable to receive the liberating knowledge of the truth. And the religion of this Jesus — this particular form of Christianity — is disinterested in food. Indeed, it is disinterested in thanksgiving for creation, in communal practice gathered around such thanksgiving, and in the earth itself. While the elaborate mythology of lesser gods is not so popular today, the interest in what is good for the self — in what the self needs and wants for fulfillment — that idea *is* popular.

But one does not have to turn either to the right or to the left in the range of Christian opinion — either to the rapture or to gnostic technique for the self — to find evidence that White's old accusation needs to be taken seriously. Even in this room, we can look closer to home. It would be useful, for example to survey our hymnals. How many of the hymns we actually sing in our assemblies have an overwhelming accent on "going to heaven," on the beauty of someplace else than here — indeed, on "getting out of here?" How much of our preaching speaks the same theme or combines that theme with primary advice for the well-being of the individual hearer? And how much of our sacramental practice is marked by the pious negotiations of the individual self with a deity-away-from-here. Is our eucharist, for example, also a thanksgiving for food? Is it even recognizable as food-from-the-earth or is it only an apparent "bread-of-heaven?" In ordinary Lutheran liturgical practice, we may sometimes find

that *salvation* and *election* have so pushed the doctrine of *creation* aside that faith in the God who creates the world and calls it good is an endangered memory.

But that is by no means all there is to say. There is significant evidence, throughout the world in Christian assemblies gathered for worship, of a "greening of the liturgy," of a new liturgical attention to creation faith and to the responsibility for the well-being of our blue planet. In North America, the liturgical theologian Paul Santmire has called for such attention for decades, for our seeing a connection between our use of bread and wine to encounter and receive the very body and blood of Christ and the importance of the earth that God has made as the source of this bread and wine. And newly, the liturgical theologian Benjamin Stewart — I urge you to watch for these names — has invited us to see how the thanksgiving over the water of the baptismal font should insert us into a knowledge of the reality and health of the actual networks of water upon which we locally depend. There are many more examples.

Here is another. In North America, the Evangelical Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have just published — on October 6, 2006 — a new book of liturgy and hymns: *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or the ELW. The ELW itself evidences this "greening." Its hymnal, for example, includes a "Creation" section. More: many of its hymns for liturgical seasons are powerfully aware of the actual time of the earth in which that season is being celebrated. "As the sun with longer journey melts the winter's snow and ice," sings one hymn in Lent (ELW 329), "with its slowly growing radiance warms the seed beneath the earth, may the sun of Christ's uprising gently bring our hearts to life." The hymnal acknowledges that the church's year of proclamation is being celebrated here, on this earth, amid its conditions. More: the patterns for intercessions in the book call for congregations to actually pray for the earth itself. In the Sunday assembly, a leader of prayer is urged to lead prayers that "reflect the wideness of God's mercy for the whole world — for the church universal, its ministry, and the mission of the gospel; for the well-being of creation; for peace and justice in the world . . ." and so forth (p. 105). While our churches have for decades provided such a list of the things for which we should be praying, "the well-being of creation" is new in that list. Similarly, in the great Bidding Prayer of Good Friday, "God's creation" is included in the list of things for which the assembly intercedes (p. 263). These prayers, one should note, are not envisioned as being only for the harvest or for any other way in which the surrounding world is useful to us — but actually for the well-being of the creation in itself. One could imagine

congregations beginning to pray for endangered species or threatened water-sources. More: the eucharistic prayers of this book includes lines like these: “You formed the earth from chaos; you encircled the globe with air; you created fire for warmth and light; you nourish the lands with water” (Prayer VII; p. 67). And one of the prayers over the water of the baptismal font says, “Glory to you for oceans and lakes, for rivers and streams. Honor to you for cloud and rain, for dew and snow. Your waters are below us, around us, above us . . .” (Prayer V; p. 71). This book does not understand that Jesus laughs in scorn at such thanksgivings. Far from it. And this is only the briefest of reports from just one hymnal. Such greening is going on elsewhere, throughout the Christian world.

But there is even more to say. When the ELW engages in such prayer and song, it is sinking its roots into a deep Christian tradition. When Paul Santmire and Benjamin Stewart, American theologians whom I have mentioned, do their work, they are frequently quoting Irenaeus of Lyons and Martin Luther. The greening of the liturgy is not the result of a new fad, but the continuing fruit of an old mission.

Let me say something more about that old mission, that deep tradition. The Bible itself, the principal book of the Christian assembly, the heart and source of its liturgy, is profoundly interested in the earth, in the sheer materiality of God’s good creation. According to the story of Exodus, the primary story of the Hebrew scriptures, Moses is standing on “holy ground” as he stands on the earth before the God who burns in the bush, leaving the bush itself unhurt (Exodus 3). Then the Psalms fill their praises and laments with images of a real land, real rains, real vegetation, real animals, domesticated and wild, and real people in relationship with those lands, water, animals, plants. And, in the New Testament, the author of the letter to the Colossians celebrates even more: acknowledging the need and hurt of all things, the song of Colossians 1:15-20 sings out that all things — *all things, ta panta*! — hold together in Christ, are reconciled to God in the blood of his cross. Similarly, the Fourth Gospel — perhaps the book in the New Testament most close to gnostic Christianity — even though it speaks of the opposition and judgment of the “world” and the “flesh,” *kosmos* and *sarx*, strongly asserts that God loves the world (3:16) and that the very Word of God has become flesh (1:14).

As if to speak these ideas in a narrative form, the Gospel of Mark opens with the account of Jesus standing in the water of a real stream, on the earth, among the hurt and need reflected in the baptism of John. Then he sees the heavens torn open, the voice speaking and calling this one

on the earth "the Beloved," and the Spirit descending like the dove of the Noah-story, after the flood was over. We — the readers of the Gospel — see and hear this with him. When we remember that for the neoplatonism of the time of the Gospel's origin the heavenly sphere above the earth was perfection — indeed, in the *Timaeus* (92c) of Plato, it was the very "only begotten of God" — and that the earth underneath the heaven was regarded as a descent into imperfection and error, then this is a stunning assertion. Under the torn heaven, on the earth, amid its real conditions and needs, signaling the end of the flood, stands the Son of God.

In this regard, it is useful to recall the recent typology of the ancient gospel-books that has been proposed by John Dominic Crossan in his book *The Birth of Christianity* (pp. 36-38). In discussing books like Mark and John — but also the Gospel of Judas we have mentioned and, importantly, the Gospel of Thomas — Crossan identifies two principal types of books, the "biographical gospels" and the "sayings gospels," as well as a couple of mixed types. For Crossan, the so-called sayings gospels — of which Thomas may serve as a primary example, with Judas as a related mixed type — are largely marked by a-historical encounters between the risen Jesus and individuals, in which encounters certain sayings are featured that can be taken as communicating the knowledge and technique necessary for individual salvation. The biographical gospels — which are the four books we call "canonical" — demonstrate, on the contrary, several characteristics that become strikingly clear as these book are compared with the books of sayings. The biographical gospels are interested in the life of Jesus. They also tell the story of his death. They include details from the economy, agriculture and the land itself in their stories. Furthermore, they feature the gatherings and meetings of a community of people. There certainly are individual encounters with Jesus in these books, but — like Mary Magdalene in John 20 — these individuals are mostly sent back to the community. Says Crossan: the future of the sayings gospels, the trajectory of thought that they feed, is toward "sarcophobic Christianity," a Christianity scornful of and despising the conditions of the flesh. The trajectory of the biographical gospels is toward "sarcophilic Christianity," a Christianity marked by honor for and love of the conditions of the flesh, on the earth, amid people and animals, water and plants, however needy and broken.

Repeated *meetings of the community* and *sarcophilic Christianity*: these are marks of that deep tradition, that old mission which has belonged to the Christian liturgy at its best. Indeed, each of the four biographical gospels points to that meeting of the community we would call "the

liturgy." Luke reports that the Emmaus-bound disciples knew the risen Lord in the Sunday pattern of word and table (Luke 24), the very pattern that his second volume finds to be characteristic of the church's life (Acts 2:42; 20:7-12). John's Gospel has the community meeting the risen one and receiving his Spirit on the first day of the week and again a week later (John 20), rooting the on-going weekly meeting in this earliest story. Matthew similarly reports a communal meeting that establishes the communal practice of baptism (Matthew 28). And, while Mark seems to end on a note of dispersal and fear (16:8), the young man in the tomb sends the readers of the book as well as the disciples back to the beginning of the book where, in the story we see "Jesus in Galilee" (1:14; cf. 16:7) and begin to realize that the Gospel book itself is the resurrection appearance. Furthermore, the very shape of this Gospel — baptism and gathering of a community; then stories and sayings; then meals that show forth the meaning of Jesus' death (14); then the sending that celebrates his resurrection — seems to echo the classic shape of a Christian gathering as much as does the story of the Emmaus pilgrims in Luke 24. In this sarcophilic Gospel, this book of the encounter with Jesus under the torn heaven, the meeting for baptism, word, table and sending continues to proclaim the mercy of God for the actual earth.

According to this understanding of the sarcophilic tradition, the communal assembly itself is the place in which we may be gathered into the world-loving, world-saving gospel of Jesus Christ. So in gathering an assembly together, the liturgy has classically made use of the actual local waters, for baptizing and for remembering that we are baptized. So, in telling the stories of the Bible and preaching and singing the meaning of Jesus, the liturgy has used images full of creation and redemption faith. So, in holding a meal, the liturgy has invited us to give thanks over food — indeed, to give thanks "for the many qualities of the different kinds of things," as Justin Martyr says — and to eat and drink in a model meal of communal and sustainable consumption. And so, in sending the community in mission, the liturgy has proposed that this place, here, in this world — the place that surrounds our meeting — is the theater of witness and hope, the holy ground on which we stand with Jesus Christ, in his Spirit, beside the needy and poor, before the face of God.

Such is the deepest, oldest liturgical tradition of the church. And that sarcophilic tradition can be seen to continue. In the second century, Irenaeus of Lyon appeals to the gnostic communities — or at least to those who have not followed the counsel of writings like the Gospel of Judas — to see how the eucharist they have continued to celebrate invites them to

receive and care for the earth as God's gift. In the sixth century, an anonymous writer tells the story of the mission of Pancratius to Sicily, emphasizing that Pancratius could bring the books of the Bible and vessels for the eucharist with him, but the water, bread and wine of the gospel-meeting would need to be found locally, in Sicily! And beginning in the same sixth century, Benedictine monasticism in the west began to practice a Christianity marked not by escape but by stable presence on the land, by self-supporting and sustainable agriculture and by hospitality to the poor. At the heart of such a stable, earth-related community, according to Benedict's proposal, was the communal prayer of the Psalms and the Sunday eucharist.

The story goes on. The ninth century found the church singing to Christ in Advent as to the wisdom of God that "reaches from end to end, mightily and sweetly ordering all things." The western middle ages saw the development of the Rogation processions, moving through the land, praying for the land, marking the parish boundaries with such prayer on the land. The thirteenth century saw St. Francis teaching us to sing his canticle of all the creatures. And the sixteenth century Reformation of Luther, noted by his materiality — his sheer physicality as well as his interest in the doctrine of creation — and his accent on locality, invited us back again to the centrality of the strong signs of water, word, bread and wine in a participating community.

The "greening of the liturgy" is not a new idea. It belongs to the central and abiding matters of Christian faith.

Why does this matter? Because we are in a time of urgent need for the care of the earth; because for Christians and their liturgy there are resources that are older and deeper than those that are simply from our own moment, important resources drawn from a Christianity that is truer than that which Lynn White rightly criticized; and because — alas — it is possible for us not to do anything about this question at all in our liturgical practice. We may continue to practice preaching, hymnody and the sacraments as if they were matters concerned primarily with individual souls and their "eternal" dstiny. Without adopting the bizarre mythic structures of the Gospel of Judas, we may nonetheless still lean toward an essentially gnostic technique, ignoring the advice of Mark and John, of Irenaeus and Justin, of Francis and Martin Luther.

What am I talking about actually doing? I do not mean simply the practice of an occasional "Earth Sunday" or similar *tema-gudstjänst*. I do not mean preaching or praying that proposes that it knows the details of concrete political solutions to environmental questions. But I do mean a sense alive in *all* worship that Christians know that they stand on an earth beloved of

God — a sense out of which Christians may arise to share with other people of good will that political imagination and that concrete labor necessary to find real, lasting solutions. I do mean sarcophilic liturgies that reorient us out of concern only for ourselves, toward the world around us, before God, under God's surprising grace.

So let us labor together on recovering these things: an assembly that gathers every Sunday to hear and to sing a word that speaks of God's saving love for the world and to celebrate together the sacraments that make use of the gifts of this earth; thanksgivings at table and font that praise God for creation as well as for the salvation that has been worked in Jesus Christ; preaching that proclaims that God has saved us in Christ to be part of a people of witnesses to the mercy of God for the life of the world; music that sings around this word and these sacraments in sarcophilic accents; a thankful and caring knowledge about where the water used in our baptismal baths comes from and a thankful use of real bread and the local wine or festive drink in our eucharists; intercessions that pray for the well-being of the earth, its systems and its creatures; a catechumenal, baptismal way for adults who come to join this company of witnesses and who learn more of its sarcophilic understandings as they come to the water; and an annual paschal festival in the night — using fire and stories as well as water, bread and wine to celebrate the great act of God in Christ, poured out in the Spirit, for the wholeness and health of all the earth.

Of course, this list sounds simply like the list of matters that anyone who has been working on the renewal of liturgy has come to regard as an agenda for reform. Exactly! These are matters familiar to you, as you gather together for mutual learning and mutual encouragement in a Nordic society for the liturgy, in *LEITOURGIA*. But I mean to say that the deep tradition of the "green liturgy" — of the sarcophilic character of Christian faith as it is proclaimed in the four gospels and celebrated in word and sacrament — can make an association for the liturgy into an association for the care of the earth. Please go on. Please do not grow weary of this work. Receive again, yourselves dear sisters and brothers, this gospel word and these gospel sacraments as gifts, and then help each other to set them out in your communities in renewed clarity.

Thank you for founding this association, dear friends. Thank you for seeing its immense importance.

And one last thing: In the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem, speaking to the newly

baptized of the meaning of what had happened to them when they were first brought through the water-bath to participate in the holy supper and giving them counsel about how they might continue to receive communion at future liturgies, proposed this: coming to the cup and drinking, they might then touch their still wet lips and then mark and bless each of their senses — their lips and fingers and then their eyes and ears and heart. It was as if this old preacher and pastor were inviting all of their senses to encounter all the world around them — all things, all the earth, all its creatures — through the reconciling, life-giving blood of Christ.

A liturgy refreshed in the intention of the canonical gospels, a participatory, communal liturgy of word and sacraments for the life of the world, will be like that gesture for us. It will immerse our senses and our imaginations in the passionate love of God for the earth.

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