



Natural Contemplation – a Christian Healing for the Environment?¹

Dominic White

Abstract: Recent studies have acknowledged the insufficiency of rational arguments to motivate us for necessary changes to save the planet: hence the attraction of non-religious ecospiritualities. Identifying Western Christianity's relationship with the environment as more moral than spiritual, I respond to the principle of right relation to the environment developed by the Methodist social creed tradition to recover the neglected tradition of natural contemplation from Christian cosmology and the monastic tradition. Drawing also on Douglas Christie's analytical autoethnographic approach and on neglected liturgical tradition, I argue further that natural contemplation is intrinsically a prayer for the healing of nature.

Keywords: *natural contemplation • environmental holiness • ecospiritual, autoethnography • cosmic liturgy*

Introduction

What relationship do Christians have with their natural environment? This is both a spiritual and moral question. Spiritually, for Christians the natural environment is not only nature, it is God's creation. So if we ignore it, we ignore a creative presence of God, and we ignore our own context *in creation*: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden" (Gen. 2:15). And *therefore* we risk forgetting – or at least will find more burdensome – our moral obligation to creation: God put the man in Eden "to till it and keep it" (*ibid.*).² In this paper, I seek to recover the largely forgotten Christian tradition of Natural Contemplation both as a devotional practice of holiness, and as a support to environmental action, the latter being championed by the American Methodist Social Creed. My own standpoint is from within Roman Catholicism, rendering necessarily my knowledge of the Methodist tradition not expert: what I do know however is largely the fruit of seven years of inner-city arts ministry collaboration with Shieldfield Art Works in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and warm conversations with Methodist colleagues at Wesley House, Cambridge, which hosted from 2023-2024 the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology where I am based. It is from this bricolage that this effort towards ecumenical theology proceeds. I hope Methodist scholars may wish to develop the necessarily sketchy outline of a relationship between natural contemplation and environmental action which this paper proposes.

¹ This article is an expanded version of a paper of the same title given at the Annual Research Day of the Cambridge Theological Federation, Westminster College, 8 June 2023. My special thanks to Anna La Mura, Barnabas Palfrey, Elizabeth Theokritoff, Gareth Polmeer, Joseph Powell, a patient editor who opened to me the wealth of Methodist environmental theology; Melanie-Préjean Sullivan, Timothy Radcliffe, Veronika Dlabáč and Zlata Vrabec for their comments, criticisms and suggestions, and to my anonymous reviewers whose critiques were so helpful.

² Cf Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: on Care for our Common Home* (Vatican City, 2015), 76. Available online at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html#_ftnref19 (Accessed 3 September 2024).

Dominic White is Acting Director of Research at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge. He is a Dominican friar and Catholic priest, and prior of Blackfriars, Oxford.

Here I explore first the robust Methodist response to secular critiques of apparent Christian anthropocentrism with regard to the environment, then turning to the neglected question of how a tendency to omit nature from Christian spiritual practice has not only deprived Christians of a motivation for environmental action, but also deprived us of a spiritual practice that can deepen our prayer and benefit our wellbeing. Noting the attraction of some Christians to contemporary pagan/non-religious ecospiritualities, I examine these for compatibility with Christianity, before recovering the tradition and practice of Christian Natural Contemplation in its monastic origins and contemporary manifestations. I consider a liturgical turn for natural contemplation, to include the whole worshipping church in the experience of this spirituality, and the channel of grace and conversion this can be for works of environmental justice.

The Roots of a Problem: Action, Reaction and an Opportunity?

It is commonly stated that much of the present environmental crisis has been caused by our disconnection from nature. We have treated nature as an external object, a mere resource, rather than understanding that we are part of nature. In 1967, when the environmental crisis was beginning to emerge, Lynn White's landmark paper, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis"³, blamed Christianity for this on the grounds that it was the most anthropocentric religion the world had ever known, because God gave humankind "dominion" over creation (Gen 1:26, 28). The Methodist tradition has responded robustly. Tony Richie argues that "belief in God as Creator clearly implies Christian responsibility toward creation for the sake of the Creator".⁴ Since Christians believe not just in nature, but in creation⁵, we can uphold the Biblical tradition *and* acknowledge that we have sometimes misunderstood and abused it⁶: indeed, already in the eighteenth century John Wesley, preaching on Genesis 1:31, affirmed the goodness of creation, but reflecting on creation's groaning in travail (Romans 8:19-22), said that "brute creation" (non-human beings) had been harmed by human sin⁷. Effectively, Wesley reveals a Biblical prophecy of human contribution to global warming.

Darryl Stephens, however, argues that scholars have been "too busy arguing about religious beliefs about nature, and had spent too little time studying actual religious communities"⁸. He traces an impressive trajectory from environmental stewardship to environmental holiness in Methodism. Stewardship risks placing us apart from creation – nature is just an "object" that we look after because God tells us to. Environmental holiness implies a deeper connection, a caring relationship with nature. So care for the environment has been in the Methodist social creed from the 1930s: especially in rural ministry, Methodists have seen that social and environmental justice are essentially linked, a principle also recalled by Pope Benedict in his *Message for the World Day of Peace* in 2010.⁹ A 1948 Methodist programme in rural areas of the United States pertained "to people in their relationship to God, to soil and all natural resources."¹⁰ This continues and grows to the present time, such as in the United Methodist Church (UMC) bishops' *Call to Hope and Action* in 2009: "In good Wesleyan fashion, the UMC understood eschatology – as is the case with salvation – to allow for human cooperation through the life of faith [...] *simultaneously co-creatures with all creation*, and [...] co-creators with God".¹¹ human reason, will and freedom are natural images of God in us, "rightly perceived, understood and acted upon"¹² – and in *holiness*, with and as part of nature.

³ Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic (*sic*) Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–7.

⁴ Tony Richie, "Radical and Responsible A Wesleyan-Pentecostal Ecotheology," *Journal of Pentecost Theology*, 23 (2014), 216-235; this citation, 220.

⁵ In this paper, while honouring nature as a primary term, for hermeneutical purposes in my interaction with the extant available literature relevant to natural contemplation, I treat "nature", "earth" and "environment" as interchangeable. With regard to natural contemplation, "creation" is treated as a term specific to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, since Jews and Christians believe that the earth, its inhabitants and the entire cosmos were created by God, whereas this view may not be shared by many who do not identify as Jewish, Christian, or religious at all.

⁶ Richie, "Radical and Responsible", 233-234.

⁷ *Wesley's Works* VI (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 206–15), on Gen. 1:31; effect of sin on "brute creation", on Rom. 8:19-22; *Wesley's Works*, VI, 241–52).

⁸ Darryl Stephens, "From Environmental Stewardship to Environmental Holiness: the Evolution of Methodist Environmental Witness, with a Focus on Climate Change", *Journal of Religious Ethics* vol. 47/3, September 2019, 470-500; this citation 471.

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace, 2010: "If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation"*, Vatican City, 2010 https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html (Accessed 26 October 2023).

¹⁰ Stephens, 474.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 480.

¹² *Ibid.* 488 (my emphasis).

In the Southern African context, Methodist theologian and pastor Dion Forster expounds the link between “red” (social) justice and “green” (environmental) justice,¹³ but also examines why we might find green justice more difficult. It is not so much about Christians being anthropocentric: while green is global, especially in the far from prosperous Southern African context, “red” issues: acute poverty, disease and child mortality are local, immediate and pressing.¹⁴ He demonstrates the connection between social and environmental justice, such as the devastating impact of climate change-driven floods on farms. Yet in terms of *motivating* people to make big changes in their behaviour to heal the planet, Forster acknowledges implicitly a weakness in Christian spirituality, in contrast to one traditional African creation story, in which humankind and animals are created together, emerging from a hole in the ground. Theologians at the African Regional Consultation on Environment and Sustainability in 2002 argued that “[t]he African traditional concept of *ubuntu as harmony in the cosmos* can be quite easily related to the ‘eternal shalom’ of the Old Testament, or the ‘eschaton’ of God’s kingdom found in the New Testament.”¹⁵ Their starting point was Psalm 24 (“The Lord’s is the earth and its fullness”), and from this they argued against anthropocentricity and ownership of land (with all the social injustices the latter entails) and in favour of re-visioning the earth as God’s gift, and humankind as part of the biosphere along with other created beings, and stewards.¹⁶

Again, though, while this is a strong theological argument, do those of us in the Global North, without the cultural tradition of ubuntu, *experience* this argument as motivating, *moving* us, or as another demand in a time of multiple crises? Hal Gunder, Justin Schott and Jesse Turner, in their study of faith and environmentalism among Methodists in Appalachia, US, argue that a sense of spiritual connection to nature may provide an ecotheological motivational strategy, alongside more traditional but deontological approaches such as stewardship.¹⁷ And recently secular writers too have argued that we need more than just hard scientific evidence, but rather need to (re-)link ritual, nature and the interconnected wellbeing of humankind and nature.¹⁸

Connecting with Nature: Science and Eco-Spiritualities

But connecting with nature is more than just a strategy for making our ecological duty enjoyable: a recent study, *Moments, not minutes: The nature-wellbeing relationship*, has shown that spending time in nature, conscious engagement with nature (i.e. not just running in the park but stopping to look at a tree, to touch it, to smell the flowers) and having a strong emotional/psychological connection with nature have a positive impact, whether directly or indirectly, on human wellbeing.¹⁹ We have not just failed nature: by disconnecting from the rest of nature, we have failed to meet our own needs. “Love your neighbour *as yourself*” (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31). The document of the Vatican’s Amazon Synod (2019) sees in the diverse cultures of the indigenous peoples a common thread:

the interconnection and harmony of relationships between water, territory and nature, community life and culture, God and various spiritual forces. For them (*the indigenous peoples*), ‘good living’ means understanding the centrality of the transcendent relational character of human beings and of creation, and implies ‘good acting’. [...] The indigenous world enriches the intercultural encounter with its myths, narrative, rites, songs, dance and spiritual expressions.²⁰

¹³ Dion Forster, “More Red than Green: A response to global warming and the environment from within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa”, *The Epworth Review – the Journal of Methodist ecclesiology and mission*, Vol 35, No 2 (2008), 38-52.

¹⁴ Ibid 39-41.

¹⁵ Ibid. 48, my emphasis.

¹⁶ Ibid. 49-50 and n. 27.

¹⁷ Hal Gunder, Justin Schott, Jesse Turner, *Faith & Environmentalism Among United Methodists in Appalachia: Investigating Christian Environmental Ethics & Promoting Environmental Care in the Methodist Church*, unpublished report towards MSC, University of Michigan, 2006.

¹⁸ See Alister McGrath, “The Uses of Wonder and Ritual: How the Sacred Helps Us Find Our Place in the World”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 6259, 17 March 2023, pp. 22-23; review of Karen Armstrong, *Sacred Nature: How We Can Recover our Bond with the Natural World* (London: Bodley Head, 2022), and Dimitris Xygalatas, *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living* (London: Profile, 2022).

¹⁹ Miles Richardson, Holli-Anne Passmore, Ryan Lumber, Rory Thomas and Alex Hunt, “Moments, not minutes: The nature-wellbeing relationship”, *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 11 (1), 2021, pp. 8-33: <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v11i1.1267> (Accessed 15 June 2023).

²⁰ Vatican, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*: Final Document (Vatican City, 2019), 9, 54: <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html> (Accessed 15 June 2023).

While necessarily representing an outsider's view of these cultures, nevertheless implicit in these words is an acknowledgement that such an understanding is absent from the Western cultures which are still globally dominant in theology. It is hard not to hear in these words a sense of bereavement from our natural home.

Some contemporary Western Christian theologians have taken an ecospiritual turn, finding their resources in nature spiritualities and practices which are commonly identified with Wicca or witchcraft. Elizabeth Campbell notes the rise of the "Instagram witch" in her teens and twenties, who typically has a "flat ontology" of non-hierarchical relationship between humans and non-human beings, not least because "a witch may feel more kinship with the beleaguered nature than the capitalist humans who exploit her."²¹ Simone Kotva sees common ground between the neglected Christian tradition of "natural contemplation" (*physike theoria*) and the spiritual attention practised by many ecologists and practitioners of Wicca to "what may lurk."²² We might also see parallels with the Christian liturgical year in ecospiritual non-linear, cyclical or spiral conceptions of time.

This is nothing less than a re-enchantment of nature. But much as we should receive good things which may be evidence of God already at work, there is a disquieting element. Not only do flat ontologies risk diminishing humankind's implicitly priestly and royal status in Genesis 1,²³ but can Christians really cast spells?

And surely "lurking" is what an attacker does, hiding in the shadows, ready to pounce? What may lurk? The angels of God – or instead, the fallen angels? Something nasty in the woods? And ourselves – bereft from our relationship with nature, aware of its absence from Christian spirituality and theology as we may have received it – are we so thirsting to get our connection with nature back that we're willing to take any risk? The fascination of powers that are *not* tame, but wild, unpredictable, so in contrast to middle-class conformity? Powers that may offer strength to those who feel weak, hurt, disempowered – "when you eat of the tree your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil [...]" (Genesis 3:5)?

Natural Contemplation and Christian Cosmology

So what, then, is the Christian "natural contemplation" to which Kotva recalls our attention? To understand the issue behind this question, we need first to return to Christian cosmology, largely forgotten in the West. Christ came to save not just us, but the entire universe:²⁴ hence, "proclaim the good news to *the whole creation*" (Mark 16:15, my emphasis). The mystery of God's will is to "gather up all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:10), reconciling them to himself "by the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20). Christ, indeed, has ascended above "all the heavens, so that he might fill all things" (Ephesians 4:10), a prophecy of hope as the whole creation has been "groaning in labour pains", itself "subject to futility [...] in bondage to decay", but destined to "obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:20-22). According to Gregory of Nazianzen, when Christ was baptised, he made the waters holy and took up the cosmos.²⁵

Cosmic redemption is celebrated in the art of the ancient (pre-256 CE) baptistery of Dura Europos: the rich imagery makes rising up from the baptismal bath an ascent to the stars.²⁶ Yet that's because the stars were part of the problem. Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic identifies the angels as stars – the stars which are the angels of the Seven Churches (Revelation 1:20), but also the fallen angels, such as Wormwood (Revelation 12:7-10; 8:10-11). The Jewish Book of Enoch, canonical in Ethiopia and Eritrea but apocryphal elsewhere, is an expansion of Genesis 5-6 and well known to the early Church²⁷. It tells of what the patriarch Enoch saw when "he was no more,

²¹ Elizabeth Campbell, "Witchcraft in the Age of the Anthropocene", *The Noesis Review*, VIII, 2021, 62-63.

²² Simone Kotva, *Effort and Grace: on the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 174-175, 179, citing Isabelle Stengers and Martin Stavrsky, "Relearning the Art of Paying Attention: a Conversation", *SubStance* 47, no. 1 (2018), 136.

²³ See Richie, "Radical and Responsible", 225.

²⁴ What follows is a very brief summary from my book, *The Lost Knowledge of Christ: Contemporary Spiritualities, Christian Cosmology, and the Arts* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).

²⁵ Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 39 :14, *Patrologia Graeca* 36, edited by Jean-Pierre Migne (Paris: Garnier, 1886), coll. 349-352.

²⁶ See Dominic White, *The Lost Knowledge of Christ*, pp. 67-75; Dominic White, *How Do I Look: Theology in the Age of the Selfie* (London: SCM, 2020), pp. 72-76; Dominic White "Early Christian Initiation: a Somatic Ressourcement", *Worship* (forthcoming).

²⁷ Jude 14-15 cites 1 Enoch 1:9; see also Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 4.16.2.

because God took him" (Genesis 5:24). He saw the angels/stars orbiting the house of God, but the fallen ones went out of orbit and caused the seasons to go wrong (1 Enoch 71:8-9). Climate chaos, in other words. Paul warned the Ephesians that "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). Indeed, "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14, cf 1 John 4:1-3). So while there are indeed angels of God who appear to people (imaged by the stars of Dura Europos), be cautious about what lurks in the forest. Even though some pagans may invoke natural forces quite innocently to heal nature, just as we pray to God,²⁸ these nature forces may or may not be good – but they are more powerful than we are.

Nevertheless, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, monk and spiritual master of the twelfth century, says: "Believe me who have experience, you will find more lessons in the woods than you ever will amongst books. Woods and stones will teach you what you can never hear from any master."²⁹ Monasteries were built in the countryside not merely to escape the vices of the cities, or to have adequate space for a farm to supply food: nature was understood as a contemplative space in which to meet God. In a Methodist space Darryl Stephens hints at something similar: in arguing for a shift from environmental stewardship to environmental holiness, he argues that the Wesleyan approach is God's *prevenient* grace awaiting our response.³⁰ *Prevenient* is an important term in Thomas Aquinas' theology of grace, recalling the priority of God's grace *always coming before* human action: God's grace is already at work, moving us to repentance,³¹ *metanoia*. And, one might add, God's grace is right there in nature as creation, recalling us to the presence of the Creator in His work.

Natural Contemplation and the *Logoi* of Nature

St. Bernard was quite simply in the tradition of *physike theoria*, "natural contemplation", of early Christian monastics such as St. Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580-662). He is in a long tradition, especially represented in the Alexandrian tradition (Clement, Origen), which fuses Greek philosophy, particularly the Stoics and Neo-Platonists, with the Old Testament Wisdom literature and its cosmic focus:³² Wisdom who is the beginning of the Lord's works (Prov. 8:22), with God as He creates the cosmos (Proverbs 8:23-31), and who gives to the seeker knowledge of "the structure of the world and the activity (*energeia*) of the elements (Wisdom 7:17), the cycles of time, and knowledge of flora and fauna and of the human mind (Wisdom 7:18-22).

Thus Maximus can say, "there is nothing evil in creatures except misuse, which stems from the mind's misuse in its natural cultivation."³³ As a practical spiritual guide, Maximus emphasises that natural contemplation is a process.³⁴ Interpreting allegorically Acts 10:9-16, where, controversially for our more animal-loving age, Peter is told three times to kill and eat unclean animals, Maximus argues that this is first about killing lustful behaviour: that is, our desire to use the other as an end. Our destructive treatment of nature is a contemporary example.

The second killing is of deceitful opinions – false, lazy or projected understandings of nature.

The third killing is of idolatry. Nature is not our God. Rather, God is *in* nature. This act of *metanoia* prepares us simply to *be with* things: it reflects, and perhaps clarifies, Evagrius Ponticus' teaching that we have to renounce

²⁸ A colleague with many years' experience in university chaplaincy had this experience of pagan students. She wondered if their praying to natural forces, without any thought that their words were somehow filled with "power", reflected a Christian background (private email correspondence). I would understand this as perhaps meaning that for these students, praying to natural forces could bring the same powerful results Christians would expect in faith from praying to God, either directly or through the intercession of the angels and saints.

²⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Letters*, trans. Bruno Scott James (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998 (1953)), 107.2 (106.2), 156; cf Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 12.

³⁰ Stephens, 488.

³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia 114.1-2.

³² See Joshua Lollar, *To See into the Life of Things: the Contemplation of Nature in Maximus the Confessor and his Predecessors* (Turnhout: Brépols, 2013), 43-165.

³³ Maximus the Confessor, "The Four Hundred Chapters on Love" (*Centuries*), in Maximus the Confessor, *Selected Writings*, translated by George C. Berthold (London: SPCK, 1985), III.4/62.

³⁴ Maximus the Confessor, *Questions to Thalassius*, 27.

the demonic gnosis of acquisitiveness (what benefit does this object have for me?), instead embracing the grace of what Rowan Williams calls “the infusion of angelic awareness, seeing the things of the world in their true – that is, symbolic – significance and using them accordingly”. Thus we have an adequate and contemplative relationship with finite reality, going beyond its usefulness to a receptivity towards its ontological excess.³⁵

So Maximus takes us first by the way of renunciation, or to put it better, by the way of a moral relationship with nature. As with the Methodist tradition, right relation with our fellow creatures is emphasised: Maximus will not allow us to use nature, anthropocentrically, as our spiritual toy. Having made this firm ethical statement, Maximus now leads us by a positive way, which is also relational and moral. So first, he asks us to contemplate how nature feeds us. Clearly this is not just about food and drink, but nature enabling us to breathe by providing oxygen. This establishes in us gratitude to nature.

Maximus’ second step is to engage our intellect.³⁶ As Hans Urs von Balthasar says, for Maximus our intellect works on the data our senses give us of nature, in all its “dizzying variety”, the senses being the “intellectual vehicle of the powers of the soul.” And so we perceive the “laws” of nature, how the different creatures are related and interconnected³⁷ into what today we call an ecosystem. For Maximus, observation of the laws of nature is also a moral lesson to us, on how *our* senses should work in harmony. Yes, animals do kill and eat plants and each other, but also, as Michael Marder and others have discovered, non-human beings also help each other: plants communicate with each other by chemical signals.³⁸ There is something here in Maximus’ understanding which might recall “intelligent design”, but at a deeper level, *interconnection and harmony* – the true meaning of the symbolic, which originates in the fitting together of the two pieces of a *symbolē*, a token.

This takes us to the third phase of contemplation, doxology: arising from our wonder and contemplative engagement of the intellect, we glorify God who made nature intelligently. Baptised as priests (1 Peter 2:9), we articulate creation’s praise of God – we celebrate cosmic liturgy. And this baptises the human instinct of wonder. As William Desmond says, “There is no adequate environmental ethics without reverence beyond all functionality; simply joy in the being other of the world, joy that enacts a lived praise of its worth.”³⁹ The Energy Policy of the UMC takes this a step further: we are co-creatures with all of creation and co-creators with God.⁴⁰

For Maximus, when we contemplate nature in this way, we contemplate its *logoi*. Intentionally connecting to Christ the *Logos*, Maximus also draws on the multiple meanings of the Greek word *logos*: reason, structure, account and, for Maximus, God’s *intention* for each of his creatures.⁴¹ This is a dynamic understanding, fully compatible with evolutionary biology. According to Maximus, Christ, the Logos, the Word through whom God created the world (Genesis 1), is in a sense incarnate in the *logoi* of creation. Drawing on Pseudo-Dionysius,⁴² Maximus understands that all the ideas, that is the principles of each species, are already present in God’s mind. So, being already there in God’s mind, the ideas are actually uncreated – as the “energy” of the elements in Wisdom 7:17.⁴³ They become “incarnate” in physical creation.

This might sound as if we just contemplate the idea of the plant or animal, rather than the thing itself. But perhaps Maximus intends us to understand that we get a graced glimpse of the glory of creation which will be

³⁵ Evagrius Ponticus, *Thoughts* 8, cf 4, 7; Maximus, *Centuries* III.92/ 74; Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (London/Oxford: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), 56, 60-61.

³⁶ Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua to John*, 7.

³⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: the Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003 [1988]), 304.

³⁸ Luce Irigaray & Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 121-124; Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

³⁹ William Desmond, *Ethics and the Between* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 181, n. 19; and see Steven E. Knepper, *Wonder Strikes: Approaching Aesthetics and Literature with William Desmond* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2022), 62.

⁴⁰ UMC Energy Policy, 1980 (Stephens, 480).

⁴¹ Maximus, *Ambigua to John*, 7.33; *Questions to Thalassius*, 13.

⁴² Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 5.8.

⁴³ Greek *energeian*, translated as “activity” in the Revised Standard Version (Catholic Edition). See Paul M. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 112.

fulfilled in the New Creation. For he invokes not just deductive reason, but contemplation, *theoria* in the original Greek: the etymology of “theory” – and *theoria* is rooted in *theorein*, to see. We need to take time to see, not just project our theories on to nature. Yes, laboratory dissection and experimentation teach us much about plants and animals: but so many centuries after Maximus we have forgotten, as Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder point out, the first truth of our need for nature, that is, our dependence upon nature merely to breathe.⁴⁴

What Maximus offers us is what we might call “contemplative metaphysics”.⁴⁵ And Aquinas, following Aristotle, tells us that all knowledge comes to us from the senses.⁴⁶ This is far more than just epistemological realism, i.e. what you perceive with your senses is real, not just a product of the mind. Rather, contemplative metaphysics is taking *time* to contemplate, following a discipline of wonder. Thus we have time to receive more of the truth of what things are, thereby deepening in our theories of them. Then, our theories open out into praise.

And of course much of our praise, especially in liturgical worship, is through the words (*logoi*) of Scripture, which, as Joshua Lollar points out, have a special connection with the *logoi* of nature:

Just as the Word has diversified himself in the *logoi* of created things and yet remains unified in Himself, so too has the Word been expanded into the *logoi* of Scripture while yet drawing all those who study them back into the unity that He maintains.⁴⁷

It is no coincidence that Joshua Lollar is an Orthodox Christian: the Orthodox tradition has retained the New Testament’s strong sense of cosmic redemption, and Orthodox leaders and theologians such as Patriarch Bartholomew, St. Amphilochios of Makri, Philip Sherrard and Elizabeth Theokritoff have been among strong advocates and activists of environmental justice.⁴⁸ This recalls the cosmic dimension of John Wesley’s soteriology, to which I alluded earlier, and which the bishops of the UMC call us to rediscover. This salvation is truly holistic, “complete holiness and happiness.”⁴⁹

Natural Contemplation as a Baptized Autoethnography of Nature?

Douglas E. Christie is a contemporary theologian who engages with the Christian monastic tradition as a powerful resource, tradition and training for contemplative reconnection with nature.⁵⁰ He sees it as practising an asceticism of battle against “nameless forces” and “dwelling in a still-fresh paradise” aimed at “reconstituting a broken whole”.⁵¹ In other words, it is not just a way of praising God whilst also being spiritually beneficial to us, but a practice through which we become channels and agents of God’s healing of nature. Christie draws a great deal on his own experience of spending time in nature, alone, or with groups, including in monastic retreats. He reflects on his own mother’s illness and death in the context of nature as sacrament of presence and harbinger of death, enabling him to sense, during the scattering of her ashes in nature, both her absence and a mysterious sense of her presence.⁵²

All the more because Christie writes beautifully, such an approach falls easily prey to accusations of subjectivism and romanticism. But in fact, it’s closer to analytical autoethnography. According to Garance Maréchal,

⁴⁴ See Irigaray and Marder, *Through Vegetal Being*, 45-46, 100.

⁴⁵ I am indebted to Louise Nelstrop for this expression.

⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.84.7.

⁴⁷ Lollar, *To See into the Life of Things*, 249.

⁴⁸ See, for example: Patriarch Bartholomew, ed. John Chrysavgis, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2021); Herman A. Middleton, «Elder Amphilochios of Patmos: Life», in *Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit: The Lives & Counsels of Contemporary Elders of Greece*, 2nd edition (Thessalonica: Protecting Veil Press, 2004); Philip Sherrard, *The Rape of Man and Nature: An Enquiry into the Origins and Consequences of Modern Science* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1987); Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009).

⁴⁹ Stephens, 486, citing the UMC’s *God’s Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action*, 2009.

⁵⁰ Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵¹ Ibid. 15.

⁵² Ibid. 310-311.

“[a]utoethnography is a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field works and writing”, with a double sense of the ethnography of one’s own group and as autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest.⁵³ Although it has been criticised as “navel-gazing” and “emotionally incontinent”, Maréchal argues that “evocative and emotional autoethnography promotes the ethnographic project as a relational commitment to the ordinary practices of human life [...] analytical autoethnography finds it necessary to *look outward at distinct others* in order to generate meaningful social analysis.”⁵⁴

And true to the compunction and, more fundamentally, the *metanoia* of the monastic tradition, Christie does a great deal of looking outward. Not only does he engage with other “natural contemplatives”, such as Thomas Merton and Henry David Thoreau, but he acknowledges his own failure to notice the Columbia River and its salmon, instead being distracted by his fascination with the technology of the Grand Coulee Dam, and this prompts him to reflect on the damaging effects of our failure to see.⁵⁵ If he presents monastic natural contemplation as a kind of autoethnography, it is a radically de-self-centred kind: the monk’s attention to their thoughts is not navel-gazing, but rather repentance: are my thoughts engaging with reality? If I am angry, what am I really angry about? Indeed, a strong theme is rejecting all idols, *even the idol of nature*. Christie gives the challenging example of Abba Arsenius rebuking his disciples for even hearing the rustling of the reeds: for him, this shows that they have no quiet in their hearts.⁵⁶ In the context, it seems he is showing them that while they are praying, they are actually allowing themselves to get distracted away from their prayer rather than listening contemplatively to God’s presence in nature. Arguably, Arsenius was perhaps less interested in natural contemplation than other monks. But this reveals an essential tension in monastic contemplation between word and silence, affirmation and negation: we learn to contemplate the Word of God in silence, and our silence needs a word. We see the Word of God as the *Logos* of creation, the *Logos* of its *logoi*, precisely because we have practised radical detachment, radical self-emptying (cf Philippians 2:7). We no longer make an idol of nature by projecting our desires, wounds and fantasies on to it – rather, we start to see nature as it is. This is a “participatory turn”: it’s not enough to theorise about contemplative practice, as if then we would know what to do. Rather, we need to engage personally, with all the risk and vulnerability that comes with actually implicating ourselves,⁵⁷ in contemplating all things as a unity. We pay honest attention to things as they present themselves to us, such that our minds will come to be places of light – a place where God dwells.⁵⁸

Purified of self-centred romanticism, we have the authority to invoke the ideal of paradise. Christie says, “it is [...] difficult to imagine how we will be able to participate in the work of repairing the world without seriously grappling with the question of what kind of world we hope to discover and live within – without reimagining paradise.”⁵⁹ In the contemplative tradition, paradise is not separate from world, but woven deeply into everything that exists:⁶⁰ “[w]e have what we seek.”⁶¹ Thus it can be said of true Christian contemplatives that, however audacious this sounds, they are the ones “by whom the world is kept in being.”⁶²

There is an intriguing link here with the trajectory of the UMC. In its 1984 statement on environmental stewardship, it invokes (and perhaps it’s surprising that Christie doesn’t) the Scriptural concept of *shalom*, far more than a vague sense of peace, but rather, “the complete and harmonious interrelatedness of all creation.”⁶³ This strikes a strong contemplative chord which is inseparable from action: by graced contemplation we see God’s complete harmony in creation as God created it. But our intellect, which as we know from Evagrius and Maximus must also be engaged, knows that creation is damaged by sin. So this spurs us to action: “Religious experience and personal

⁵³ Garance Maréchal, «Autoethnography» in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, edited by Albert J. Mills et al., Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010, 43.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 45.

⁵⁵ Christie, *The Blue Sapphire*, 144-146.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 102, citing Abba Arsenius, *Apophthegmata Patrum* Arsenius 25, in Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006), 13.

⁵⁷ Christie, *The Blue Sapphire*, 22.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 33-35.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 347.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. 353.

⁶² Ibid. 36, citing Anon, *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 50.

⁶³ Stephens, 481, also 484.

transformation prompt good (responsible) works as a spiritual practice.”⁶⁴

There is also an echo in Pope Francis’ document on ecology, *Laudato Si: on Care for our Common Home* (2015): he says of St. Francis of Assisi (whose words “Laudato Si, “Praised be”, are the opening of his hymn of creation), that rather than a naïve romantic, St. Francis “was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.”⁶⁵

To let my own study take an autoethnographic turn, on a contemplative walk among the trees two autumns ago, I was reflecting on how beautiful the trees were, aware, as a recovered asthmatic, of how they give me oxygen to breathe. I was also considering the pollution levels and the whole planetary situation. As my contemplation opened out into praise of God’s glorious creative work, I also felt a moment of inspiration. I felt called to pray for those trees, in the knowledge that God had empowered me by my baptismal priesthood to pray blessing on creation. Aside from the threat of fallen angels, is there not a danger that a grieving “Instagram witch” is actually asking the non-human beings of nature to do more for her (or him) than nature can provide – to be a saviour? Instead, as Christians, we rely on the saving God, who works through his good angels and us his baptismal priests to heal creation, and for us to be healed as part of it.

Conclusion: Towards Contemplative-Active Communities of Environmental Holiness

Seeking to provide a spiritual resource to meet the imperative of active environmental holiness called for by Methodist theologians and to develop their recovery of *shalom* as harmony in the cosmos, I have aimed in this paper to retrieve the neglected Christian tradition of natural contemplation. I have sought to show it in both its ancient and modern instantiations as a form of contemplative prayer that responds to all that is best in ecospirituality, and in both praising God as creator and restoring us to right relationship with the rest of creation, provides at least a foundation for active environmental holiness.

But isn’t there a danger that natural contemplation will just stay something for a few religious “professionals”? What about our congregations? In fact, there are rich but neglected resources in the Western liturgical tradition to reconnect whole Christian communities with creation, such as Harvest Thanksgiving services, and the blessing of fields at Rogationtide (the “time of asking”), shortly before Ascension. In the early 1940s, at the request of the Young Farmers’ Clubs and Women’s Land Army, the Anglican Rector of Crawley, Rev. D.L. Couper, wrote *Country Services: Plough Sunday, Rogationtide, Lammastide, Harvest Thanksgiving*.⁶⁶ It’s easy to dismiss these liturgies as anthropocentric – it’s all about the earth producing enough food for *us*, and *people* not getting starved, injured or killed. But these liturgies create, or rather prayerfully recall, our *relationship* with the earth. And in fact one of the prayers thanks God for “the rich soil, the smell of the fresh-turned earth [...] The keenness of a winter’s frost, men’s breath, and horses, steaming.”⁶⁷

Part of the problem is that it belongs to a vanished world. The blessing of the parts of the plough includes words we no longer know: “the slade and the sidecap, the share and the coulter.”⁶⁸ Thirty years later, in 1974, Rev Peter Akehurst sought to rethink the Rogationtide and Harvest services, since with mass urbanisation the rural harvest festival was “part of a rapidly fading pattern of existence.” It’s difficult to grow a marrow on the window ledge of a tower block, and parishioners will probably buy food to offer at the Harvest Service from the supermarket.⁶⁹ Fearing that Harvest thanksgiving will be reduced to a “vote-winning” special occasion for the less churchgoing, he seeks to

⁶⁴ Stephens, 488.

⁶⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 10, cf also 72.

⁶⁶ Rev. D.L. Couper, *Country Services: Plough Sunday, Rogationtide, Lammastide, Harvest Thanksgiving* (Crawley: private publication, 1947).

⁶⁷ Ibid. 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 10.

⁶⁹ Peter R. Akehurst, *Liturgy and Creation: a Re-appraisal of Rogationtide and Harvest Festivals* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1974), 3.

pastor and evangelise by putting Christ back into the Harvest Festival. Prescient about the growing environmental crisis, he argues that the Anglican liturgical tradition is already:

fully creational in its expression, the church already seeks to sanctify material existence, to state God's claim over it and to service men (*sic*) for their task as agents in it of the Kingdom present and yet to come.⁷⁰

For him, agricultural first-fruits are incidental: what is central is humankind's Biblical role as God's stewards of creation.⁷¹

Another half century on, we're acutely aware that freak weather and its devastating impact on agriculture are the "new normal": thus the problem of how to feed people, and affordably, is in fact tightly bound up with healing the environment. Suddenly some of the "Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions" in the 2010 Roman Catholic Missal have a new relevance: "At Seed Time", "After the Harvest", "In Time of Famine or for Those Suffering Hunger", "In Time of Earthquake", "For Rain", "For Fine Weather", "For an End to Storms", and in times of bushfires, drought, floods and cyclone.⁷² They're hardly ever used in Britain, but restoring them, especially at a time of freak weather and rising food prices, would be a start to turning round what we might call the urbanisation of liturgy, and thus of our prayer in general. The liturgy is both contemplative and active, offering cosmic worship to God in the restoration of right relationship with the beautiful and fragile yet theophanic creation, praying with it and for it as the Methodist social creed has helped us rediscover. And this might be a channel of grace to restore another relationship: the relationship of followers of nature spiritualities with Christ and His disciples.

It may be argued that we need something rather stronger to motivate us to action than cosmic liturgy. Will a liturgy "For an End to Storms" really have us changing our lives and campaigning to reduce emissions and thereby reduce and hopefully reverse the global warming which is producing freak weather? The cyclical nature of liturgy – the feasts and fasts coming round every year in harmony with the seasons – is a point of connection with ecospiritualities, and this steady, stable annual rhythm forms us over time, shaping our outlook and our relationship with the world. It is thus a channel for conversion of heart. Perhaps it's no coincidence that practitioners of natural contemplation such as St. Maximus were part of the Byzantine liturgical tradition, which so strongly emphasises the cosmic extent of redemption.

Yet more fundamentally this is about prayer. We do not instrumentalise a liturgy, even for good purposes. We may rightly hope that it will galvanise us to environmental holiness visible in action. But first and foremost liturgy is worship of God, reverencing God's absolute priority and lordship. We come, poor and needing pardon and healing, praying for grace for ourselves *and for the rest of Creation*. And, as a priestly people by our Baptism, let us not underestimate the power of prayer for all needs, including the healing of creation – if only we ask for what is really needed (cf Jas 4:2). How the grace we pray for ourselves and for Creation will be given is of course completely in God's hands. His work, and the work He will command and grace us to do, we cannot predict, because God's grace is transformative, leading and forming us into what we do not know: the Risen life in its fulness in the New Heaven and New Earth.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 7.

⁷¹ Ibid. 8-9, 10-12.

⁷² *The Roman Missal*, 3rd English edition (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2010), 1355-1369. Cf also prayer "For Rain in Due Season", based on Ps. 146, in Séan Finnegan (ed.), *A Book of Hours and Other Catholic Devotions* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1998), 363.

Bibliography

- Akehurst, Peter R. *Liturgy and Creation: a Re-appraisal of Rogationtide and Harvest Festivals* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1974).
- Anon, *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981).
- Armstrong, Karen. *Sacred Nature: How We Can Recover our Bond with the Natural World* (London: Bodley Head, 2022).

- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *Cosmic Liturgy: the Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003 [1988]).
- Barker, Margaret. *Creation: a Biblical Vision for the Environment* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010).
- Bernard of Clairvaux, *Letters*, translated by Bruno Scott James (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998 (1953)).
- Blowers, Paul M. *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- Campbell, Elizabeth, "Witchcraft in the Age of the Anthropocene", *The Noesis Review* VIII (2021), 59-69.
- Christie, Douglas E. *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- Couper, D.L. *Country Services: Plough Sunday, Rogationtide, Lammastide, Harvest Thanksgiving* (Crawley: private publication, 1947).
- Desmond, William. *Ethics and the Between* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).
- Evagrius Ponticus. *De Malignis Cogitationibus. Sur les Pensées* ["Thoughts"], edited and translated by Paul Gehin et al., *Sources Chrétiennes* 397 (Paris: Cerf, 1998).
- Finnegan, Séan (ed.), *A Book of Hours and Other Catholic Devotions* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1998).
- Gregory Nazianzen (St Gregory of Narek), Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations*, vol.2, *Patrologia Graeca* 36, edited by Jean-Pierre Migne (Paris: Garnier, 1886), coll. 349-352.
- Irenaeus, *Contre les Hérésies* (Against the Heresies), Book IV, edited and translated by Adelin Rousseau et al., *Sources Chrétiennes* 100 (Paris: Cerf, 1965).
- Irigaray, Luce and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
- Knepper, Steven E. *Wonder Strikes: Approaching Aesthetics and Literature with William Desmond* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2022).
- Kotva, Simone. *Effort and Grace: on the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).
- Lollar, Joshua, *To See into the Life of Things: the Contemplation of Nature in Maximus the Confessor and his Predecessors* (Turnhout: Brépols, 2013).
- Marder, Michael. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
- Maréchal, Garance, "Autoethnography" in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, edited by Albert J. Mills et al., Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010, 43-45.
- Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua ad Iohannem* ("Ambigua to John"), *Patrologiae Graeca* 91, edited and translation by François Combefis (Paris: 1860), coll. 1061-1417.
- Maximus the Confessor. *Quaestiones et Dubia* ("Questions"), edited by Jose Declerck, *Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca* 10 (Turnhout: Brépols, 1982).
- Maximus the Confessor, "The Four Hundred Chapters on Love" (*Centuries*), in Maximus the Confessor, *Selected Writings*, translated by George C. Berthold (London: SPCK, 1985).
- McGrath, Alister, "The Uses of Wonder and Ritual: How the Sacred Helps Us Find Our Place in the World", *Times Literary Supplement* 6259 (17 March 2023): 22-23.
- Middleton, Herman A., "Elder Amphilochios of Patmos: Life", in *Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit: The Lives & Counsels of Contemporary Elders of Greece*, 2nd edition (Thessalonica: Protecting Veil Press, 2004).
- Patriarch Bartholomew, ed. John Chrysavgis, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2021).
- Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Divine Names*, in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, edited and translated by Colm Luibheid (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987).
- Richardson, Miles, Holli-Anne Passmore, Ryan Lumber, Rory Thomas and Alex Hunt, "Moments, not minutes: The nature-wellbeing relationship", *International Journal of Wellbeing* 11, no. 1 (2021), 8-33. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v11i1.1267>
- Sherrard, Philip, *The Rape of Man and Nature: An Enquiry into the Origins and Consequences of Modern Science* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1987). Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae* vol. XII, edited and translated by the English Dominican Friars (London/New York: Blackfriars, with Eyre & Spottiswoode and McGraw-Hill Book Company, ca. 1963).
- Stengers, Isabelle and Martin Stavrinsky, "Relearning the Art of Paying Attention: a Conversation", *SubStance* 47, no. 1 (2018), 130-145.
- Theokritoff, Elizabeth, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009).

- The Roman Missal*, 3rd English edition (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2010).
- Vatican, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*: Final Document (Vatican City, 2019). <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html>
- Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006).
- White, Dominic. *How Do I Look: Theology in the Age of the Selfie* (London: SCM, 2020).
- White, Dominic. *The Lost Knowledge of Christ: Contemporary Spiritualities, Christian Cosmology, and the Arts* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).
- White, Dominic. "Early Christian Initiation: a Somatic Ressourcement", *Worship* (forthcoming).
- White, Lynn, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic (sic) Crisis", *Science* 155.3767 (1967), 1203-1207.
- Williams, Rowan. *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (London/Oxford: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021).
- Xygalatas, Dimitris. *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living* (London: Profile, 2022).