

The laughter of the universe is God's delight  
It is the universal Easter laughter.  
- Jürgen Moltmann<sup>1</sup>

## I

From earliest times, Christians have understood from scripture that the created universe is a testimony and revelation of the wonder and greatness of God. They have celebrated God's redemptive work through rites known as "sacraments". Through sacraments, in variously understood ways, God is believed to be present with us in Christ. Is the whole of creation in fact a testimony of the Emmanuel - God with us? And can church sacraments speak of God's work in all of creation? Or are our sacramental rites to be criticised as an inadequate representation of God's purposes in creation and in Christ? These are some of the questions that occur as environmental theology and sacramental theology encounter each other. But there is no sharply articulated contention between the two. Therefore what follows is a somewhat loose survey that attempts to draw out a few of the challenges of ecological theology to an understanding of the sacramental.

### *The nature of sacrament*

It is difficult to write on sacramental theology without becoming enmeshed in definitional debate on what "sacramentality" and "a sacrament" are. I propose to avoid this debate altogether<sup>2</sup> as most of what follows fits comfortably with most understandings of the idea of sacramentality. But there is an important qualification to this.

The medieval church debated the definition of sacrament over many years, seeking to refine Augustine's understanding of a sacrament as a "visible form of invisible grace" and as a "sign of a sacred thing".<sup>3</sup> Hugo of St. Victor

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<sup>1</sup> *The coming of God: Christian eschatology* / Jürgen Moltmann. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996, p.339.

<sup>2</sup> ... especially as my first essay in THL 314 was largely devoted to the definition of sacrament as sign.

<sup>3</sup> *Christian theology: an introduction* / Alister E. McGrath. - 2nd ed. - Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997, p.496.

(1140) required that (among other things<sup>4</sup>) there be a physical element, such as water, wine or oil.<sup>5</sup> Yet such a definition remained inadequate for the church, as it did not encompass all seven of what were by then generally accepted as sacraments.<sup>6</sup> By omitting reference to a physical element, Peter Lombard was later able to bring practice and theory into line. A sacrament could be an action, such as laying on of hands. This understanding was to remain virtually unchallenged until the reformation.<sup>7</sup>

The qualification to be noted is that a sacramental understanding of creation tends to require an element of materiality - it is the material, biophysical, universe through which God is seen and known. An understanding of sacrament that removes the physical element can bring about a dualism which ecological theology precisely seeks to avoid.

## II

### *Nature as revelation*

There is much in scripture that speaks of the creation as a *sign* of God's action in grace and power (Amos 4:13 and 5:18; Jeremiah 27:5 and 31:35-37; Isaiah 40:4-5; Psalm 8:1,3-7; 19:1-2 and 24:1-2; Proverbs 8:1,22,24-31). God's creation is a sign and expression of God's relationship with God's people and humankind as a whole. God redeems and restores the creation, including humankind.

Many have written of the natural world as a place of personal encounter with the greatness and beauty of God in a way that is nonetheless intimate.<sup>8</sup> Spiritual experiences mediated through the senses are notoriously subjective, and must be subject to tests of coherence and adequacy. Nevertheless, as James Nash observes, to restrict the database of faith and theology to scripture and tradition alone, excluding general revelation, "natural" theology, or

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<sup>4</sup> He also required that there be a likeness to the thing signified, authorization to signify the thing in question, and an efficacy by which the sacrament is capable of conferring the benefits it signifies.

<sup>5</sup> McGrath, *op.cit.*, p.498 see also *The eucharistic mystery: revitalising the tradition* / D Power. - Dublin: Gill; & McMillan, 1992, p.212-3.

<sup>6</sup> Baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, marriage, ordination and extreme unction.

<sup>7</sup> McGrath, *op.cit.*, pp.498-9.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Paul Collins in *God's Earth: religion as if matter really mattered*. - North Blackburn: Dove Books, 1995.

mystical experiences, is an arbitrary limitation on the freedom of the Spirit and a denial of God's presence and *present* revelation.<sup>9</sup>

To ask, "Who is God?", Nancy Wright says, is another way of saying, "Where do we locate the holy?" Such texts as John 1.3 and Colossians 1.17 "seem to indicate that the holy is much more within the Earth community than we Western, Enlightenment-influenced Christians have thought".<sup>10</sup> As a spiritual director, she asks herself, "Now I am wondering whether we spiritual directors should wait expectantly for spiritual directees to see God in creation. I think we should." Individual experiences of the spirit of the Earth will differ. Some will feel celebration and joy - others are moved by grief for the sufferings of the Earth. "But a caveat must be stated: we cannot lose the distinctiveness between God and the Earth." We may experience the love of God while in nature. But it is not simply nature loving us. "God is intrinsic in nature, even while transcending it."<sup>11</sup>

#### *Nature as sacrament*

James Nash describes the experience of God known and revealed in the natural realm as "sacramental".

This understanding of sacramentality emphatically denies that the Christian faith desacralizes nature. Contrary to a common viewpoint ... nature is sacred by association, as the bearer of the sacred. We are standing perpetually on holy ground because God is present ... The sacramental presence of the Spirit endows all of creation with a sacred value and dignity.<sup>12</sup>

Nash identifies characteristics of Christian "nature sacramentality"<sup>13</sup>:

- Sacramental experiences of God in nature are morally and spirituality regenerative.
- This sacramentality is not romantic or sentimental. In nature it observes new life and violent death.
- Christian faith does not *desacralize* nature (as noted above).
- But Christian sacramentality does *dedivinise* nature. The biophysical

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<sup>9</sup> *Loving nature: ecological integrity and Christian responsibility* / James A. Nash. - Nashville: Abingdon, 1991, p.112.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, Nancy G. - "Christian spirituality: mending the web" in *Theology for Earth community: a field guide* / edited by Dieter T. Hessel. - Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996, pp239-249, at p.245.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.246.

<sup>12</sup> *Loving nature: ecological integrity and Christian responsibility* / James A. Nash. - Nashville: Abingdon, 1991, pp.114-5

<sup>13</sup> *Loving nature*, p.114-116

world is *not* part of God. Christian sacramentality is not pantheistic, but rather panentheistic, in the sense that God is *in all* and all is in God without being part of God.

- Nature sacramentality is sensate. It experiences God in and through the biophysical world, not by blocking the senses or attempting to transcend them.

Moltmann declares that a trinitarian doctrine of creation does not start from an antithesis between God and the world. God creates the world and at the same time enters into it. It lives by God's power, and yet God lives in it and is seen through it. If the Creator were to stand over against the creation, God would stand against God's own self.<sup>14</sup>

William Temple wrote of a "sacramental universe", in which all of material existence is essentially holy, a medium of revelation and a means of grace. The creation is the sacramental expression of the creator<sup>15</sup>

Rosemary Radford Ruether finds in the Jewish wisdom tradition and New Testament christology that the whole cosmic community of nature is alive, grounded in and embodying the divine Spirit who is its source of life and renewal of life.<sup>16</sup> God, in whom we live and move and have our being, is not some detached spiritual being in heaven, Ruether argues, but the one who is in and through and under the whole life process. The whole cosmos is God's body.<sup>17</sup>

Calvin, in his *Institutes*,<sup>18</sup> placed the Christian sacraments on the broader basis of nature, recognizing that God can use one of God's created elements sacramentally - for example the rainbow given to Noah and his posterity as a sign of the continuing mercy of God.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in his parables, Jesus used natural objects as symbols of aspects of faith. Protestant writer, Max Thurian,

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<sup>14</sup> *God in creation: a new theology of creation and the Spirit of God* / Jürgen Moltmann. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993, pp.14-15, 63-64, 98-100.

<sup>15</sup> *Man, nature and God* / William Temple. - London: Macmillan, 1934, pp. 482-495

<sup>16</sup> *Gaia and God: an ecofeminist theology of Earth-healing*. - HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, pp.229-237.

<sup>17</sup> *Ecofeminism and healing ourselves, healing the earth* / Rosemary Radford Ruether. - [Lecture at] St. Stephen's College, Edmonton, Alberta 2 June, 1998. URL: <http://www.ualberta.ca/ST.STEPHENS/ss-rueth.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Book IV, xiv, 18.

<sup>19</sup> *The Theology of the sacraments and other papers* / Donald M. Baillie. - London: Faber and Faber, 1957, p.45.

states the relationship between the sacraments and universal sacramentality thus:

... although it is beyond question that God is acting invisibly and secretly in people and in the world by his providence and his mercy, we know the means of grace through which he acts visibly and explicitly; they are his word and the sacraments of his presence and his working. ... Although the activity of God is universal, far exceeding the reach of his word and sacrament, it is in them that we can be sure of hearing him and meeting him.<sup>20</sup>

Catholic writers have particularly contributed to the recovery of the sense of the sacramentality of the cosmos, an understanding of God grounded in wisdom theology and cosmological Christology.<sup>21</sup>

In Orthodox perspective, we are by nature priests, standing in the centre of the world, unifying it in acts of blessing God, receiving the world from God and offering it to God. In *Between sacraments and Orthodoxy*<sup>22</sup>, Alexander Schmemmann speaks of the sacramental nature of life. God created and blessed the world by filling all that exists with divine love and goodness. Our response is to bless and thank God and see the world as God sees it. There can be no ultimate sacred-secular split. For instance, we recognize that sharing food is a natural sacrament of family and friendship that is more than simply eating and drinking. Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholemew said in 1997,

... everything that lives and breathes is sacred and beautiful in the eyes of God. The whole world is a sacrament. The entire created cosmos is a burning bush of God's uncreated energies. And humankind stands as a priest before the altar of creation, as microcosm and mediator. Such is the true nature of things; or, as an Orthodox hymn describes it, "the truth of things", if only we have the eyes of faith to see it. ... All things are sacramental when seen in the light of God.<sup>23</sup>

Nash suggests six affirmations of Christian faith with ecological implications.<sup>24</sup> Among these is an affirmation of the sacramental presence of

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<sup>20</sup> *Our faith: basic Christian belief* / Max Thurian. - Taiz ■: Les Primes de Taiz ■, 1978, pp. 111-2, quoted *ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>21</sup> *The coming of the cosmic Christ* / Matthew Fox. - HarperSanFrancisco, 1988. See also: Berry, *The dream of the Earth*. Thomas Berry. - San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988, and *The universe story* / Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry. - HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.

<sup>22</sup> New York: Herder and Herder, 1965. Here I rely on the summary in *The Sacraments in religious education and liturgy* / Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed. - Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Pr., 1985, pp.13-14.

<sup>23</sup> Bartholemew. - Homily of His All Holiness Bartholemew, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople at the 50th anniversary dedication of the Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California, 8 November, 1997 URL: [http://ww2.goarch.org/patriarchate/us-visit/speeches/Homily\\_at\\_50th\\_Annivers.htm](http://ww2.goarch.org/patriarchate/us-visit/speeches/Homily_at_50th_Annivers.htm)

<sup>24</sup> The six affirmations are: the doctrine of creation; the doctrine of the incarnation; the affirmation that humans are called to exercise dominion; the hope for cosmic redemption; the love of God; and the

the Spirit in the created order. Nature is made sacred by being the bearer of the sacred. The world is filled with the glory of God (Isa.6.3; Eph.4.6). Thus, Nash argues, "the world is valued by God as the place of spiritual presence and residence. It is God's beloved habitat - and ours."

### III

#### *Challenge*

We have seen above a harmony between ecological theology and a sacramental understanding of God's participation in creation. But ecological understanding implicitly challenges church sacraments and church practices. If we too strongly or inappropriately understand church sacraments as the actuality or representation of the presence of God (the "Real Presence") we risk taking God out of the creation. In the sacraments many would say that God, or at least the grace of God, is made available to us in a unique way. From this one might implicitly (but wrongly) diminish God's commitment to the whole of the created order.

Such concern has been articulated explicitly by the Society of Friends (the Quakers). In its response to the World Council of Churches document *Baptism, eucharist, and ministry*<sup>25</sup>, the Dutch Yearly Meeting of Friends (Quakers) wrote that:

... the word of God does not only refer to personal inner renewal, but also to a new earth. The signs of peace and justice are signs of salvation that cannot be reduced to sacramental-ritual forms. ... Communion [in God's spirit] is not reserved to such places or instances as the table and the meeting. On the contrary, Quakers hold that (daily) life as a whole should be steeped in this experience of communion with God and fellow human beings<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, the London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in Great Britain wrote,

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sacramental presence of the Spirit in creation. *Theological Foundations for Ecological Responsibilities* / James A. Nash. - 1997. URL: <http://www.umc-gbcs.org/nash.htm>

<sup>25</sup> *Baptism, eucharist and ministry*. - Geneva : World Council of Churches, 1982 (Faith and Order paper: no. 111)

<sup>26</sup> *Churches respond to BEM: official responses to the "Baptism, eucharist and ministry text* / edited by Max Thurian. - Volume III. - Geneva : World Council of Churches, 1987. (Faith and Order paper: no. 135), pp. 297-8.

... We fear that separating a particular sacrament and making it a focal point in worship can obscure the sacramental validity of the rest of creation and human life.<sup>27</sup>

Ecological theology is a challenge to liturgical reform of sacramental rites. From a survey of professors of liturgy, Beryl Ingram reports that, "the deliberate connection of ecology and liturgy is simply not happening in most of our [U.S.] seminaries."<sup>28</sup> She suggests much could be done to include celebration of the environment and God's creation in sacramental liturgy - and provides some ideas. Liturgists must ask whether or not images in worship services preserve images of domination and subordination inimical to and understanding of our inter-relatedness with and dependence on the creation.

## IV

### *Creation encountered through sacrament*

The challenge of ecological theology to the Christian understanding of the sacramental can be seen through the ways in which churches and scholars have responded. Browning and Reed speak of a "movement *from* seeing the sacraments as religious rites through which God breaks into our otherwise secular lives *to* receiving the sacraments as profound symbols of God's living presence in all of life."<sup>29</sup>

Some have brought to the sacraments an appreciation of God's creation, by having the water, bread and wine stand specifically as symbols of the created universe. Teilhard de Chardin sought to bring the creation story into Christian spirituality using, for instance, a metaphor of the bread and wine of the eucharist as embodying the entire universe.<sup>30</sup> According to Orthodox scholar Anetsis Keselopoulos, the early Fathers taught that:

there is a total integration of the material and the spiritual, so that the elements of bread and wine are an actual mode of existence of the divine and there is a complete union between them. In other words, the sacrament presupposes an actual incarnation of divine power and life; and what is communicated to man in

<sup>27</sup> *Churches respond to BEM: official responses to the "Baptism, eucharist and ministry text" / edited by Max Thurian. - Volume IV. - Geneva : World Council of Churches, 1987. (Faith and Order paper: no. 137), p.211.*

<sup>28</sup> Ingram, Beryl. - "Eco-justice liturgics" in *Theology for Earth community: a field guide / edited by Dieter T. Hessel. - Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996, pp.250-259, at p. 252.*

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.11.

<sup>30</sup> *Christianity and evolution / Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. - London: Collins, 1971, pp.73-4, cited in The body of God: an ecological theology / Sallie McFague. - Minneapolis: Fortress Pr., 1993, p.82.*

the sacrament is this divine power and life.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the Incarnation takes place today in the Eucharist,

which embodies the intimate involvement of man within the act of salvation, as Christ renews, regenerates and resurrects the whole of creation. When this sacramental involvement of man with the rest of creation is removed, he deprives himself of the essential quality of his human nature.<sup>32</sup>

Contemporary liturgical theologian Hoyt Hickman believes that the way to teach eco-theology in liturgy is to re-educate worshipers about the meaning of the sacraments. Baptism includes a signification of everything that water is - enough means life, too much means death. Clean water on the Earth today is scarce. As we are cleansed in baptism, so might we go forth to cleanse the water of the Earth (cf. Rev.22.1). Similarly, "whatever the Lord's Supper is, it is everything that eating is". As we eat and drink, we have cause to evaluate what and how we feed ourselves and the environmental implications.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, Presbyterian Donald Baillie wrote:

The sacraments in the specific sense are but concentrations of something very much more widespread, so that nothing could be in the special sense a sacrament unless everything was in a basic and general sense sacramental. ... Is the divine Word entirely absent from the wider world from which it singles out special elements for a specially sacred use? Is there not a basic reason why material things should be taken by the Word and consecrated the instruments of divine grace? Do they not lend themselves to such a use because God made them, because they are His creatures?<sup>34</sup>

James Nash, however, dislikes the idea of the eucharistic elements as symbols of nature.

The wine and bread are the products of culture, signifying the gifts of labor in the human transformation of nature. This is a critical rite for the church, but nature sacramentality values nature in the raw.<sup>35</sup>

## V

*Sacrament as expression of God's redemption of nature in Christ*

Scripture suggests (especially in Colossians 1.20<sup>36</sup>) that Christ's redemptive work of reconciliation is directed towards all of creation. Catholic

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<sup>31</sup> Keselopoulos, Anetsis. - "An Orthodox approach to the ecological question" *Alive in Christ*, 1996(3), Winter 1996. URL: <http://www.stots.edu/kesel.html>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Ideas of Hoyt Hickman as described by Ingram, *op.cit.*, pp.257-8.

<sup>34</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.42-3.

<sup>35</sup> *Op.cit.*, n61, p.232.

<sup>36</sup> "... through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross". Colossians 1.20 NRSV

author, Joseph Tetlow, finds the reshaping of natural things into the Christ-revealing eucharistic elements to be an expression of this redemption. This is in harmony with the idea of the bread and wine as the products of culture.

The sacramental promise of eternal life reminds us that when we receive Communion we are eating bread, fruit of the earth and work of human hands, now most intimately bound to the body, blood, soul, and divinity of the Son of God. Here lies the most fundamental revealed truth that gives shape to an ecological spirituality today. All the earth shall be made new and brought to fulfillment through Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Edward Schillebeeckx wrote of Jesus himself as sacrament to those who believe in him.

The man Jesus, as the personal visible realization of the divine grace of redemption, is *the* sacrament, the primordial sacrament, because this man, the Son of God himself, is intended by the Father be in his humanity the only way to the actuality of redemption.<sup>38</sup>

Redeemed by Christ, the Christian community is a sacrament to others. And in the church sacraments, the Christian community recognizes the presence of the redemptive mystery. Schillebeeckx says that,

In an earthly embodiment which we can see and touch, the heavenly Christ sacramentalizes both his continual intercession for us and his active gift of grace. Therefore the sacraments are the visible realization on earth of Christ's mystery of saving worship.<sup>39</sup>

There are critics of such a view. Karl Barth, though he affirms baptism and eucharist, is skeptical of sacramentality.

And was it a wise action on the part of the church when it ceased to recognise in the incarnation ... the one and only sacrament, fulfilled once and for all, by whose actuality it lives as the one form of the one body of its Head, as the earthly-historical form of the existence of Jesus Christ in the time between His ascension and return?<sup>40</sup>

This stands against any expression through sacraments of God's role in creation - though Barth himself places great emphasis on God as the creator.

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<sup>37</sup> Tetlow, Joseph A. "An ecological spirituality" in *Peace with God the creator, peace with all creation*. - Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1995.

URL: <http://www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/ejp/articles/spirituality.htm>

<sup>38</sup> *Christ the sacrament of the encounter with God* / E. Schillebeeckx. - New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963, p.15.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45.

<sup>40</sup> *Church dogmatics: vol. IV, The Doctrine of reconciliation - part 2.* / Karl Barth. - Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958, p.55.

## VI

Two writers help us toward a conclusion. In *The Coming of God*, Jürgen Moltmann says that,

According to Christian understanding, the Redeemer is no other than the Creator. He would contradict himself if he were not to redeem everything he has made. The God who created the universe will one day be 'all in all' (I Cor.15.28). ... There is one God. It is for his sake that the unity of redemption and creation has to be thought.<sup>41</sup>

Sallie McFague, writes in *The Body of God*,

Creation is not one thing and salvation something else; rather, they are related as scope and shape, as space and form, as place and patten. Salvation is for all of creation. The liberating, healing, inclusive ministry of Christ takes place in and for creation.<sup>42</sup>

It is in Christ that God is pleased to be reconciled to all things. Church sacraments have helped (some would say enabled) Christians to commemorate, enact, appropriate and celebrate God's gift to us in Christ. The God who is seen, known and experienced in and through all that God has created, gathers together and redeems the creation in this same Christ. There need be no contradiction between ecological and sacramental theologies. (It is more a matter of emphasis.) Awareness of God in creation reforms and enriches our understanding of sacraments and sacramentality.

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<sup>41</sup> *The coming of God: Christian eschatology* / Jürgen Moltmann. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996, p.259.

<sup>42</sup> *The Body of God: an ecological theology* / Sallie McFague. - Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p.182.

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