

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***God of Earth: Discovering a Radically Ecological Christianity.***

By Kristin Swenson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016, 148 pages.

Serious study and publication in the field of creation care is now beginning to make a mark amongst Christians who have for too long ignored, or even mocked and deplored, the growing body of evidence in support of climate change and its attendant damage to our world. Bill McKibben's work was largely ignored by Christians though he is a devout Methodist. Perhaps he seemed alarmist. Wendell Berry, also Christian, was appreciated more for literary than ecological reasons by many Christian readers, and the early theological works of Terrence Fretheim and H. Paul Santmire attracted only the small audience of mainline biblical scholars.

But the subject of creation care, as it is now commonly dubbed, can no longer be ignored. Publications are increasing rapidly. The United Methodist Church has appointed a "Missionary for the Care of God's Creation." Theological schools are integrating creation care into their curriculum, even establishing small scale farms. Duke Divinity School stands out with its Alban Institute, its Faculty in Theology, Ecology and Agrarian Studies, as well as its Prairie Whole Farm. Princeton Theological Seminary boasts a Farminary project, while the School of Divinity at Wake Forest University has developed a Program in Food, Health and Ecological Well-Being. Goshen College hosts the Merry Lea Environmental Center, and the Metanoia Farmers Cooperative works alongside Canadian Mennonite University. Regent College has established formal ties with A Rocha Canada, which is expanding its network of educational affiliations. Climate scientist Kathryn Hayhoe is an unapologetically outspoken Christian voice along with a growing number of individuals whose voices are heard in blog posts, classrooms, lecture halls and churches.

Unique perspectives are appearing in the literature. Ilea Delia's *Care for Creation*, for example, advances a particularly Franciscan spirituality of the Earth. And now, Kristin Swenson's *God of Earth* invites readers to engage in a highly imaginative "Radically Ecological Christianity." Swenson's experiment begins with some intriguing questions: "What if Jesus, the incarnation of a universal and eternal God who desires reconciliation and fullness of life, is also present and alive with us today, in and through this blue-green pulsing planet earth?" "What if among the ways that a person might meet the incarnate God, know divine love, and experience deepest forgiveness is in relationship to the nonhuman natural world?" "What if Jesus, from before the man from Galilee and still today, were God of earth - both 'over' (like Elizabeth is Queen of England) and 'constituted by,' (like chocolate is of cocoa) - and all the while, at the same time, God?" (xii).

These questions require a great deal of theological parsing, since, as she testifies, they are rather radical. But more than that, it is not at all clear what these questions (assertions, really) actually mean. I can *conceive* of Jesus being the God *over* a non-human earth, whether I agree or not, but cannot even imagine what it means for Jesus to be *constituted by* the earth as chocolate is constituted by cocoa. Is this "Jesus beyond Jesus," Swenson's preferred term for this notion, the same as earth itself? Or does the name suggest that the earth is infused with a spiritual quality, the kind that we sometimes feel when absolutely dazed by the wonder of the natural world, or the take-my-breath-away kind of beauty in a surprise vista? Or does it assume that the non-human earth, while not itself Jesus, is a second Jesus, the two being of a kind, but still differentiated? Or is God's incarnation in Jesus somehow analogous to God's incarnation in the earth?

Throughout her book, then, Swenson imagines and experiments with the something beyond, looking for "layers and possibilities for meaning far beyond the singular, the time-worn, and the strictly traditional" (xiii). The reason for this adventure is to witness "the hints of ways within the religion I inherited to put things together again - the holy and the world, Creator and creation" (xii). For that I applaud her.

So, how does she put these together again? Her framework is the church calendar, beginning with Advent. I will present a strategic sampling of her argument and, to be fair to Swenson, have chosen to use her own language through the use of extensive quotations.

During **Advent**, we wait, we prepare, and we wait some more. While we know that Jesus can come as either "the manger baby or the 'second coming,' terrifying judge of all the earth," we are reminded that "Jesus as the incarnation of God, as God's experience of a world-bound life, inhabits time with us and like us, knows the temporality of our world" (5). More than that, "God is in, through, and of earth," an earth "threaded through with thoughts of God, with the intentions of God not simply in terms of its nuts and bolts but with an inclination towards wholeness, beauty, and joy." It is a time when "we human beings, created in the image of God, share in the constant responsibility and delight of realizing such goodness" (6).

Practically, we do this by getting our house in order. "To make less fossil fuel dependent choices in daily life, and to take delight in the nonmaterial goods of friendship art and family - these also are concrete acts of preparation for the coming of the God of earth" (11). We do this *by exercising* "hope for a future closer to the care and keeping that Yahweh God assigned to the first human being...", *by practicing* the "exercise of paying attention to the earth, noticing its ways and respecting its value independent of ourselves" (18), and *by anticipating* "the moment of the infusion into earth of a living God intent on redemption. We lean into the hope of earth transformed" (23).

Swenson's **Epiphany** may "celebrate Jesus' birth with deck-the-halls joy," but quickly moves to a celebration of the equally vulnerable baby earth. Seen this way, the faithful invite the coming of the God of earth, the Jesus beyond Jesus, thereby accepting "a certain

responsibility to take care for the tender newborn, to sacrifice in honor of its holiness, and to protect against the despoiling Herods of our time" (28). They recognize "the attention, love and care that the baby Jesus draws forth from us by his very nature a poor infant is the same as earth's - to attend, to care, is to worship the newborn God" (31).

At times despair takes the upper hand, undermining any sense of hope. "Oh how I wish that the newborn God of earth, who comes with every concern of the planet for the whole dizzying complex earth, that the truth of a demanding sacredness in our fragile orb be born in/become clear to CEOs and hedge fund managers and contractors and army generals and so-called farmers who manage millions of acres from a high-rise in Manhattan. Please Jesus, God of earth, be born in them too" (36).

There is hope in the coming of this Jesus beyond Jesus, but that does not diminish our own responsibility. We need to acknowledge that the coming of the God of earth "means nothing less than an end to business as usual." We need, like the magi, to gift the newborn king with riches, not as the Herods, who would "rather kill all semblance of the holy than risk their bottom line" (42).

**Lent:** The God of earth is on trial, on trial before the contemporary religious equivalents of the Sanhedrin, before the multi-nationals, and before the political powerhouses of the day. All find this Jesus beyond Jesus an affront to current values. In her sometimes hard-hitting way, Swenson charges that "Only when the governments of the most powerful nations in the world establish a price for the carbon commensurate with its capacity for harm can we avert the environmental crisis toward which we are careening. But the nations won't do it without us. The God of earth stands on trial. Pilate hands it back to us. And with every drop of cheap oil, we cry, 'Crucify him!'" (93).

And so it happens, leaving those who have contributed least to this crucifixion to watch and to grieve. And to hope, "allowing for the possibility that out of it something fresh and wonderful – new life – may yet come" (103-4).

**Easter and Pentecost:** By analogy with traditional Christianity, "the God of earth did indeed completely and inarguably die" (106). In admitting that this is a necessary conclusion by analogy, Swenson has also admitted that the analogy is not adequate at this point. In her one concession to her assertion that Jesus is "constituted by" earth, Swenson states that "What makes the God of earth not exactly the same as earth is belief that this Jesus-beyond-Jesus, Jesus enduring as the God of earth, is the intentional incarnation of a God who desires that things be right, repaired between us." This is an unfortunate non-answer to the question of what it means for Jesus to be the God of earth.

As at Pentecost, the reader experiences the filling of God's Spirit, and so empowered, calls the world to repentance and baptism. "Recognizing the God of earth, alive among us and bearing the capacity to reconcile and heal compels us to call out for change – to turn from an ecologically destructive lifestyle toward sustainability...Repent!" (116).

I cannot help but share many of Swenson's sentiments about the state of the earth, as well as her calls to do better, much better. And I applaud her conviction that we need a more ecological Christianity. We do need to repent, to make peace with the land, as Norman Wirzba and Loren Wilkinson have called us to do.

That said, the fuzzy opening assertions have haunted us throughout the book, because they are never answered. That is truly unfortunate, since Swenson could have advanced the values and concerns she addresses with a much less confusing and theologically dubious set of assertions had she simply begun with this simple straight forward proposition: that something of God is manifest in all that God has created, that what God creates must by its very nature be at least minimally God-like even if not fully incarnate, as even Swenson seems to admit of Jesus.

In the end, Swenson believes that her experiment "seems to work" (138). It might have under modified conditions, but it doesn't here. Too bad, since she is a delightful writer, and since her framework around the Christian calendar is so appealing (Lent might have been a better starting point.) But the Church needs strong and compelling arguments to support the earth-keeping convictions that many of us share with the writer. Unfortunately, this reviewer does not find them here.

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