Addressing God with Names of Earth

Lisa E. Dahill

Associate Professor of Religion
California Lutheran University

> The Great Work of our species for our time is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.[1]

> Within a sexist system the true identity of both women and the [E]arth are skewed. Both are commonly excluded from the sphere of the sacred; both are routinely taken for granted and ignored, used and discarded, even battered and "raped," while nevertheless they do not cease to give birth and sustain life. … The [fundamental] relationships—human beings to the [E]arth, among each other, and to God—are profoundly interconnected. … In the history of western thought … all three have been conceived primarily according to the values of patriarchy.[2]

Such profound challenges are at the heart of this article. The Earth is abused through human evil; humanity has lost sight of the relationships that give and sustain life. This contribution is part of a larger project exploring the theology and practice of an ecological Lutheran spirituality, for I believe that faith practices matter in the ecological crisis. To wit, ecological conversion requires new metaphors and language for God that reorient worshipers to the divine presence permeating all that is.

Here is how I proceed. First, I note connections between Bonhoeffer's category of "abstraction" and contemporary effacement of human awareness of the natural world in its distress. Next, feminist environmental philosopher Val Plumwood and feminist eco-theologian Cynthia Moe-Lobeda help to place this effacement in parallel with that of human female bodies and with voices and people who are poor within global capitalism. Then I propose the theologically risky move of what I am calling second-naiveté pantheism. That is, I assert that addressing God using the metaphor or name "Earth" provides a way of re-orienting Christians' attention to this place where divine life is profoundly at risk: in the ongoing survival and abundance of the creation's life. To close I test the viability of this proposal using prayers to God named as

The Earth is abused through human evil; humanity has lost sight of the relationships that give and sustain life. …Faith practices matter in the ecological crisis.

"Earth." Readers' reactions to these prayers are important data in generating responses to the article as a whole.

Abstraction and effacement

Elsewhere, I have explored the connection between Bonhoeffer's category of "abstraction" and the present-day effacement of the reality and life of the natural world.[3] In his *Ethics,* Bonhoeffer speaks of the "abstraction" that results when the union between God and the world in Jesus Christ is broken apart—when God is posited in separation from the world (or the world in separation from God). One of the key places where God and the world came together in Jesus Christ for Bonhoeffer was in those threatened ones to whom most of the church was heedless: the Jews. Expressions of "God" that ignored or failed to take real political account of the actual situation of the Jews under Hitler were, for him, abstractions, no matter how orthodox.

One of the places we are still too often heedless as a society—with danger as acute as that facing the Jews in Nazi Germany—is in relation to the life and well-being of the natural world, the entire biosphere upon which our species depends. Signs of the "ecological conversion" that Pope Francis calls for are visible today, crystallizing in the remarkable accords reached among world leaders in Paris.[4] Scientists and leaders from all nations increasingly agree that ecological distress or catastrophe is the overarching crisis of our time, unfolding already in the lives and bodies of the poorest human beings on earth. Although we are waking up to these needs, Christians generally fail to take ongoing account of

1. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 3.
2. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit,* Madaleva Lectures in Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 2–3.
3. Lisa E. Dahill, "Bio-Theoacoustics: Prayer Outdoors and the Reality of the Natural World," in *Dialog* 52 (Winter 2013): 297–306.
4. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

This willful ignorance of the living reality and needs of the world beyond ourselves is pushing us into the position of becoming "un-creators," reversing God's original work of creation and returning the living biosphere to a place of chaos, degradation, and death.

the actual lives of species outside our own. We are as cut off from creation's existence as a "Thou" crying out for our attention and courageous action as most Christians were cut off from the voices of the Jews in Bonhoeffer's time.[5]

Feminist ecology

As Cynthia Moe-Lobeda notes, this willful ignorance of the living reality and needs of the world beyond ourselves is pushing us into the position of becoming "un-creators," reversing God's original work of creation and returning the living biosphere to a place of chaos, degradation, and death. She writes:

> We [have been given] a world of beauty beyond comprehension, a glorious bit of earth and water resplendent with sight, sound, smell, and touch, a shimmering sphere created and destined to provide abundant life for all. … Yet today, humanity faces a moral crisis never before known: We are, in the words of John Cobb and Herman Daly, "living toward a *dead* end," destroying Earth's life-systems and building a soul-shattering gap between the rich and the impoverished. … Our numbers and our excessive consumption threaten Earth's capacity to [continue] regenerat[ing] life. … *We have become the "uncreators."*[6]

Australian eco-feminist philosopher Val Plumwood also notes how pervasive this effacement of creation is today, via the "ecological denial" that rejects awareness of human embeddedness within the natural world.[7] Plumwood's work traces the parallels between diverse forms of privileged gaze, each refusing to see the reality of some oppressed other. Her systemic analysis of "centrism" illuminates the problem:

> The weakening of the sense of ecological reality … is just one of the damaging effects of human-centeredness (or anthropocentrism) … [which] promotes [and underlies] various forms of epistemic remoteness. Centrism is often represented as if its distortions affected only the weaker party to the relationship, "the victim," but this idea is widely rejected by oppression theorists as illusory and as an example of "studying down." Both dominating and subordinated parties are deformed by centric constructions. … [our] self-enclosed outlook has helped us to lose touch with ourselves as creatures who are not only cultural beings but also natural beings, just as dependent on a healthy biosphere as other forms of life. [8]

Post-colonial eco-feminists of different classes, cultures, and contexts worldwide have been making similar connections for over forty years now, at least since Reuther's *New Woman, New Earth* in 1975.[9]

Yet little seems to have changed: if anything, we are even more distant today from the life of the natural world, distracted by screens and buffered by buildings, automobiles, and economic privilege from the forces of creation. What will help us *stop* living in abstraction, *stop* "losing track of nature," and learn to pay attention again to the actual biological reality of the world upon which every human life on Earth, including the incarnate Jesus Christ, depends? There are surely many layers to any adequate response to this question, involving powerfully entrenched forces of privilege and injustice. However, I want to focus on just one.

Reorientation to divine life

Since the center of Christian life is worship, liturgical language powerfully shapes worshipers' spiritual and theological imagination, our vision of the world and of God. Thus I am coming to believe that the ecological conversion Pope Francis is calling for requires, among other things, new metaphors and language—indeed, forms of address, or names—for God that reorient worshipers to the

5. For a prescient acknowledgement of environmental effacement, see "A Social Statement on Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993), 1. "This statement … acknowledges humanity's separation from God and from the rest of creation as the central cause of the environmental crisis."

6. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "The Theology of the Cross for the 'Uncreators,'" in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today,* Marit Trelstad, ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 182–183. Italics in the original. Citing John B. Cobb and Hermann E. Daly, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon, 1994). For a fuller treatment of this insight, see Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

7. Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 97.

8. Ibid., 98–99. She cites Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 40.

9. Cf. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Aruna Gnanadason, *Listen to the Women! Listen to the Earth!* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005); Ivonne Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, David Molineaux, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); and Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen, eds., *Ecofeminism and Globalization: Exploring Culture, Context, and Religion* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

divine presence permeating each threatened creature on Earth. Worship is already a place where such expansion of Christian ecological vision is taking place. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (*ELW*) includes several Eucharistic prayers with powerful creation images (notably III, IV, VII, VIII, and X), and, in the prayers gathered for Thanksgiving at the Font, one (V) gives particular attention to the literal waters of Earth. In addition, *ELW* includes intercession for the created world in its rubrics for the Prayers of the People, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) *Sundays & Seasons* resource also gives attention to how the propers for a given Sunday or feast day speak to the life of the larger creation. Despite this, however, I rarely sense that such liturgical expansion has led to much broadening of pastoral, devotional, or theological gaze; for instance, even intercessions meant to be "for creation" are as often framed for humans who till the ground or suffer the effects of natural disasters as they are for the larger world and its creatures on their own terms.[10]

Of course, proposing new ways to address G*d is a theologically complex matter. Scholarly attention to language of God over centuries, including in this volume, attests to this complexity.[11] To propose "Earth" as an address to God, which raises the specter of pantheism, might seem too difficult even for environmentally minded Christians to consider. Yet our ongoing, collective heedlessness to the lives and deaths of the creatures and ecosystems around us, and of the planet that supports us, has convinced me that, perhaps more than anything else, we need permission to see and love the natural world precisely as a (if not *the* fundamental) manifestation of God.[12] Thus as a means of encouraging this contemplative gaze, I propose the use of "Earth" as a name to address the First Person of the Christian Trinity.

Such renaming matters because the liturgical practice of addressing God predominantly in human images reinforces the anthropomorphic frame of reference as described by Plumwood. God is then easily, even unconsciously, viewed as a divine being oriented solely or primarily to human concerns, devoted to human welfare, acting to save human beings only, and/or in a heaven somewhere other than the creation itself. In a time of ecological crisis, such God-images come to participate in the abstraction Bonhoeffer lamented: God separated from the world's most urgent, specific places of suffering and life. Sometimes, human-oriented names of God make compelling sense. But in an ecologically endangered world, the heart of prayer in divine address also needs to open worshipers' gaze to the face and presence of God in the life of the planet itself.

I propose the use of "Earth" as a name to address the First Person of the Christian Trinity.

Thus I believe we need to expand naming of God beyond even gender-neutral or feminine-gendered human language for God. We need *eco*-feminist—indeed, fully *ecological*—God-language. To address God as "Earth," in conscious bodily and spiritual relation to the planet's life, allows worshipers to experience this divine name as a concrete form of address intimately connecting Christian faith in its fullest liturgical expression and our planet's materiality and mystery.

For millennia the fear of pantheism has kept Christians from addressing God in direct Earth-language. We freely name God as "Father" or "Mother," even "Rock," "Dove," or "Fire," but not as "Earth."[13] The perceived jolt of such language perhaps echoes the shock people experience the first time they hear female images and feminine pronouns used of God. In each case, the degree of theological impossibility elicited by the respective metaphor or name corresponds to the extent to which the shocking referent (female humanity, Earth itself) is experienced as categorically alien to the being of God.[14]

10. Anecdotal research shows that pastoral conversation in public spheres is also overwhelmingly focused on human needs and life, infrequently giving meaningful attention to the larger biotic world in which we live.

11. A particularly useful work is R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices,* volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Publishing, 2011). See also, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "G*d – The Many-Named: Without Place and Proper Name," in *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry,* John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 109–126; and A. McKibbin Watts, "Bring Many Metaphors But Not Many Names," in *Touchstone* 11 (May 1993): 27–39.

12. To trust that the Logos through whom all things were made is the same Word who addresses us through Scripture gives Christians a way to love the divinely animated world precisely in its biological reality, as part of our larger "reading" of the Word. See Lisa E. Dahill, "Into Local Waters: Rewilding the Study of Christian Spirituality," forthcoming in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality.* For more on the history of this question, see Forrest Clingerman, "Reading the Book of Nature: A Hermeneutical Account of Nature for Philosophical Theology," in *Worldviews* 13 (2009): 72–91.

13. Hymnody and choral works are instructive. We sing of "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree" and might imagine works tracing metaphorical connections between the persons of the Trinity and other trees, or animals, or landscapes and climatic forces. We have hymns to Light or Sun, to Water or Spring. But the idea of singing to Earth—using "Earth" as a similarly evocative metaphorical name for God—feels unthinkable. For an exploration of the primal elements (earth, wind/air, fire, water) in relation to God, see Ellen T. Armour, "Toward an Elemental Theology: A Constructive Proposal," in *Theology that Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God,* Darby Kathleen Ray, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 42–57. In addition to this "elemental" use of the language of *Earth,* I am curious about its grammatical form as a proper noun, the name of our planet, and how this proposed blurring of names ("Earth" and "God") corresponds to earlier instances of the Hebrew and/or Christian tradition, which attribute to the one God the names of other entities previously thought to be competing deities.

14. The Earth Bible project acknowledges this parallel in making use of a threefold methodology drawn directly from feminist and liberationist approaches. See Norman C. Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics,* Norman C. Habel and Peter Trulinger, eds. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 4–5.

> What we need instead is to begin to move into a whole-hearted second naiveté with regard to imaging divine life as *Earth*.

In the earliest development of monotheistic systems, the differentiation of God from the manifold, overwhelming powers of the natural world was an important piece of human development. Accounts of this transition tend to assert that humans needed to see ourselves reflected in the image of the divine as Most High, supreme over all the powers of Earth; we needed to learn to trust that the grace and power that gave rise to all that is was a power of endless love, favorably inclined toward us—indeed, radically at home in the flesh among us in Christ—even in the face of the storms and predators and chaos that were so threatening in the unmediated wilds of Earth. For those whose lives felt—or still feel—captive to those wilds, to the chaos embodied in the unpredictable furies of gods and demons, this liberation from what seem like dark forces under which humans must cower and to trust instead in a God of grace ruling over Earth, love birthing and embracing and redeeming all that is, may function as good news indeed.[15]

We, however, live in a different time. The West no longer needs our dominance over other species inscribed in heaven, in the image of the Most High in patriarchal male face and form. At the same time, most of the West (what Bonhoeffer calls the "world come of age") is not likely to revert to a first-naiveté belief in the gods, demons, and personified natural forces that occupied the pre-modern pantheon. These old idols have been broken. We have been so successful in breaking these idols, in fact, that we are now in danger of suffocating the natural life that once held such primal power over us.

I have come to believe, therefore, that what we need instead is to begin to move into a whole-hearted second naiveté[16] with regard to imaging divine life as *Earth*. People in a variety of religious and non-religious philosophical traditions are calling for a re-enchantment of Earth: a return to the capacity to experience the wild life of natural systems as itself a primary locus of the divine, to which we have no access apart from these eco-systems and their real life.[17] We need to bring the gift of the ethical systems created by monotheism—especially the preferential option for the least of these, and the radically incarnational and sacramental gifts of the Christian tradition in particular—into equally radically religious re-engagement with the reality of the beleaguered natural world on its own terms and in its own languages and voices.

Proposing a "*second-naiveté* pantheism" means that Christian religious language could fruitfully risk evoking the spiritual and imaginative power latent in the mystery, beauty, intimacy, and transcendence of human relationships with the Earth that sustains us. I am not proposing that the Earth *is* God; I am proposing a thought-experiment: that we consider using "Earth" as a name to address the Christian God.[18] Such practice has the power to cut through our deep alienation from the natural world and—just as female God-imagery does in challenging patriarchy—to open worshipers to dimensions of the divine mystery to which the tradition's dominant images and metaphors had blocked access.

It might seem that this proposal does not take seriously enough the threat of metaphorical proximity to the *Ur*-heresy of pantheism.[19] Indeed, I do take seriously how shocking the language of the prayers at the end of this article will feel at first encounter: Can this be *Christian* prayer? Might not "Earth" be an image that cannot in any form serve as divine metaphor—for which there is no conceivable divine "is," but only "is not"? Yet the categorical denial of such prayer-language robs us of one of the most revelatory windows imaginable into the being of God: the planet itself. It is time to risk a second naiveté of religiously charged Earth-language, risk allowing ourselves to see in the mystery and sustaining grace and suffering of Earth itself a primary face of God. Of course, the life of Earth, like every metaphor, includes dimensions that do

15. Many indigenous cultures accomplish the movement toward human psychological maturity in relation to the larger forces of the universe without the necessity of a fundamental separation, let alone alienation, between the interwoven realities perceived as divine, human, animal, and natural. The scope of this article does not permit exploration of factors that may have led Western civilization to create this alienation. For an intriguing consideration of the role of the emergence of literacy, especially phonetic alphabetic literacy, see David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

16. The use of the language of "first naiveté," "deconstruction" (or "hermeneutics of suspicion"), and "second naiveté" draws on the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. See Erin White, "Between Suspicion and Hope: Paul Ricoeur's Vital Hermeneutic," in *Journal of Literature and Theology* 5 (1991): 311–321; Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, E. Buchanan, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); and Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

17. See, for example, Roger Gottlieb, ed., *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment,* 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2004); the work of the Yale Forum for Religion and Ecology; and the volumes devoted to the world's primary religious traditions in Harvard University Press's Religion and Ecology series. I have attempted a Lutheran Eucharistic spirituality of engagement with creation in, Lisa E. Dahill, "The View from *Way* Below: Inter-Species Encounter, Membranes, and the Reality of Christ," in *Dialog* 53 (Fall 2014): 250–258.

18. I use the language of "name" and "metaphor" of God more or less interchangeably within this article's attention to second-person address of God (I am not proposing "Earth" as a form of third-person reference to God). A similar approach is visible in the Prayers of the Day gathered in the *ELW* propers, where God is addressed using a variety of images, metaphors, and names.

19. The best philosophical account of pantheism remains Michael P. Levine, *Pantheism: A Non-Theistic Concept of Deity* (New York: Routledge, 1994). The term is generally defined as the belief that the world is (in some sense) divine, blurring or denying the fundamental Christian insistence on the ontological distinction between Creator and creation.

To name God using the name of Earth could help turn us from the destructive power that broke the early idols and toward a constructive, truly life-giving Christian spirituality for our time.

not unambiguously reveal the Christian God. But our refusal to ascribe any divine presence or "face" to the natural world is precisely the danger *facing* us; orientation to a God located elsewhere is a central dimension of our willingness to destroy the Earth we are thereby *ef*-facing.[20] Thus to name God using the name of Earth could help turn us from the destructive power that broke the early idols and toward a constructive, truly life-giving Christian spirituality for our time.

Some proposals[21] move toward retrieval of the Holy Spirit as the neglected member of the Trinity and a resource within classical Christianity for Earth- and body-embracing language of God. If indeed the Holy Spirit we worship is the Giver of Life, then we may surely be among those who do worship this Giver, this Life, as fully and directly as we can, and invite people out of our classrooms and away from screens and even sanctuaries into direct access to this Life, this Spirit, in all its beauty and reality. Others embrace the doctrine of the Incarnation, pushing its Earth- and body-permeating logic as far as possible.[22] If the pain of the Earth is in a very real sense the crucifixion of Christ anew, we who stand at the cross and do not run away need to show the way: to name precisely here the face of the Beloved in the very Body of God. It is in order to extend such images even more fully into Christian prayer that I am proposing using Earth-metaphors and the *name* "Earth" in prayer to the First Person of the Christian Trinity.

20. This language of creation's "face" draws on the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas and the gift of the "other" in shaping ethical human life. For an ecological reading of Levinas and, more broadly, the wilder face of the divine, see Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Another use of the image of the divine "face" in creation is found in Mark Wallace, "The Green Face of God: Christianity in an Age of Ecocide," in *CrossCurrents* 50 (Fall 2000): 310–331.

21. See, for example, Mark I. Wallace, *Finding God in the Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); and "The Wounded Spirit as the Basis for Hope in an Age of Radical Ecology," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans,* Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 51–72.

22. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). See also her more recent work developing this metaphor in Sallie McFague and Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation: Why Evolutionary Continuity Matters in Christology," in *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26 (2010): 173–188.

Sample prayers

What is it like to pray to God using the name "Earth"? I invite you to stand and read these prayers out loud, alone or with others, and to let your response to the experience contribute to your thinking about the questions this article raises.

> O Earth, in the waters of baptism you bring us to new birth to live as your children. Strengthen our faith in your promises, that by your Spirit we may lift up your life to all the world through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (Text drawn from *ELW* propers for Lent 2A)

> O Earth, we confess that we have failed to live in harmony with you. We have abused your gifts, meant for all, and taken your love for granted; we have failed to hear your cries in the voices of your neediest creatures, our own relatives in you. Open our hearts to all those around us in this place, and give us your wisdom to live in accord with the gifts we receive: your life opened up for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with Pope Francis that "how we are shaping the future of our planet" is a challenge and crisis demanding participation—indeed, "ecological conversion"—for all on Earth? Why or why not? How do you see your own vocation to love and heal the natural world? What forms of community or support would strengthen this vocation?
2. What is your favorite name, metaphor, or image of God? What dimensions of the divine life does this name or image reveal for you?
3. How do you respond to speaking or hearing the prayers addressed to God using the name "Earth"? How, if at all, might the practice of praying this way help strengthen your own and your community's connection to God alive in all things?
4. Are you and/or your congregation, family, or community more comfortable praying with familiar language or do you prefer new or surprising language in prayer? Why do you suppose this is? Can you think of a time when one or the other of these was particularly powerful for you?
5. Share a time when you experienced God's presence outdoors. What "face" of God does the natural world tend to reveal for you?