
This is an important book—both for its strengths and its shortcomings. Santmire is well known as an ecotheologian of great experience, particularly noted for his *The Travail of Nature* (1985) and *Nature Reborn* (2000). And a besetting question for Christian ecotheologians is—how can they make connections with the congregational lives of ordinary mainstream churches? Liturgy seems like an important area for this, as well as a vital way of testing out the fruitfulness of new theological insights. So I opened this book with great expectation.

Santmire begins by inviting the reader to walk with him by the bank of the Charles River and think lofty thoughts about creation. At once this reader started to fret that this would be an over-romantic treatment of the natural world—a besetting sin of such writing. But Santmire is too sophisticated a thinker, too versed in Luther and Barth and Tillich, to lapse into theological cliché. He admits, opening up his theme, that there is a cognitive dissonance attendant on his theme—so much Christian worship lacks reach and imagination, so much imaginative spiritual practice deliberately floats free of the discipline of any tradition. (And the American spirit is much influenced by such ‘Thoreauvian’ individualism and independence.) But it need not be so, and the author offers a range of inspiring examples of where Christian liturgy is indeed transformative.

To see how this might become a more widespread feature of church life Santmire wants to go back into the heart of early Christian liturgical practice—to rediscover the ‘assembly’ as a place of countercultural practice and proclamation, of simplicity and of ecstasy. His key theological move is a rejection of what he calls the ‘gothic vision’, the ‘theology of ascent’, that is exemplified in the great Gothic cathedrals, drawing the human eye, heart, spirit, up out of the world towards God. Instead he wants to suggest the virtues of a theology of descent, returning to the strong insistence on God immanent and active in the world that he finds in Luther. What would it mean, then, to look at every aspect of sacramental liturgy both in this immanentist light, and also with an eye to its ecological reach? So he has chapters on baptism, proclamation and offertory and on eucharist and sending, and ends the book with two chapters
on ‘our walk with nature ritualized’. Much of this is good, intelligent writing about liturgy, community and ethics, and as such should be widely read by seminarians and leaders of churches. There is also a useful appendix on the use of the term ‘stewardship’.

As I indicated above, the author’s theme is crucial to the flourishing of a church really engaged with this time of ecological crisis. That Santmire is not more successful is testament as much to the difficulty of the task as to any lack of skill or insight on his part. Time and time again I encountered an interesting way of understanding a movement within liturgy, or a scriptural passage that informed it, but then felt two or three pages down the line that the author’s treatment remained too conventional, too trapped in the tradition, unable to find a really radical or fresh edge.

He does definitely want to be radical, as in his suggestion that the age-old exhortation ‘Lift up your hearts’ at the opening of the eucharistic prayer falls into the trap of the theology of ascent and would be better rendered ‘Open up your hearts’. How difficult that would be for most Christians reflects just how steeped the faith is in metaphors of ascent—not only do we find ‘Lift up your hearts’ in the Canon of Hippolytus (almost a thousand years before the Gothic arch), but the New Testament insists on the ascension of Christ, on his sitting high in the glory of God the Father, with every knee bowed before him. This vertical axis, this metaphor of ‘up’ for exaltation, salvation, glory, has been extremely strong in the imagination of the Church from its earliest days—it is not something that can be subverted simply by returning to the primal simplicity of the early church. At the same time it is, as Santmire recognises, ecologically problematic (and there is ethnographic evidence that it mystifies some cultures).

This is symptomatic of a wider tension I sense in the book—Santmire wants to reject more radical readings of the faith, such as the panincarnationalism of Ruether. That leaves him both with the strengths of staying within the particularity of the mainline of the tradition, but also its constraints.

However, there is no question that Santmire does his best to see how the Scriptures can be read ecologically, and acknowledges the need on occasion to hold together a plurality of understandings. There is familiar reference to the Colossian hymn (without our being given any clearer sense of what cosmic reconciliation might mean than anyone else has