

God of Earth

Discovering a Radically
Ecological Christianity

Kristin Swenson

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For Craig

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Introduction

“The temple bell stops.
But the sound keeps coming
out of the flowers.”

—Basho, translated by Robert Bly

One of the enduring wonders of writing is how often what shows up on the page surprises me, the writer of it, as much as (maybe more than) any reader. Sometimes as I hunker there, laying down the text, word by word, brick by brick, I bang smack into something I didn't even know existed before. A glimmering idea, brand new, floats down and lands all shiny in the mortar. Suddenly, while writing what I supposedly know, I stumble upon a beauty or a truth that I'd never even suspected before. Grace of the muses, the ancient Greeks might say.

I did not expect, in working on this project, to happen upon a comfort that has eluded me for as long as I can remember. I'd begun to think I would never find equanimity in the face of our planet's ills. Wonder of wonders, this project gave me a sudden and profound (if fleeting) relief that requires neither that I fix everything, nor that I pretend there's no problem and preoccupy myself with the bread and circus of business as usual. It's admittedly a slippery peace—just as (but only as) slippery as faith, I suppose.

A lapsed churchgoer of a questionable Christianity, I nevertheless remain captivated by the implications of Jesus. I cannot shake the sense that the premise at the heart of Christianity is rich in ways as yet unplumbed and profoundly relevant for our time. I look around at the world as it is, *caring* about the world as it is, and wonder if the Jesus of Christian theology just might be bigger than the Middle Eastern man from two thousand years ago.

I was born, raised, and still identify myself as a Christian; and for as long as I can remember, I've been passionate about the health and welfare of the nonhuman natural world. Over

the years, both general characteristics—my Christianity and environmentalism—have taken on all sorts of nuance, from embarrassment over what frequently stands for “Christian” and attendant religion envy (Buddhism is so cool, and Jewish ritual rocks), to appreciating how sophisticated our interactions with the nonhuman natural world must be in order to do the least harm.

I’ve come to agree with Jane Goodall, who said, “How sad that so many people seem to think that science and religion are mutually exclusive.”¹ And with Wendell Berry that “perhaps the great disaster of human history is one that happened to or within religion: that is, the conceptual division between the holy and the world, the excerpting of the Creator from the creation.”² So to state this project in another way: I see hints of ways within the religion I inherited to put things together again—the holy and the world, Creator and creation.

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 pulsing blue-green planet Earth? What does it mean for the ever-living God of all to become flesh that we might be reconciled to her? 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?

I propose taking Christian claims seriously—but in a new way, to come at it all quite differently. 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?

That’s what drives this book—a nagging question that I’ve chased over field and stream and, once snared in my flimsy net, subjected to an experiment of the imagination. Indeed, for all that the effort might sound at first like some complicated intellectual exercise, or academic systematics, it’s not. On the contrary, it’s the chronicle of a question.

I guess what I'm trying to say is, this isn't a head trip; it's a journey of the heart.

So, it's also an invitation—an invitation of imagination. The implications are both ecological and personal as they blow past petrified traditions to embrace fresh questions of what Christianity might mean and be in our time.

For what is the whole Jesus-thing if not God's being of and in the material, blood, bone, and breath of it all? What is it if not a declaration of love beyond knowing for the eternal, universal Creator to take on skin and limbs and friends and grief in order to reconcile this blue-green home of ours to heaven? And what is that reconciling if not a repair that accepts the truth of our brokenness and throws a lifeline that we may grope our way toward wholeness? It's a complicated business, with weighty responsibility and a not-altogether-certain outcome, but there it is. Comfort, inspiration, and, dare I say, the possibility of hope.



If we accept the basic tenets of Christianity, then we're talking about accepting a relationship with heaven that honors the God of earth. If that sounds like turning Christianity on its head—bringing what is divine and other-worldly smack down to earth, actually *of* earth—consider this: isn't that what Christianity already does? Doesn't it turn things upside down and propose profound paradoxes even as it trumpets truth? Well. This book is an invitation to take seriously what Christian theology preaches at its most basic level: that the one eternal Creator God chose out of love to become incarnate in order to reconcile wayward human beings to God.

Some people may find this whole enterprise to be dangerously unorthodox. Yet *God of Earth* takes the most basic premises of Christian belief as its beginning and the ground from which it reaches. It reckons with the fact that even as those premises appear to be straightforward and simple, they have layers and possibilities for meaning far beyond the singular, the time-worn, and the strictly traditional.

Besides the traditional interpretations, what does it mean to think of Jesus as God of earth with the same significance as the baby in the manger, the young man with his band of a dozen friends, the crucified Christ, and the tomb-busting savior? What does it mean to imagine the incarnation of God as ever-alive and present to us in the wildly diverse and astonishingly dynamic nonhuman natural world in which we live now?

Traditional Christianity combines the time-bound, earth-stuff God who is recognized in Jesus with the timeless, universal, creator God through its calendar year, measured not January to January but Advent to Advent. As the year tracks Jesus's life, it also pushes that life back before Jesus was born and forward into the ever after. What's more, in its cyclical nature, it catapults that life beyond simply the historical event of one man to recognize a Jesus who was before, is now, and will always be. The whole point of it, according to Christianity, is a righting of wrongs, repairing what has broken, the healing of dis-ease.

There is something in the Jesus-story that issues an urgent challenge even as it gives hope. God made herself of earth to draw us into being and making right. Creator of all, God inhabited the earth within time and in a particular place in order to call to us. And God, being God to the people who follow him throughout the ever-renewing cycle of a church year, still does inhabit and call. That's the wonder of it, the terror of it, the promise of it.

If you are hurting and sad and desperately lonely in your empathy for an ailing world, I hope for you comfort. For there's something buried in the notions and humming in the interstices of the traditional metaphors that endures with renewing novelty. There is a hint of something in it that busts through despair. And I confess, sometimes I despair. I look at the rising seas and crescendoing "weather"—hurricanes, droughts, floods, and wildfires—at the hunger and extinctions and frack-ing and waste and pollution; I know that I participate in it, I contribute to it, and I despair.

But then there's this: God for and in . . . *of* earth.

Welcome to the journey.