



HOW AN EARTHIER CHRISTIANITY MIGHT SAVE US

“How can we fix it?” is often our first question when we learn about the magnitude of the environmental crisis. But there are deeper questions beneath that urge to help, says Fred Bahnson, director of the Food, Health & Ecological Well-Being Program at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. Bahnson is the author of *Soil and Sacrament* and an award-winning writer whose essays have appeared in *Harpers*, *Orion*, *The Sun*, *Christian Century*, and *Best American Spiritual Writing*.

We spoke with Bahnson about the limits of activism and what an earthier Christianity might look like.



AN INTERVIEW WITH **FRED BAHNSON**
BY **SAM MOWE**

« *Walked a Path Just to Have a Taste*
Heather Sundquist Hall



Part of Me You Carry 
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Your recent work focuses on a spiritual response to the Anthropocene, a term that's been put forward by some geologists to describe a new geological epoch during which human activity has become the dominant influence on climate and the environment. More than statistics or solutions, you're specifically interested in what it feels like to live during the Anthropocene. Why?

The term *Anthropocene* evokes the sleepy lecture halls of Geology 101. We hear such words and our eyes glaze over, yet the effect on our lives this language has is profound. So we need to humanize it with the language of emotion. Most of us have inherited a worldview built on the assumption that Earth's climate is more or less stable. To learn that our climate is now in flux is deeply unsettling. As a writer, I try to explore those existential emotions that arise when we confront that reality.

In a recent essay for *Orion*, "The Ecology of Prayer," you describe what it's like to visit a place that is projected to be below sea level in the near future due to climate change. Can you talk about your emotional trajectory during that experience?

Last April, my family took a trip to Ocracoke Island on North Carolina's Outer Banks. Right before we went, I

looked up a website called *Surging Seas*, which models projections about future sea level rise. I typed in "Ocracoke." The website showed two possible scenarios—either that we rein in our carbon emissions and we get 2 degrees Celsius warming by the end of the century, or the business-as-usual scenario where we keep burning carbon unabated—and both scenarios showed the Outer Banks underwater within a century or two.

As a child, I heard about the Outer Banks from my mother, who grew up on the North Carolina coast. She read me ghost stories from the Outer Banks, or tales of the famed pirate Blackbeard. So it's always been a storied place in my imagination. It's also an incredibly beautiful place with abundant wildlife: sea turtles, diamondback terrapins, numerous species of birds. To go there knowing that this place would be underwater in a couple generations—it filled me with a deep melancholy I didn't quite know how to process. So I wrote about it. I had already been in a pretty dark place, given that amount of climate science I'd been reading, and I stayed in that dark space for about a year.

What did you learn while grappling with that darkness?

It became obvious to me that we can't simply innovate our way out of the Anthropocene. It's a fool's mission to think climate change is just another speed bump on the long road of human progress, and that through our technological acumen we—or our proxies in Silicon Valley—can smooth out the bump with some whiz-bang solution and just continue our unlimited economic growth. That's pure hubris. We are not in control. We are not smarter or more innovative than nature. For the human species to confront climate change we first need a heavy dose of ecological humility. I'm all in favor of working toward solutions—in fact, Paul Hawken's recent book *Drawdown* offers an excellent roundup of the most effective solutions—but we can't use "solutionism" or technology as a substitute for confronting ourselves, for dealing with the messy side of human nature that got us here in the first place.

Even though your trip to the Outer Banks led to a year of being in a dark place, there were also glimmers of light during that trip: You write about a sense of beholding the beauty of the place and how deeply meaningful it was to be there with your children. Can you talk about the experience of holding profound and opposite emotions at the same time?

I think that's one of the challenges that the Anthropocene is placing before us. We need to live in paradox. Where I live in western North Carolina the hemlock trees are dying. Because our climate is warming, hemlocks are more prone to insect damage. We need to live in that tension between "I know that the hemlocks are dying" and the reality that the Davidson River in Pisgah National Forest, where we go swimming in the summers, is still a place of ravishing beauty.

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And new life abounds. Even as hemlocks are dying, Reishi mushrooms are busy colonizing them. Reishis have been used in Chinese and Japanese medicine for thousands of years. In Asia, it’s known as the mushroom of immortality. Studies have now demonstrated its anticarcinogenic properties. It’s also an immune booster. Something like one in two men in the United States and one in three women will get cancer in their lifetime. Even as hemlock trees are dying, other life-forms that could be life-giving for us are colonizing them. There’s a kind of hidden grace in that exchange of life for life, and there’s beauty in Pisgah Forest, even as it changes. How do you hold that beauty in tension with the loss that we feel? That’s the work that we’re called to do in the years ahead.

An important element of your *Orion* essay is what the ecological crisis means for the Christian tradition. You write that, as a Christian educator, you’re trying to “bring Christianity back down to Earth.” What do Christianity and the ecological crisis have to do with each other?

Christianity is a much more earthy, grounded faith than many of its current spokesmen—and they’re mostly men—have led us to believe. American Christianity has unfortunately inherited all kinds of neo-Platonic dualisms: body/soul, heaven/earth. We’ve had an ongoing infatuation with heaven that has caused us to ignore the Earth and to desecrate the actual places in which we live. That’s no faith I want to be part of. If heaven is all that’s on offer, then, like Ivan Karamazov—from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*—I respectfully “return my ticket.” But thankfully the biblical writers saw differently. The final vision in Revelation 21 is *not* a vision of anemic souls flying off to heaven. It’s a vision of heaven getting raptured down to Earth. Not that we should read that literally, but the image evokes the sense that the Earth will not be burned up—it will be made whole, and we along with it.

What Christian contemplative practice does is return us to that nondualistic, pre-Enlightenment realization that we are already one with creation. This Earth is our only home. As the 14th-century mystic Catherine of Sienna said, “All the way to heaven is heaven.” God is everywhere present in creation and in us. And that realization of our oneness and interdependence demands a certain level of care for the places where we dwell.

What is the role of activism in a Christian response to the ecological crisis?

Among certain progressive Christian circles in the U.S., I think we have leapt too quickly into a kind of shrill activism that’s devoid of self-reflection. We need political action. We need fossil fuel divestment. Clearly, we have to keep the remaining carbon in the ground, and divestment is a powerful strategy that forces fossil fuel companies to stand down. But such activist work can too easily replace the need to deal with ourselves, to confront that line between good and evil that, as the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, runs down the center of every human heart. That’s why we need contemplative practice. It’s why we have to pause to lament losses like the Larsen C ice shelf calving into the Weddell Sea. Jews and Christians belong to a biblical tradition of lament. One-third of the Psalms are psalms of lament. Some of them get pretty angry—at God, at the state of the world, at the never-ending injustice. Lament is as necessary as breathing. Activism is necessary, but not as a replacement for inner work.

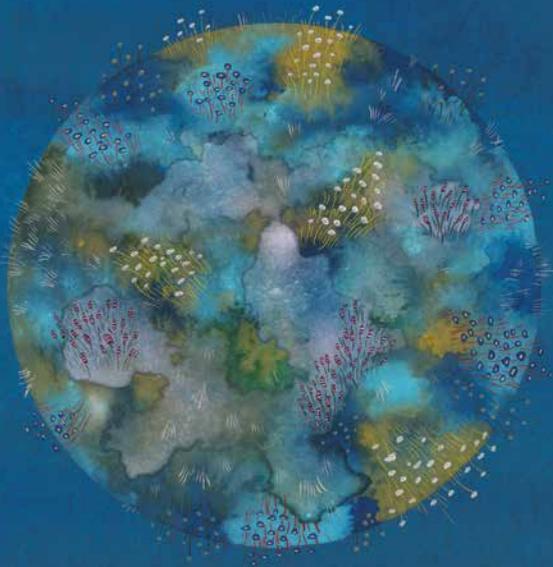
But the ecological crisis is urgently important. What purpose does lamentation serve?

It returns us to our humanity. The science tells us that Earth is running a fever, but that knowledge doesn’t just stay in our heads. We feel it in our bones. We feel a sense of loss, of grief. When someone close to you dies, you don’t pretend as if their death didn’t happen. Emotion that gets repressed will come out in unhealthy ways, and our grief over what we’re doing to the Earth is no different. We have to express it, talk about it, process it—give it a liturgical framework. Only then can we think clearly about how to work toward solutions to climate change.

Not that it’s a linear process. I think a healthy response is to move back and forth between contemplation and action. It’s all of a piece. And this is what caused me to turn to my own contemplative tradition within Christianity.

Can you say more about what’s drawn you to the contemplative tradition within Christianity?

It places the emphasis on changing the beholder. My discovery of the Christian contemplative tradition happened through Thomas Merton, in my view the greatest Christian contemplative writer of the 20th century. Though



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as a Trappist monk he lived secluded from society, Merton's writings on the social issues of his day (Vietnam, racism, the threat of nuclear war) created numerous openings in the social fabric. The breadth of his social engagement arose from the depth of his contemplative life. Reading Merton sent me back to the 4th century Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt and Palestine. These contemplatives describe a more expansive sense of God than the God of my Evangelical upbringing, a God who infuses all of creation. God is present not just in our individual soul, but in the rivers and trees, in the pileated woodpecker, in the microflora in our gut. Every created thing bears the Divine presence.

When an ecosystem is forced suddenly and irreversibly across a certain threshold, scientists call that a *state shift*. To move the needle on climate change, I think we need a spiritual state shift. We need what Pope Francis calls "an ecological conversion." We need to move from treating nature as this giant warehouse of goods that we can plunder at will to seeing that the universe is saturated with God. We should care for it as we care for our own bodies, because it *is* our body. The dividing line between our bodies and the world is just another myth we need to overcome, along with the myth of unlimited economic growth on a planet of finite resources. What if, instead, we came to see our dependence upon a healthy planet as that of a fetus's dependence upon its mother's womb?

Where do you see signs of the earthier Christianity that you're looking for?

On the page, it looks a lot like what Pope Francis described in his marvelous encyclical *Laudato si'*. "Soil, water,

mountains," he wrote—"everything is a caress of God." I'm no apologist for the Catholic Church, but I think that with this essay, Pope Francis has given us a great gift because he demonstrates the wedding of the religious imagination with the ecological imagination. That's absolutely the kind of thinking we need to overcome our Western dualisms.

Practically, I see it in the individuals and communities taking responsibility for how we eat, how we derive our energy, how we transport our bodies and our stuff—and doing all that in ways that sequester carbon rather than burning it. Ecological literacy is not just for ecologists or climate scientists or city planners; we all live and eat and excrete, and we all have need for shelter and transportation. So, we really need to be learning about how those things affect the ecosphere. On the local scale, we need to learn practices like permaculture. On the political scale, we need to support policies that build soil, sink carbon, and increase social equity. We also need to reconnect religious practice to the places that sustain us. In *Harper's*, I profiled a forest priest in New Hampshire named Rev. Stephen Blackmer, who started "The Church of the Woods" (see page 78). Blackmer is an Episcopal priest and the service is recognizably Christian, yet they don't own a church building. The entire service is held outdoors, rain or shine, year-round. They celebrate Eucharist on a white-pine stump festooned with British soldier moss. A common theme among Blackmer and his parishioners is that activism isn't enough; this time we're entering also demands a liturgical response, one that takes creation into account, and for the members of "Church of the Woods" that means taking their religious practice out into the forest.

Earlier you said that "activism is necessary, but not as a replacement for inner work." How can contemplation help inform our activism?

In the Christian contemplative tradition there is the ancient practice of *anachoresis*, a monastic form of withdrawal. That doesn't necessarily entail changing your zip code or going on pilgrimage. It simply means a daily withdrawal into ourselves, into our inner depths, so that we are acting with integrity. In addition to contemplative prayer, one of my practices has been selective digital withdrawal.

Action without that kind of inner work is just going to result in further disasters like those that have led us to the Anthropocene. This is going to sound facile, but our consumer culture is filling a void that is better addressed through prayer and stillness. Christian contemplative practice means sitting with God, dwelling with God, being nourished by God. When we allow ourselves to be fed that way, we find we really don't need much more than food, shelter, stories, and love.

Sam Mowe is a writer living in Portland, Oregon. His interviews have also appeared in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, and *The Sun*.