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An Environment Friendly God: Response to Nancy Hudson's "Divine Immanence"

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Abstract This paper is a response to Professor Nancy Hudson's paper "Divine Immanence: Nicholas of Cusa's Understanding of Theophany and the Retrieval of a 'New' Model of God," (Nancy Hudson, "Divine Immanence: Nicholas of Cusa's Understanding of Theophany and the Retrieval of a 'New' Model of God," *Journal of Theological Studies* 56.2 (October 2005): 450–470). The global ecological crisis has spawned intensive reflection about living in right relationship with the earth. Western Christian thought has received special scrutiny since modern alienation from nature has been traced to Christian theology. Undiscovered within the mystical theology of Nicholas of Cusa lies an ecologically promising vision of nature. The concept of divine immanence presented by this medieval thinker provides a rich spirituality that is inclusive, rather than exclusive, of the natural world. It is also far more intimate than contemporary stewardship theology. Cusanus interprets theophany as divine self-expression. A series of striking metaphors, including God's enfolding and unfolding, God as 'Not-other', and Christ as the contracted maximum, reveals a holistic spirituality. Nicholas of Cusa's concept of divine immanence infuses the world with immeasurable value and gives rise to a Christian theology that can address the current ecological crisis. This paper was delivered during the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God in response to a presentation of Nancy Hudson's "Divine Immanence."

Keywords God · Environment · Neoplatonism

In "Environmentalism and Nicholas of Cusa's Model of God," Professor Hudson suggests looking to the 15th century mystical theology of Nicholas of Cusa for a traditional Christian model of God that can be reconciled with contemporary concerns about ecology and the environment. Initially, such a strategy might seem odd. After all,

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with their emphasis on an intellectual and spiritual world that transcends the physical world, both Platonism and Neoplatonism – and the theologies they spawned when married to Christianity via the early Church Fathers – would not seem to be environment friendly. Indeed, one might blame Platonism/Neoplatonism for reinforcing the detached, royalist, triumphalist models of God in the Biblical tradition that have tended to put Christianity at odds with the environmental movement.[1]

Nonetheless, linking Neoplatonism and environmentalism is not as strange as it first appears. Recent work on Plotinus and Neoplatonism has highlighted the links between Neoplatonism and environmental biology, environmental ethics, and deep ecology.[2] And, indeed, as one reads Professor Hudson's interpretation of Cusanus's theology, one is impressed with the prospects it holds for reconciling devotion to (the Christian) God with a concern for the environment. Given that "God enfolds the created order in himself and unfolds or self-manifests in the world"[3] in the Cusanean theology, we seem to have a concept of divine immanence that does not threaten the Christian concept of God (Hudson, 462) and yet "is inclusive, rather than exclusive, of the biophysical world" (Hudson, 452). Combined with a Christology that understands Christ as the "contracted maximum" – i.e., the perfect microcosm of the created universe – Cusanean theology seems to hold the promise of a God who is fundamentally creative and conciliatory, resulting in an ecology that "is fundamentally incarnational" (Hudson, 470).

Nonetheless, there are three somewhat interrelated questions I would like to raise with regard to Professor Hudson's turn to Nicholas of Cusa in search of an environment friendly God. First, is this indeed a *Christian* understanding of God? This may seem to be an odd question, since Cusanus clearly was a Christian, and a well respected Christian at that (e.g., he served as a papal emissary and was a cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church). This also is a question perhaps best left to the Christian theologian to answer. However, it is an important question given Professor Hudson's concern to develop "a *Christian* spirituality that can address the current ecological crisis" (Hudson, 452; my emphasis). The question can be put in different ways. On the one hand, is the Christian understanding of God best expounded in terms of a Neoplatonic philosophy such as this? If we are to search out a way to understand the Christian God as environment friendly, would we not be better off developing new ways of understanding God and Christ from the "ground up," i.e., by returning to the roots of Christianity and the Biblical tradition? (Here I am thinking of Sallie McFague's strategy in *Models of God* as one example.) Addressing the environmental and ecological issues of today from a Christian perspective might be better served by returning to the origins of Christianity and developing a new theology from scratch.

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[1] See, e.g., Sallie McFague, *Models of God. Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987).

[2] See, e.g., Peter Manchester, "Teleology Revisited: A Neoplatonic Perspective in Environmental Biology" in *Neoplatonism and Contemporary Thought I*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 73–83; Laura Westin, "Plotinian Roots of Ecology, Post-Normal Science and Environmental Ethics" and David R. Lee, "Commonality and Difference Between Neoplatonism and Deep Ecology" in *Neoplatonism and Contemporary Thought II*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 29–49 and 51–70. See also the collection of essays in *Neoplatonism and Nature: Studies in Plotinus' Enneads*, ed. Michael F. Wagner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

[3] Nancy Hudson, "Divine Immanence: Nicholas of Cusa's Understanding of Theophany and the Retrieval of a 'New' Model of God," *Journal of Theological Studies* 56.2 (October 2005): 455.

The question about whether this is a Christian understanding of God can be put in another way. Does the Cusanean theology succeed in navigating the extremes of absolute transcendence and absolute immanence that, in either case, would undermine this understanding of God as a Christian understanding? As Professor Hudson puts it

> The problem is that the neglect of either side of the equation, absolute identity or absolute difference, threatens either the self-identity of God or of creation or both. God would not be infinite and absolute, that is, would not be himself, if the world existed utterly apart from him. And the created order would not have its own being if it were absorbed into a monist system (Hudson, 460).

Even after reading Professor Hudson's paper it is not clear to me that Cusanus navigates this problem successfully. Neoplatonism would seem to lend itself to some sort of pantheism; indeed, Cusanus was accused of pantheism in his day. His assertion of the absolute transcendence of God seems to be just that—an assertion, based upon faith, or upon the odd marriage of negative theology to Neoplatonism.

Secondly, even if we grant that the Cusanean theology unfolds a traditional Christian understanding of God, how is this view better than other Christian understandings of God for addressing the current ecological crisis? Near the beginning of her essay Professor Hudson cites the work of Lynn White, Jr., who "argued for a return to the reverence for all things embodied in the life of St. Francis of Assisi" and Sallie McFague's work in *Models of God* as examples of Christian responses to environmental concerns. Nonetheless she concludes that "even the most optimistic of critics, such as H. Paul Santmire, can only point to the '*ambiguous* ecological promise of Christian Theology'" (Hudson, 451). However, it is not clear to me how the complex mystical theology of Nicholas of Cusa is a better and less ambiguous answer to the search for an ecologically promising Christian theology than, e.g., Sallie McFague's *Models of God*. Focusing on the Christian understanding of God as love and rooted in the Biblical stories of Jesus and his appearance in the world, McFague explores how the Christian might know the world as God's body. Knowing the world as God's body rather than as the king's realm makes the royalist, triumphalist images of God – as king, lord, ruler, patriarch – inappropriate and calls forth McFague's alternative images – God as Mother/Father, Lover, Friend – that suggest mutuality, interdependence, caring, and responsiveness (*Models of God*, 61 and *passim*). While McFague's rethinking of Christian imagery of God might not be "traditional" (while Platonism/Neo-Platonism is "traditional"), the complexity of this Neoplatonic theology that flirts with pantheism seems to make it no less ambiguous a model for an environment friendly Christian God.

The third question that arises with respect to Professor Hudson's argument is broader than the first two but no less important. In developing an environment friendly model of God, should we proceed from an esoteric, *contemplative* cosmology and *intellectual* understanding of what is divine such as we have in Nicholas of Cusa? Or should we proceed first from our practical concern with, and embeddedness in, the environment to then develop our understanding of what is divine? In other words, what comes first: the "environment" or "God"? My point is that, as environmentalists, our responsiveness to our surroundings would seem to be logically prior to our intellectual vision of what is divine. Our understanding of what is divine therefore should emerge from our environmental sensitivities; those

sensitivities should not be framed (and therefore driven by) a particular view of God. This, I would suggest, accounts for the allure of traditions such as Daoism or aboriginal and North American mythology (that Professor Hudson cites at the beginning of her paper) in developing environment friendly spiritualities. Such traditions are close to the natural world and their understandings of what is divine arise from that intimacy. For example, John Grim notes that "the experience of sacred relationships forged by indigenous peoples suggest more lived and embodied modes of expression" that produce a kind of "interactive knowledge" that is "embedded in local environments" and explores and transmits "creative engagements with the natural world and the larger cosmos."[4] As for Daoism, "the Dao is no more – and no less – than the flourishing of nature itself,"[5] giving us a

> cosmogony [that] is different from the Neoplatonic account of creation, which sees differentiation as the fundamental cosmogonic process. In that account, the multiplicity and diversity of the universe arise out of the splitting up or differentiation of some primoridal unity. The Daoist account, however, is quite different. One does not divide into two, nor two into four. Rather, the one becomes, as it were, pregnant with itself and gives birth to two; two becomes pregnant with itself and gives birth to three. In this way we may understand the process of the Dao – the ways of our universe – as a sort of recursive, fractal-like complexity in which life takes itself into itself and emerges into a yet more complex form.[6]

In this way, Daoism finds the ongoing fecundity and creativity of things themselves to be divine, without reference to an outside agency; transcendence is within, rather than outside the universe.

The alternative, environmentally rooted ways of indigenous religion or Daoism highlight why the ecological promise of Christian theology (including Cusansus's theology) is ambiguous: Christian theology always puts its belief in God (however that gets modeled) before the environment.

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[4] John A. Grim, "Indigenous Traditions: Religion and Ecology" in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger A. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 283–284. See also Roy C. Dudgeon and Fikret Berkes, "Local Understandings of the Land: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Indigenous Knowledge" in *Nature Across Culture. Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 75–96.

[5] James Miller, "Daoism and Nature" in *Nature Across Culture*, 393. Miller clarifies that the English word "nature" does not quite capture the spirit of Daoism since "the natural operation of the Dao is not limited to one dimension of life or being. Indeed it lies at the root of all activity, whether human, celestial, political, animal, or vegetal."

[6] James Miller, "Daoism and Nature" in *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, 223–224. Miller here is commenting on Chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing*:

> Tao engenders One,
>
> One engenders Two,
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> Two engenders Three,
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> Three engenders the ten thousand things.

Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1993).