

The Significance of the Incarnation for Ecological Theology

A Challenging Approach

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In this paper I will examine James Nelson's work in sexual ethics, particularly his attention to the significance of the incarnation for human thinking about the body. Nelson argues that what the incarnation implies for an adequate understanding of human sexuality, in fact, extends beyond human beings to include the whole of the created order. I will indicate briefly that his work on the experience of embodiment is in keeping with work done on the body by other Christian writers, such as Sallie McFague. While Nelson's work is situated within the larger conversation on the meaning of the body, I argue that his methodological insights offer a unique way to develop a theology that responds to the contemporary ecological crisis. Because it attends to the immediate and personal experience of alienation from the body, it can provide strong roots for the growth of an extensive ecological worldview.

Each of us reflect, in our attitudes toward our body and the bodies of other planetary creatures and plants, our inner attitude toward the planet. And, as we believe, so we act.¹

Within me even the most metaphysical problem takes on a warm physical body which smells of sea, soil, and human sweat. The Word, in order to touch me, must become warm flesh. Only then do I understand — when I can smell, see, and touch.²

Body Theology

Nelson's work in human sexuality is focused on the development of what he calls "body theology." The majority of the work to date in Christian sexual ethics has asked, "what does theology have to say about the body or the nature of human sexuality?" That is, one began with religion and moved from there to ask about the body. This was because it was assumed that religion had truths that were given or developed apart from any consideration of bodily experience, truths that simply needed to be applied. As John Fenton states,

To far too great a degree in the past, Christian theology's concern with the body has been confined to what theology has to say about the body, it being assumed that theology comes from outside the body, and that theology approaches this flesh as something it will try to interpret from its superior vantage point.³

¹ Paula Gunn Allen, "The Woman I Love is a Planet; The Planet I Love is a Tree," *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. Edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 52.

² Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, trans. P.A. Bien (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1965), p.43, as quoted in James Nelson, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience* (Pilgrim Press, 1983), 16.

³ John Fenton, "Bodily Theology," in *Theology and Body*, edited by John Y. Fenton (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 129. While Nelson has a well-developed 'body theology,' Fenton's article is from an early discussion of the significance of attention to the body for theology that occurred at a conference on "Theology and Body" in 1973. The papers from the conference were collected into the volume, *Theology and Body*.

The self-reflective insight that those who were doing the theologizing were themselves embodied persons did not arise.⁴ Nor did Christian theology regard bodies as sources of meaning.

Even a brief look at western Christian history would indicate that we have lost the belief that our human bodies are good as well as the belief that the whole of the material world is permeated with the presence of God. Nelson sees this to be the result of the spiritualistic dualism that we have inherited from Hellenistic Greece, namely, “the notion that spirit and body are fundamentally different, with spirit the eternal, good reality and body the temporal, lower, even evil part of us.”⁵

There is not adequate space here to go into the history of spiritualistic dualism and the sexist dualism that is related to it.⁶ While the tradition has not been totally nor consistently negative, Christianity has had to deal with the deleterious influences of movements such as gnosticism and docetism.⁷ In particular, there has been the tendency to see the created order, including the human body, as evil and to suggest that truth and goodness lie in being liberated from the snares of body and matter. Given its ambivalence about the physical, Christian theology in the West has been mostly concerned with speaking about the body in such a way that it seems to assume some nonphysical or non-bodily vantage point. Nelson challenges this approach.

But what if the incarnation is pervasively true — that God is met bodily if God is met at all? Then body experience is not somehow lower than spiritual experience, nor does theology start somewhere else and then speak about the body’s proper (disciplined and subordinate) place in the scheme of things. Rather, incarnational theology itself must be a body theology.⁸

In other words, a new question has emerged — “what does our experience as human sexual beings have to say about the way we do theology, read the scriptures, interpret the tradition, and attempt to live out the meanings of the gospel?”⁹ Nelson argues that it is the very concreteness and particularity of our bodily experience that is the source for the theology he has in mind. This is the case even if we tend to experience our bodies as both ours and yet strange to us.¹⁰ Body theology is not simply about describing the body theologically nor talking about the body as if it is merely a house for the soul. “Rather, [body theology] affirms that bodily experience must be the starting point for any theological reflection at all.”¹¹

⁴ Nelson refers to Kierkegaard’s response to Hegel that, in his rationalization of human experience of God, he had only forgotten ‘concrete, particular, existing individuals.’ (*Body Theology*, 41)

⁵ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 17.

⁶ For a fuller presentation of the notions of spiritualistic dualism and sexist dualism, see Nelson, *Embodiment*, 37-69.

⁷ Gnosticism suggests that there is a particular kind of knowledge that can liberate a person from ignorance and evil within the created order. The various forms of gnosticism share the following characteristics: dualism (human beings are imprisoned in creation which is under the control of sinister forces such as the demiurge but they seek for truth and goodness outside of creation); soteriology (a conviction that God, who is transcendent, sent one with divine enlightenment into creation so that those who chose to receive the inner enlightenment could be freed from the evil material reality); sectarian notions (there are distinctions between those who have received enlightenment and those who live in ignorance); syncretism (ideas and practices from various philosophical and religious traditions are included). Docetism refers to the theological teaching that Christ had the appearance of a physical body. The roots of this teaching are traced to beliefs that materiality (including the human body) is evil.

⁸ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 20.

⁹ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience*, ix. See also the work of Joan H. Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

¹⁰ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 21: “On the one hand, how can we be anything other than bodies?... Yet I also experience the body’s strangeness. Though I can express myself only through my body, I am limited by it at every turn: by its finite location in space (if I am here, I am not there); by the ways my emotions either seem blocked within body prisons or seem to run their bodily course quite apart from my conscious will; by the constant threat of disability, illness, and ultimately death.”

¹¹ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 22. Some striking examples of the impact of this methodology are found in Joan H. Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), Mary D. Pellauer, “The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics That Celebrates Women’s Sexuality,” *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 149-168; John Giles Milhaven, “Sleeping like Spoons: A Question of Embodiment,” *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 85-90; Paula Gunn Allen, “The Woman I Love is a Planet; The Planet I Love is a Tree,” *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (Sierra Club Books, 1990), 52-57.

This method of theologizing or this type of theology begins with the concrete experience of being embodied persons in the world, recognizing that a whole range of meanings is part of that embodied experience. As Nelson puts it, we begin

with our hungers and our passions, our bodily aliveness and deadness, with the smell of coffee, with the homeless and the hungry we see on our streets, with the warm touch of a friend, with bodies violated and torn apart in war, with the scent of honeysuckle or the soft sting of autumn air on the cheek, with bodies tortured and raped, with the bodyself making love with the beloved and lovemaking with the earth.¹²

Our knowledge and response to the world occurs through our bodies such that what we feel about being bodily persons affects the way we feel about the world.

What can be learned from this reflection on body experience? “[W]e learn that the fundamental reality with which we deal is not simply living beings as such, nor objects as such, but rather it is relationships.”¹³ Nelson has in mind here that meaning comes through personal relationships where the presence of the other as subject makes me want to communicate who I am, indeed, helps me to know who I am.¹⁴ As with human beings, we can know God only in relationship and this means that the task for theology is to express “the meanings of God *in relation* to the world.”¹⁵ One of the consequences of this way of thinking and doing theology is that it regards the world as the primary arena of divine activity.

Nelson acknowledges the various discussions about the body that have been emerging in Christian theology and ethics and have helped in the development of his methodological approach. In particular, he points to feminist theology which looks at the ways in which sexism has alienated us from our bodies,¹⁶ liberation theology which demands that social structures which dehumanize and disembodify the poor must be changed, the writings of blacks, gays and lesbians about their experiences as oppressed people, and medical ethics where a new concern for whole persons, as body-selves, is emerging. To this list Nelson adds the work in ecological theology which recognizes the intimate connection between our bodies and the earth.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” (John 1:14)

How might we proceed to understand what is given in our body realities as well as the various meanings we ascribe to those realities? Is there any way to interpret these bodily realities such that human beings can move toward greater wholeness in relation to God, to other human persons and to the earth? While Nelson acknowledges that there is no single road, but rather many ways to proceed, he does suggest that exploring the meanings of incarnation is of vital importance to Christians who have been affected by dualistic notions.

In his book, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience*, Nelson examines the Christian affirmation in the prologue of John’s Gospel that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). From Nelson’s perspective, this radical claim affirms (1) that flesh is indeed important; (2) that the incarnation of God has occurred in a particular human being, Jesus; (3) that “somehow Christian faith at its core is about the embodiment of God in our

¹² Nelson, *Body Theology*, 42.

¹³ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 22.

¹⁴ Nelson refers to the insights of Martin Buber who recognized the presence of the divine in every true meeting between persons. (*Between Two Gardens*, 23)

¹⁵ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 23.

¹⁶ Cf., Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (Harper, 1978); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: toward a feminist theology* (Beacon Press, 1983) and *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (Harper Collins, 1992); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Fortress Press, 1993); *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, eds., Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (Sierra Club, 1990); *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989).

own daily flesh-and-blood encounters.”¹⁷ But Christians, especially in the west, have had difficulty with these three affirmations.

The difficulty that we have accepting the goodness of our bodies and of matter makes it difficult for us to believe that the incarnation, which is God’s embrace of humanity, did not somehow eliminate Jesus’ humanity. Nelson indicates, for example, that it is difficult for us to imagine Jesus as laughing, crying, sweating, sensuous or sexual. Joan Timmerman, who also works in the area of sexuality and spirituality, argues that the shifting content with regard to the Christian affirmation that “Jesus Christ is truly human” says something about our underlying anthropological assumptions. “Those things which reflect the aspirations of our own ways of being human are included; those things which incorporate the confusions and conflicts we wish to reject are left out.”¹⁸ When the classical formulations about Jesus’ humanity were developed, they followed the conventional dualistic model that emphasized rationality. With Edward Schillebeeckx, Timmerman suggests that our Christologies will remain inadequate, not because we do not know enough about God but because we do not know enough about what it means to be human.¹⁹

For Nelson, the adequacy of our Christologies is to be measured morally and with regard to the present time.

Does this interpretation of Christ result in our bodying forth more of God’s reality now? Does it create more justice and peace and joyous fulfillment of creaturely bodily life? Do we experience more of ‘the resurrection of the body’ now — the gracious gift of a fundamental trust in the present bodily reality of God, the Word made flesh?²⁰

The incarnation is a graced reality that opens up the possibility of discovering who we really are as human beings, of what it means to embody the communion of the divine with human life.

But there is another problem. Since we find it difficult to believe that God embraced the totality of Jesus’ humanity, we have trouble thinking that the incarnation occurs in us as well. We lack “the conviction that God not only blesses human flesh from afar but also intimately embraces and permeates the bodyselves that we are, expressing divine presence and activity in the world through us.”²¹

Nelson argues that the traditional approach that focuses on how the divine and the human have met in the person of Jesus is too narrow. As he puts it, this confines the Christ to Jesus, and consequently, denies or does not deal with the way in which God is present in the life of other human persons. “More adequately, the purpose of Christology is to attempt to understand Jesus as Christ *and also* to understand and affirm God’s incarnate, relational activity in human life in the present and in the future.”²² What if, Nelson says,

Christians believe that the desire of God is that all human beings — not just one — be Christbearers? What if we believe that the Love that (as Dante said) ‘moves the sun and the other stars’ deeply yearns for intimate union with every person, desiring that each one participate in the redemption of the world?²³

Nelson’s main point here is to affirm that while the Word became flesh in Jesus, it also continues to become flesh; both meanings of the incarnation are important. In terms of an incarnational body theology, this suggests human beings communicate, fundamentally, as embodied persons. We are words as Jesus is

¹⁷ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 17.

¹⁸ Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth*, 26.

¹⁹ Timmerman notes that in classical discussions of Jesus’ manhood, things that were associated with women (connectedness, vulnerability, immersion in nature) were excluded. But it is no longer possible to hold male experience as universal and normative human experience.

²⁰ Nelson, *Body Theology*, 52.

²¹ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 17.

²² Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 25.

²³ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 27.

the Word. “In Christ we are redefined as body words of love, and such body life in us is the radical sign of God’s love for the world and of the divine immediacy in the world.”²⁴

In pursuing this line of thought, Nelson considers four possibilities: (1) that our body experience might express God’s hunger; (2) that our body experience might express God’s language; (3) that our body experience might express God’s interrelatedness with all else; (4) that our body experience might express the divine pleasure. It is the third possibility that Nelson suggests opens up into ecological concerns.

God as the Word made flesh intends communication. But also, “God’s bodily speech intends communion — shalom, interconnectedness, interdependence, mutuality of relationship.”²⁵ As stated earlier, our bodies are the means to such relationships of communion; they are the way in which we enter and participate in relationships. Still, our bodies, Nelson suggests, are more than that. “Our bodies themselves are divine revelations of the interrelatedness of all with all.”²⁶ In other words, in contrast to the dualistic vision of Greek Hellenism, and more recently, of Newtonian science and Cartesian philosophy, Nelson puts forwards a vision of bodies as revelations of inclusive community. What data support this vision?

On the one hand, if we look at our bodies, we see that they are made up of over a trillion individual cells that work together. Nelson has the image of bodies as communities “with their own ventilation systems, sewage systems, communication systems, heating units, and a billion miles of interconnecting streets and alleys.”²⁷ On the other hand, our bodies are more than their own communities; they are also communities that are in relationship with the earth. The fluids in our bodies have the same chemicals that were present in primeval seas; our bones have the same carbon that is present in the oldest of the earth’s mountains; the nitrogen in our bones is the same as the nitrogen in soil. In other words, “our bodies tell us that we are *one* with the whole earth. Our bodies are revelations of God’s new heaven and new earth.”²⁸ Nelson quotes Teilhard de Chardin in this regard:

The prevailing view has been that the body...is a *fragment* of the Universe, a piece completely detached from the rest and handed over to a spirit that informs it. In the future we shall have to say that the Body is the very Universality of things...My own body is not these cells or those cells that belong *exclusively* to me: it is *what*, in these cells *and* in the rest of the world feels my influence and reacts against me. *My* matter is not a *part* of the Universe that I possess *totaliter*; it is the *totality* of the Universe possessed by me *partialiter*.²⁹

This reflection on concrete embodied experience leads to the understanding that our bodies are constructed of interrelated systems. Furthermore, the interrelationship of the systems within any given human body is not an isolated or autonomous reality. The elements that are part of those systems are the very elements that are part of the earth’s ecosystems. The interrelationship that we know to be true of our own bodies extends beyond our bodies to integral relationships with the systems that sustain the life of the planet. It is precisely the understanding that we are related to all other living and non-living beings that is required, especially by those in western cultures, if we are to respond adequately to the threat of ecological disaster.

The Incarnation and Ecological Theology

The insights and methodology about the body that Nelson develops are an important addition to other explorations of the relationship between embodiment and ecological issues. There are some significant

²⁴ Nelson, *Body Theology*, 52.

²⁵ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 34.

²⁶ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 35.

²⁷ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 35.

²⁸ Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 35.

²⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 12f, as quoted in Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, 35-6.

areas of agreement, for example, with Sallie McFague's work on ecological theology and her examination of the model of the world as the body of God.³⁰

With Nelson, McFague argues that Christianity is a religion of the incarnation, of the body, although it has a history of treating bodies, especially those of women, and the natural world, in an oppressive and sinful manner. The ambivalence and even abhorrence that is present in human treatment of the body points to the degree of self-hatred that pervades western culture. For McFague, "[t]o the extent that we do not like bodies, we do not like ourselves."³¹ And yet, with Nelson, she states that it is impossible for us to continue to disregard our bodies or to think that we only *have* our bodies; "*we are* bodies."³² It is because bodies are not irrelevant but central to human life that they need to be given serious attention.

The ecological crisis calls us to move from attention to our human bodies to deal with the body of the universe. This is why McFague offers the model of the body as a critical interpretive tool for a contemporary ecological theology. The model is valuable ecologically because it unites human beings to every other body on the planet. It is also important as a justice model because it pushes us to think about the ways in which bodies, including the body of the earth, are oppressed by human decisions and actions. At its core, McFague's ecological theology, like Nelson's body theology, argues that bodies, all bodies, do indeed matter.

Paralleling Nelson's argument that body experience must be the starting point for any theological reflection, McFague asks: "If we and everything else that exists in the universe are matter, are body, then can we also speak of the 'body of God'?"³³ Indeed, McFague sees the extension of the model of the body to God to be a necessary step in the present ecological age. Her hope is that it is a model that helps human beings understand themselves more clearly as bodies imbued with spirit who live with other spirited bodies on the planet. Furthermore, extending the model to God makes it possible for human beings to see themselves as part of God along with all other bodies. The immanence of God inherent in this model sees everyone and everything as a potential sacrament of God. In turn, transcendence is understood in terms of God as the source that gives life to the universe. Like Nelson, this model of the body and the idea of the universe as God's body suggest that God can only be met bodily. Our meanings of God are in terms of God's relationship to the whole universe, and indeed, the world should be regarded as the primary arena of God's activity.

Within this exploration of the body of God, McFague sees the importance of the incarnation or Christology to the development of an ecological theology. The affirmation that God is embodied in Jesus, indicates for McFague as it does for Nelson, that God embraces and permeates all bodyselves. "What matters is the concrete, physical availability of God's presence and the likeness to ourselves."³⁴

The story of Jesus, understood within the framework of the body of God, indicates that all are included in the shape of God's body, but most especially those bodies that are needy, outcast, vulnerable, suffering. It is clear to McFague that nonhuman bodies, and the earth itself, should be included among the oppressed. "An incarnational religion, a bodily tradition, such as Christianity, should not have to strain to include the natural world and its creatures, for they epitomize the physical."³⁵ This claim draws on the attention that contemporary liberation theology gives to the preferential option for the poor, the notion that God's love is especially oriented toward any who are suffering, not just in a spiritual sense but also as bodies. Since in this organic model bodies are basic, how bodies are treated must be of primary concern.

When the notion of the poor is extended to include the nonhuman, it is McFague's contention that we will come to regard the nonhuman as having its own intrinsic value and will understand that the nonhuman is of value to God. Further, when the notion that God's body includes all suffering bodies is

³⁰ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.) For a discussion of the use of metaphors and models in theology, see McFague's earlier work, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987).

³¹ McFague, *Body of God*, 16.

³² McFague, *Body of God*, 16.

³³ McFague, *Body of God*, 18.

³⁴ McFague, *Body of God*, 160.

³⁵ McFague, *Body of God*, 167.

connected to the common creation story derived from contemporary scientific understanding of the origins and evolution of the universe, human beings will come to a fuller understanding of their relationship with all other bodies.³⁶ Humans will also face more clearly the harm and devastation they have been causing to parts of God's body.

While there is a great deal of complementarity between the ecological insights and concerns that emerge from Nelson's and McFague's work, particular aspects of Nelson's methodology provide a unique way in which humans can develop the ecological sensitivity needed in our time.

It is the case that human beings are deeply alienated not only from the nonhuman world but also from themselves, their own bodies. Healing the deleterious effects of dualism on our relationship to our own bodies may lead to a greater sense of the sacramentality, integrity, and intrinsic value of one's own body, of the bodies of others, and of the body of the earth. As Nelson argues, what we feel about ourselves as bodily persons affects the ways in which we regard and deal with all bodies, as well as God.

Much of the contemporary ecological writing done within a Christian context talks about the necessity of situating ourselves as human persons within the context of the interrelatedness that is integral to the nature of the universe. There is the important insight that, to the degree that we understand ourselves as related to the very origins of the universe and to all beings that are part of the universe, only then will we be living out of an ecological worldview. We can move toward that worldview by knowing the cosmological story and by experiencing it as often and as deeply as possible. Paying attention to the earth turning toward the sun at dawn and away from it at dusk, spending time in the presence of the night sky and feeling the earth's rotation, becoming intimately familiar with nonhuman beings — all of these are examples of avenues by which we can know, as bodyselves, the nature of the universe. Such experiences can help us to know that we are integral members of the history and ongoing reality of the universe.

But I want to suggest that alienation from our own bodies is an immediate reality, perhaps the most direct and intimate experience of dualism I can have. If I can learn the truth about the nature of my own body, the reality that overturns dualistic notions, I may more easily, and more deeply, regard all other bodies on this planet as my kin. While I can come to ecological awareness by becoming familiar with the story of the universe, becoming familiar with the stories of my body is a very fruitful and quite challenging endeavour. Indeed, authors who have attempted to speak about their experiences as embodied persons arrive at affirmations of the goodness and sacredness of body. They also feel and recognize their embodied experiences connecting them to the universe itself.

For example, Mary D. Pellauer has explored one aspect of women's sexual experience, orgasm, and struggled to find the appropriate language to talk about the meaning of that experience.

The language that feels closest for me may raise other feminists' hackles — the theological language of gift or grace, the surprisingly unmerited, gratuitous gift....Orgasm is a gift I receive *from my own body*. My very flesh has this capacity to burst me open to existence, to melt me down into a state in which my connections to the rest of the universe are not only felt, but felt as extremely pleasurable, as joyous.³⁷

Or again, Chung Hyung Kyung, a Korean theologian, refers to the writing of Gabriele Dietrich in which she connects women's menstruation with Jesus' shedding of blood on the cross and can affirm that "[w]omen's menstruation is a holy Eucharist through which the renewal of life becomes possible."³⁸

These reflections are not ecologically focused but they do lead to affirmations of the value and meaning, the sacredness, of bodily experience. They lead to the insight that the spiritual is an integral dimension of all experience. Joan Timmerman refers to this as the sacramental principle.

³⁶ McFague discusses this common creation story in Chapter 2 of *The Body of God*, 27-63.

³⁷ Mary D. Pellauer, "The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics That Celebrates Women's Sexuality," *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth: Sources for Theological Reflection* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 160.

³⁸ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 71.

By sacramentality I describe ... the truth...[that] the Mystery of God is present and accessible through the Spirit who, as the Immanence of God, permeates all things. The coinherence of God in matter and history precedes all communication about this presence and human modes of perceiving it.³⁹

The notion of sacramentality is grounded in the incarnation, the understanding that God has entered into not just human being, but all being. As a consequence of the incarnation, all reality can mediate the mystery of God, that is, all being can be sacrament. Indeed, Timmerman points to the ongoing integrative and healing work of the Spirit and to the fact that contemporary theology is giving new attention to the Spirit as cosmic creator.

At this time....when our vision of the universe is immensely greater and more dynamic in its development than what Paul apparently meant by “creation,”...we are also aware of a greater degree of immersion in nature. We know that we participate in the earth...⁴⁰

This inclusive, sacramental, view of reality affirms that the divine is encountered, not by rejection of bodily experience, but rather in and through ‘sensuously experienced reality.’

The point to emphasize here is that Nelson’s methodology invites us to attend to our experiences as bodyselves. I can come to know my body as an integral dimension of my reality as a human person. I can know the sacredness inherent in my own body experiences. It is an insight that emerges out of attention to my own concrete, particular body experiences and becomes a steadfast part of my self-understanding. It expands and overcomes the limited worldview that says that my body does not matter, that it is irrelevant. As it shifts my understanding of my self, it has the great potential to expand my horizons to see the intrinsic value of each and every body, human and nonhuman alike. Such a sacramental perspective is a critical dimension of any ecological theology.

Conclusion

How can I come to know my self, my body, my matter, as Chardin says, as the totality of the universe that I possess in a partial way? The possibilities for meeting the ecological crisis that are inherent in Nelson’s approach point to the need for greater attention to every aspect of our bodily experience. Such reflection can help us to retrieve the lost belief that bodies are good.⁴¹ It can help us to see the revelation of the sacred that is available in our experiences as bodyselves. More importantly, it can connect us to the varied ways in which we are intimately related to the earth. For

[w]e are ourselves a mystical quality of the Earth, a unifying principle, an integration of the various polarities of the material and the spiritual, the physical and the psychic, the natural and the artistic, the intuitive and the scientific...This being so, there is need to be sensitive to the Earth, for the destiny of the Earth identifies with our own destiny...⁴²

One trusts that with such embodied recognition and understanding of the sacredness of all dimensions of life, of body as well as spirit, of living and non-living beings, we would consider carefully whether any disregard or injustice exists in the ecological decisions that we make as members of the earth community.

³⁹ Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth*, 23. In a later discussion of sexual/spiritual growth, Timmerman examines William Stayton’s model for measuring relationships and potential erotic response. This model suggests that persons are capable of responding erotically to the transcendent, world of nature, other human persons, and the self. For Timmerman, this model holds great potential as a sacramental view of the world of nature, one in which diversity is celebrated, and all aspects of one’s world have the capacity to stimulate creative energy.

⁴⁰ Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth*, 114-115.

⁴¹ As is the case with all the authors cited here, such reflection needs to be done within the context of economic, social and political analyses.

⁴² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 174-5.

At its core, this avenue to ecological awareness leads, as D. H. Lawrence suggests, to knowing the waking of the day as our own waking, the breathing of the trees as our own breath, the dusk as our own sleep.

The last 3,000 years of mankind have been an excursion into ideals, bodilessness, and tragedy and now the excursion is over.... It is a question, practically, of relationship. We *must* get back into relation, vivid and nourishing relation to the cosmos.... The way is through daily ritual, and reawakening. We *must* once more practice the ritual of dawn and noon and sunset, the ritual of kindling fire and pouring water, the ritual of first breath, and the last.... We must return to the way of “knowing in terms of togetherness”.... the togetherness of the body, the sex, the emotions, the passions, with the Earth and sun and stars.⁴³

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⁴³ D. H. Lawrence, as quoted in Dolores LaChapelle, “Sacred Land, Sacred Sex,” *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (New Society Publishers, 1989), 167. LaChapelle explores the relationship between human sexuality and the natural world by examining three different approaches, one of which is that of D. H. Lawrence who she says is “the only modern literary figure who has ventured into this terrain of human sexuality and nature.” (155)