

H. Paul Santmire, *Before Nature: A Christian Spirituality*, Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 2014. (PB). Xxvii + 253pp. ISBN 978-1-4514-7300-1. \$39.00.

This is a very beautiful book, and one to which I know I shall continually return. Santmire will be familiar to very many readers of this journal as the author of the important *The Travail of Nature* (1985), which identified many of the ways Christian theology struggles to engage appropriately with the non-human creation. Also *Nature Reborn* (2000), with its classification of ecotheologies into the apologist, the reconstructionist and the revisionist, a taxonomy that I have used over and over again in teaching. In 2008 he published *Ritualizing Nature*, addressing the very important problem of how Christian worship can hold back ecological engagement. So it is entirely logical that he should now, in his seventies, turn his attention to personal spirituality and how that might be done within an ecologically-aware Trinitarian faith.

It will surprise some readers that Santmire draws so heavily on his own personal experience, whether that be walking along the banks of the Charles River in Boston, or scything a field in southwestern Maine. I prefer to think of this as the generous giving of a lifetime of spiritual, theological and ministerial insight. But it will tend to mean that readers in contexts very different from the US or UK may find it harder to access the spirituality that is offered.

Others will not warm to the prayer that frames the book, which is as follows:

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me.

Praise, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit, come and reign.

This so-called 'Trinity Prayer', an expansion of the 'Jesus Prayer' that is its first line, Santmire commends for constant repetition, and for singing to a variety of tunes. Again, such repetitive practice will not be to everyone's taste, but no one can deny that it has been an important element in Christian practice over the centuries. If this prayer is used to expand spirituality in a way that makes links with awareness of nature and with ecological concerns, Santmire's key objective will have been met.

It will be clear from the above that this book is aimed at encouraging Christian prayer, though Santmire's reflections on ecological concerns, and the richness and honesty of his use of personal experience, would also be of interest to those of other faiths or none.

Perhaps ironically, he spends least time on the phrase with which I had most difficulty, which is the final notion of 'reigning'. Not only does kingly language seem to play back into the hierarchies that so troubled Santmire in his earlier work, but the Spirit, destabilizer of stasis, conductor of creation's praise, co-groaner with its 'second voice' of lament and expectation, does not somehow

seem to go with the verb 'reign'. I preferred Santmire's formulation that the Spirit elicits and coordinates creaturely praise, and is the midwife of the liberation of the groanings of creation and humanity alike. But that may be just my preconceptions at work.

There is plenty of theology to go with the personal anecdotes. In particular Santmire does some very imaginative work on models of the Trinity, starting from Luther's understanding of God as 'in, with and under' the creation. Santmire develops a theology of Trinity as Giver, Gift and Giving. He illustrates this by three personal illustrations – his experience of festal celebration at a Thanksgiving dinner, of the awesome power of Niagara Falls, and of having his life saved by an unknown fellow steelworker who risked his own. Santmire returns to the waterfall image on a number of occasions. I became progressively less convinced, as this image was developed in terms of the role of the two 'hands' of creation, Word and Spirit. Which was a pity, because that image of awesome, violent power seemed to promise the opportunity to relate God's activity to the violent and destructive elements of the creation.

That leads me to my principal reservation about this book, which is that Santmire, fully aware of the developing literature in this area, concludes that no rational theodicy can be offered in respect of suffering in nature. One must just trust in God. That is an understandable position, but I would have liked those theodical concerns, as articulated by authors like Denis Edwards and Robert J. Russell, to have more of an influence on the spirituality being offered. How does God's awesome power in nature, as revealed in passages such as Job 38-41, relate to the activities of predators and parasites, and the destructive effects to which natural forces sometimes give rise? The work of Jill Carroll and Charlene Burns might have helped here,

That said, Santmire tellingly deploys some of his familiar motifs. He critiques, for example, the over-emphasis on looking 'up' in Christian tradition. If the Trinitarian God is 'in, with and under' the grain of the natural world, then to contemplate the workings of that God we should rather look down into that grain. This is a very important emphasis. The tacit anthropocentrism and proto-gnosticism of so much Christian thought needs a lot more naming and disclaiming than it tends to receive. I was all the more surprised, therefore, that after a moving description of the 'hidden garden' in which Santmire and his wife pray, and swing, and think together, the author reveals that their plan is to be cremated and their ashes buried there. That seemed to me a very curious decision, since cremation takes the matter of our bodies 'up', and disperses it, rather down, as in burial, to be subsumed in the processes of the Earth.

The book ends with some very helpful practical suggestions as to how the Trinity Prayer might be used in different seasons, how it might be said or sung to a range of tunes. Santmire quotes Krister Stendahl's description as prayer as 'putting holy pressure on God.' (p233). In giving us the benefit of many years of gentle and gracious pressuring of the divine, in ways fully aware of his own failings, Santmire writes his readers a spiritual love-letter that will be a blessing to many. Warmly recommended.

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