Ecology and Salvation

A Wesleyan Methodist Meditation on Stewardship[1]

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Abstract: As crises of global warming mount, commitment to ecological theology and practice becomes urgently relevant. That John Wesley reveals prescient elements of an ecotheology calls Methodists to more active realization of the responsibility for "the Natural World" already taught in the Social Principals. Wesley calls us to become good stewards of the creation and all its creatures. While much ecotheology rejects "stewardship" as too close to "dominion," it will be more effectual to reclaim it in terms of Wesley's teaching on "the use of money" and "the soul of the universe." He found the suffering of nonhuman creatures, who "travail together in pain," to call us to responsible use of the creation. Salvation of our souls becomes inseparable from whether we respect the graced soulfulness that defines all creatures' relation to the Creator.

You may feel a certain redundancy in my title: why Wesleyan and Methodist? I did not mean to mark off my Methodism as truly Wesleyan, versus some other versions (I wasn't thinking of the current separation; nor was I thinking of the US Wesleyan Methodist church in their separation from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1841—though I admire their resistance to war and to slavery.[2]) But my redundancy did give me an excuse to engage—at last – a bit of John Wesley himself. I have been gratefully a United Methodist for 3 decades, when I joined a (very hip) congregation; I was already teaching in an ecumenically UMC seminary. And it happens that well before that I

1 This lecture was delivered at Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in August 2024.

2 The name "Wesleyan" came into play around 1740 to distinguish the followers of John Wesley from other Methodists (such as "Whitefieldites" and the Countess of Huntingdon's "Connexion"). Not in formal use until the early 19th century, "Wesleyan" then differentiated the "Original Connexion" from its offshoots and, in Wales, from Calvinistic Methodism. Now the term Wesleyan is usually used in the broad sense of "deriving from the Wesleys" and is applied to theology held by almost all Methodist groups.

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had sought out John Cobb, himself a son of Methodist missionaries to Japan, as my doctoral advisor. He was the profoundly ecumenical sort of Christian who spoke of Christ calling us to learn from other religions, which in his case had meant especially Buddhism.[3]

What I cherish most from my work with that Methodist (who passed at 99 last year): is the theology of a lively creation, of a universe made not of separate mostly dead bits but of animate interconnection between all of its parts: a cosmos in a living process of unfolding and evolving by way of these events of relationship. That process worldview was adopted from Alfred North Whitehead's profoundly ecological cosmology of the 1920's. It of course preceded Earth's ecological crisis but not its causes. It lays out a (still) profoundly alternative worldview, in which no individual creature, the most simple or the most complex, exists in independence from its world, a vision in which the universe is a dense web of social relations, and God is the most social of all beings. There in the 70's I couldn't miss the reverb with my feminist critique of the separative male ego.[4] Not accidentally John Cobb was the first Christian theologian to pen a book about the ecological crisis. It was called Is it Too Late: a Theology of Ecology, first published in 1972.[5] That titular question echoes eerily unto this day. As I deliver this talk we find ourself in what may beat 2023 as the hottest year on record; with droughts, fires, ice melts, and the CO_2 level higher than it has ever been... You know the drill. Cobb has done incalculably much over half a century to expose the economics of planetary degradation. As the degradation continues.

And key for the present conversation, his Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today (1995) makes clear that John Wesley's distinctive synergy of human and divine agency underlies John Cobb's ecosocial theology. We are created responsible, able-to-respond. "John Wesley," according to the later John, "considered the failure to practice Christian stewardship a major threat to the spiritual health and effectiveness of the Wesleyan revival." Stewardship—I will return shortly to that troubled notion. Cobb cites Wesley writing the following in 1786: "I fear, wherever riches

3 Cobb, Christ in a Pluralistic Age.

4 See Keller, From a Broken Web.

5 Cobb, Is It Too Late. That is the first book-length Christian ecology. It is important to note that the first ecotheological book was written by a Muslim in 1966, Nasr, Sayid Hossein, Man and Nature.

have increased (exceeding few are the exceptions) the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore, do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, and anger, and love of the world in all its branches…'"

What a superb exemplification of the vicious circle we often call original sin. Wesley, as Cobb notes, "had a mounting suspicion of the acquisitiveness and consumerist dimensions of capitalism…[his] stewardship practice or his economic ethics is summarized in the familiar formula: earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can. That formula was laid out clearly in his sermon entitled 'The Use of Money.'" There Wesley asks: "how many have you found that observe the third rule, 'Give all you can?' Have you reason to believe that five hundred of these are to be found among fifty thousand Methodists?"[6] (This bit of discouragement comes two years before his death). So, Cobb does not draw optimism from Wesley, but a prophetic call. He considered Wesley's greatest theological contribution to be "his way of affirming human responsibility for our ultimate destiny and daily life while strongly maintaining the primacy of faith."[7]

It was in this way John Cobb who prepared me to embrace, years later, Methodism. But worry not, I am not about to preach process theology to you, or to argue it is the true Wesleyanism. The diversity of theologies in conversation even at this conference is a testimony to an ongoing strength of the Methodist tradition – a strength more like that of ecological interdependence than of unifying authority. A not invulnerable strength (as we know all too well). I am also not here to make anachronistic claims about the 18th century theologian as prophetic environmentalist. But I might let a hint of his homiletical prophecy, a hint with a green tint, slip through. Such hints and tints have long helped to motivate the meaningful work that the

6 John Wesley, cited in Cobb, Grace & Responsibility. https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/sermon-116-causes-of-the-inefficacy-of-christianity. See also Bishop Kenneth Carder's concise account of the Wesleyan hope and its disappointment, "John Wesley on Giving" (https://www.umc.org/en/content/john-wesley-on-giving-pog). Also: "A Wesleyan Perspective on Christian Stewardship." https://generousstewards.com/a-wesleyan-perspective-on-christian-stewardship-by-bishop-kenneth-l-carter/ (22.08.2025).

7 Ibid, Cobb.

denomination already attempts on behalf of this little bit of the creation we call Earth. This is less a matter of an anachronistic reading than of a synchronistic one: of working our past into the present synergy of a shared future.

Crucially, the Social Principles of the 2016 Book of Discipline include ecological responsibility. Its substantive section on "The Natural World" reads: "All creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God's creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation."[8]

Such "stewardship" is quite a grant! And inasmuch as we have taken that grant for granted, we now use and abuse it in ways Wesley could not have imagined. Sadly, even some of the most socially principled Methodists also take the grant for granted. They have more humanly vivid and pressing priorities. This is the case with my congregation. The pastors are gifted, visionary preachers and courageous activists on behalf of social justice: especially of race and LGBTQI urgencies, so existential for so many in our denomination, in our congregation. But the issue of ecological justice hardly arises (though they welcome my contributions). Stewardship of the creation is never denied. But the materiality of the nonhuman remains in the background—of what more immediately matters. The fact that each degree of global warming will raise the degree of suffering, especially of the poor and the folk of color in my city and around the planet; or that the reductive understanding of "nature" that serves the US and global economy also categorizes many as sexually unnatural: such connections remain mostly abstract, distant.

In the meantime, the increasing strength of AI does deliver the facts, continually updated, of the degrees of warming and the condition of the resources, the health, the creatures, of our corner of the creation. And at the same time, I just happened to learn the following, about AI

> As the tech giants compete in a global AI arms race, a frenzy of data center construction is sweeping the [US] country. Some computing campuses require as much energy as a modest-sized city, turning tech firms that promised to lead

8 https://www.umc.org/en/content/social-principles-the-natural-world (22.08.2025).

> the way into a clean energy future into some of the world's most insatiable guzzlers of power. Their projected energy needs are so huge, some worry whether there will be enough electricity to meet them from any source.[9]

So, the indispensable tool for fighting the problem ironically increases the problem—which suggests a vicious circle of sin and stewardship. But I want here to back off from the frenzy of data and reflect with you on the symbol of stewardship in its relationship to two other theological symbols important to John Wesley: salvation, and soul. These connections can help to intensify a Wes-Meth environmentalism. (Presuming—as I still must and as you read—it is not "too late.") Each of these three symbols will be offered in the context of a particular homily of John Wesley. I am hoping that these three sermonic 's's—stewardship, salvation and soul—will reverberate together in a past and future synchronism, helping us to become better stewards in and of the present. Even now.[10]

Sermon 51 The Good Steward

If you are involved in a wider movement of ecological theology, you know what criticism the term "stewardship" has endured. I am not referring to standard right-wing and denialist, antienvironmentalist, discourse. No, I am thinking of my own language and that of most ecologically oriented theologians in mainline Christianity. Among us the critique, and even dismissal, of the trope of stewardship is almost presumed. How did that happen?

UMC pastor and activist Sharon Delgado captures the issue in her recent book, *The Cross in the Midst of Creation*. She writes that "as followers of the crucified and risen Jesus, we are called to live by the Spirit and do our part to bring about creation's healing and transformation."[11] In this work "the biblical term stewardship is often used to express human responsibility to

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9 Halper/O'Donovan, AI Is Exhausting the Power Grid.

10 Given the deadly progress of climate change over even the period of this paper's delivery and its publication, I am aware of the apocalyptic overtones of that "even now." But apocalypse as I have argued elsewhere does not mean "the end of the world." Cf. Keller, Facing Apocalypse.

11 Delgado, Cross, 100.

care for the natural world, based on the idea that all things belong to God and that we do not own land or any other part of creation…" Rather, we exhibit "stewardship over it on behalf of God. 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it…' (Ps 24)." However, she continues, "in this time of extreme ecological devastation, the concept of environmental stewardship has limited value. Although this well-meaning concept calls for responsibility and care for the earth, it reinforces the anthropocentric concept of human dominion over the natural world (Gen 1:26) and leaves intact the view that humans are somehow above and separate from the natural world." It portrays "a universe created for and centered on human beings, which devalues the rest of creation and sanctifies hierarchical ideas that have led to widespread ecocide."[12] We may derive from this superb summary of the problem that the symbol of stewardship is achieving the opposite of both its scriptural original and of its recent environmental intentions.

I could share other ecotheological repudiations of the term, such as that of Jürgen Moltmann and Michael Northcott. In a joint evaluation of the 2009 'Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming' [Cornwall Alliance] they criticize stewardship theologies for disconnecting environmental practices from Christian spirituality by failing to show nature's own significance for God. Others point out the management ethos of stewardship which may dull the gracious awe, by which nature humbles us before God.[13]

I have for all these reasons long avoided the term. But I realize that I need a different strategy now. I will continue.to take seriously the ecocritique of stewardship. But I want to do so in order not to erase but to improve the concept of stewardship; I want the term to bolster rather than undermine the rigorous ecotheology we need. Human language is never sufficient, always part of our fallen condition. So, I want to recycle "stewardship" for the following reason: it has at once an ancient scriptural root and an immediate resonance with biblically minded folk—including, crucially in case we actually want change, more conservative and evangelical publics.

Of course, the symbol has a significant root in John Wesley. And this root brings with it a key economic meaning. In "The Good Steward" Wesley was preaching a responsibility tuned primarily to our personal bodies,

12 Ibid, 101.

13 Jenkins, Ecologies of Grace, 90.

properties and money. So, it would be a mistake to think that because he was focused on economic rather than ecological stewardship, his usage is irrelevant to current environmental urgencies. After all what is driving climate change, what is overheating the planet, what is discreating manifold species of the creation—but the neoliberal economy materializing as the organizing principle of our planetary oikos? Far from ecologically irrelevant, what he was thinking allows us to hook our current sense of stewardship as oikologia into his critical oikonomia. At any rate oikonoia translates here as stewardship. And what emerges from his sermon is a remarkable rejection of private property itself, on principle, indeed on the basis of the biblical parable of the steward.

The point reveals itself in Wesley's distinction of the debtor from the steward. Permit me to indulge here in the flow of his own words in this homily:

> We are now indebted to [God] for all we have; but although a debtor is obliged to return what he has received, yet until the time of payment comes, he is at liberty to use it as he pleases. It is not so with a steward; he is not at liberty to use what is lodged in his hands as he pleases, but [only] as his master pleases. He has no right to dispose of anything which is in his hands…For he is not the proprietor of any of these things, but barely entrusted with them by another; and entrusted on this express condition,—that he shall dispose of all as his master orders… they are all, as our Lord speaks, allotria, belonging to another…[14]

The point comes through loud and clear—we are indebted to God for everything; but we are not normal debtors, who can do what they want with their property when they get it. Stewardship, unlike debt, is no kind of deferred or indirect ownership—of one's own resources, talents, body, goods. The steward is one who has been conditionally "entrusted" with another's goods.

> …Nor [Wesley continues] is anything properly our own, in the land of our pilgrimage. We shall not receive ta idia, our own things, till we come to our own country. Eternal things only are our own:…With all these temporal things we are barely entrusted by the Disposer and Lord of all…Above all, he has com-

14 John Wesley, Sermon 51, "The Good Steward," in: The Works of John Wesley, Volume 2, Sermons II 34–70, 283.

> mitted to our charge that precious talent which contains all the rest—money: Indeed it is unspeakably precious, if we are wise and faithful stewards of it; if we employ every part of it for such purposes as our blessed Lord has commanded us to do.

Stewardship in other words is not only not ownership. "Steward" is an antonym to "proprietor." Even our money—precisely in its noted preciousness—is not actually our own. The economic implications are not low key! Joerg Rieger in No Rising Tide emphasizes Wesley's account of God's entrustment to us of private property. He argues that according to the model of stewardship, the "only basis for having anything, is an ongoing relationship with God, which constantly provides the focus for the use of what Christians have."[15] So while we are told to earn, save and give all we can, those who in his context have things (one even hesitates to use the term "own") enjoy nothing like the version of freedom promoted by contemporary free market economics.

Wesley's interpretations set strong limits on the prerogative of ownership. Perhaps that was easier to do in a time when private property did not yet resemble the extensive monopolies now represented by transnational corporations. But precisely because private property has taken such absolute forms and is held in such large pools, Rieger argues convincingly that Wesley's reflections are now more relevant than ever. And we might add: because of the religious right's sanctification of capitalism's rising tide, a theological response takes on intensified importance.

The politically potent religious conservatism of the United States remains of course key to liberating capitalism from all ethical, and certainly environmental, regulation. Therefore, I am better recognizing the importance of the work of seriously ecological evangelicals (not just Wesleyan ones) and distinguishing them from those evangelical organizations designed to oppose them by claiming a conservative stewardship model. The evangelical spectrum is ecologically complicated.

Crucially for the eco-evangelical potential is the 1999 Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship. It recognized "the moral necessity

15 Rieger, No Rising Tide, 145.

of ecological stewardship."[16] It asserted that the strengthening of market freedom and property rights—instead of government regulations—would be the solution to environmental problems. But in 2006, the Evangelical Environmental Network launched the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI), which produced the statement "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action."[17] Led by Jim Ball, that Call was signed by over three hundred evangelical leaders favorable to regulation for the sake of ecological and economic justice. Soon the Cornwall Alliance reacted with "A Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor: An Evangelical Response to Global Warming." It began to refer to the pro-regulation Christians as the 'Cult of the Green Dragon.' And it published a "Brief History of Environmental Exaggerations, Myths and Downright Lies."

Methodists can be found in both of these eco-evangelical publics. Which is to say: Wesley's definition of stewardship in terms resistant to private property should not be downplayed! Indeed, the sense of the steward's responsibility before God could hardly be more relevant. Is there, however, a way to make Wesley's economic stewardship more explicitly ecological—from within his own theology? To recycle the very notion of stewardship, freeing it from its capitalist misuses?

You know there is—we have already heard in this Oxford conversation of Sermon 60, "The General Deliverance," in which Wesley can be read as an ecological prophet.[18] In its vision of salvation, the logic of stewardship reveals that so-called "brute creatures" (the term then referring to nonhuman animals, not to brutality) will also be delivered. They too have souls. The ecotheological importance of Wesley's attention to the souls of nonhuman animals is lucidly demonstrated by UMC theologian Greg Van Buskirk, who

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16 In March 2000, The Interfaith Council on Environmental Stewardship published The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, which grew out of a consultation of some 35 scholars on environmental stewardship in West Cornwall, Connecticut, in the fall of 1999 and soon was endorsed by 1,500 religious leaders and many laymen from around the world. https://cornwallalliance.org/about/our-history-in-highlights/ (22.08.2025). I am grateful to my colleague Laurel Kearns for tuning me to this and other relevant analysis.

17 https://legacy.npr.org/documents/2006/feb/evangelical/calltoaction.pdf (22.08.2025). Jim Ball, formerly of EEN, organized and led the Evangelical Climate Initiative made up of senior evangelical leaders, and also founded Young Evangelicals For Climate Action, which continues to lift up the next generation of leaders. He is the author of Global Warming and the Risen Lord: Christian Discipleship and Climate Change.

18 I.5, in: The Works of John Wesley, Volume 2, 441.

sets him into contrast with Aquinas. The latter denies "Plato's theory that the souls even of brute animals are immortal."[19] Wesley's position on the "souls of brutes" spans his entire theological career, beginning with his 1726/1727 Master's degree lectures and stretching well into his most mature sermons in the 1780s. Permit me to replay here his captivating homiletics.

> During this season of vanity [the epoch of human domination] not only the feebler creatures are continually destroyed by the stronger; ... but both the one and the other are exposed to the violence and cruelty of him that is now their common enemy—man. [I let that exclusive language stand.] And if his swiftness or strength is not equal to theirs, yet his art more than supplies that defect...He pursues them over the widest plains, and through the thickest forests. He overtakes them in the fields of air, he finds them out in the depths of the sea. Nor are the mild and friendly creatures [those "duteous to his commands"] secured thereby from more than brutal violence; from outrage and abuse of various kinds. [Do take in the powerful affect of Wesley's concern!] Is the generous horse, that serves his master's necessity or pleasure with unwearied diligence, is the faithful dog, that waits the motion of his hand, or his eye, exempt from this? What returns for their long and faithful service do many of these poor creatures find? ...The lion, the tiger, or the shark, gives them [other animals] pain from mere necessity, in order to prolong their own life; and puts them out of their pain at once: But the human shark, without any such necessity, torments them of his free choice; and perhaps continues their lingering pain till, after months or years, death signs their release (Sermon 60).

In this extraordinary homily, the "human shark" comes off worse than any of our fellow creatures! And in the sermon's climax Wesley's attention to animal suffering waxes eschatological:

> But will "the creature," will even the brute creation, always remain in this deplorable condition? God forbid that we should affirm this; yea, or even entertain such a thought! While "the whole creation groaneth together," (whether men attend or not,) their groans are not dispersed in idle air, but enter into the ears of Him that made them. While his creatures "travail together in pain," he knoweth all their pain, and is bringing them nearer and nearer to the birth, which shall be accomplished in its season. He seeth "the earnest expectation" wherewith the whole animated creation "waiteth for" that final "manifestation

19 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles II, 82, § 8.

> of the sons of God;" in which "they themselves also shall be delivered" (not by annihilation; annihilation is not deliverance) from the "present bondage" of corruption...

In this season of "groaning together" Wesley was of course not specifying the effects of later white capitalist exploitations and extinctions. But we can hardly avoid hearing the prophetically synchronistic ecology.[20] Randy Maddox also emphasized the ecological implications of this preaching in an essay called "Anticipating the New Creation: Wesleyan Foundations for Holistic Mission."[21] Such missionary holism today takes on increasingly eschatological intensity.

Back to Sermon 60: "Away with vulgar prejudices"—Wesley is pointing at uses of the Genesis dominion—"and let the plain word of God take place. They [all creatures] 'shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption, into glorious liberty;' even a measure, according as they are capable, of 'the liberty of the children of God.'" The sermon thus includes nonhuman animals in the liberating glory of salvation. That marks a soteriology with few precedents. It shows a glimpse of such a vision already given us "in the twenty-first chapter of the Revelation. When He that 'sitteth on the great white throne' hath pronounced, 'Behold, I make all things new.'"

So the stewardship that characterizes the creation spirals all the way to the salvation signified by the new creation. In this the effects of the abusive misuse of dominion are not ended at the level of the redemption of human souls. Rather, the soulful life of every creature will find then its ultimate renewal. Here we witness how a universal soulfulness comes into play. Since animals have souls, it is no coincidence that Wesley became a vegetarian and strongly promoted such a diet. (Wesley's holism has bite!) Based on his doctor's recommendation he gave up meat and soon found himself, as he wrote in a letter, "free, blessed be God, from all bodily disorders."[22] He did not make this a mandate. To do so would hardly have helped the spread of Methodism! But in our time—given the economic role of cattle production in releasing methane into the atmosphere—this holism supports

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20 Indeed even of sensitivities developing in 17th century England. See for example Izaak Walton, The Compleat Angler, Mineola, NY 2003, first published in 1653.

21 Maddox, Anticipating the New Creation.

22 From a letter to Dr. Gibson, Bishop of London, June 11, 1747, in: The Letters of John Wesley, ed. by John Telfonrd, London 1931, quoted after Richards, John Wesley.

not just ethical treatment of animals but of all of us creatures. And given the ecological and food justice concerns of upcoming generations, this aspect of Wesley could contribute to some effectual outreach.

To help this underpublicized side of Wesleyanism sink in—the theological depth which supports it must not be ignored. It is a depth of soul—that opens into what he called "the soul of the universe." No creature at all is simply soulless. And this cosmic soulfulness then defines our relationship, all critters' relationships, to the Creator. It cannot be brushed away as some pagan animism. Neither is its key citation unfamiliar.

The passage I will read from Sermon 23, on the Sermon on the Mount, is one of the most beautiful theological statements of the Creator-creature relation on record. Wesley captures the soulful intimacy that pervades and holds every single creature of the creation. In his words:

> But the great lesson which our blessed Lord inculcates here…is, that God is in all things, and that we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; that we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical atheism; but, with a true magnificence of thought, survey heaven and earth, and all that is therein, as contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is, in a true sense, the soul of the universe.

This thought emerges from an odd context: the lesson Wesley is referencing pertains to Jesus' warning in Mt 5:33 against swearing. Not just against false swearing, with its betrayal of promises made to God, but swearing in general. No, not in the recent sense of swear words, as cusses and curses! But of making vows in the name of heaven or earth or Jerusalem—the Nazarene's point being that God is in all these places, and so one risks breaking promises to God.[23]

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23 He counsels just to say instead "yes yes or no no." Wesley underscores the point but is worried that this be misread as a prohibition against, say, swearing in a courtroom as required by British law. He assures us it is not. Anyway, no language of stewardship or creation in Mt 5,33–35. "Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King."

Somehow Wesley leaps from there to make his key contribution to future creation theology: we are invited to see the Creator mirrored in every creature. In the ensouled universe he reveals, transcendence is intimately immanent (what I've sometimes dubbed transcendimmanence...) This is a radical expansion of the doctrine of the imago dei, a universalization in the true sense—it implicates the whole universe. Even in the most creation-friendly theologies before or in his time, I do not find such explicit imagery of every creature, not just good old us, created in the image of God. So, each one, in its own way, mirrors the Creator. And Wesley adds here no distracting or diluting qualifiers about false deifications or idolizations of creatures.

Indeed, he conveys that I might as well be an atheist if I do not see God in the fly that was bugging me as I wrote this. Does that pretty much render the vast majority of so-called believers atheists? This God is no mere exterior transcendence, creating from on high—but is the very life, animacy, soul of the universe. And because Wesley says we should not just "see" but also "use nothing as separate from God, neither should we repress the relation of this inseparability to his own later notion of stewardship. Or its pertinence to our own age's use and abuse of the earth. This "true magnificence of thought"—magnificent in the original sense, of *magna*, immense—suggests a cosmically embracing thinking that he wants us all to actualize. Its magnitude implicates our theology and its practice in an intimate proximity to every fellow creature of our cosmos; each one becoming a mirror of the divine transcendimmanence.

Such divinity visible in the mirror of every creature, let me suggest, might offer a Wesleyan portal to all manner of fresh publics: to the young, with their strong environmental concerns; to all Christians who want to build broad ecosocial alliances; but also to those more mystically than dogmatically inclined, with meditative proclivities, as in Quaker or Asian interreligious moods; and in intriguing ways to the spiritual not religious public who want solidarity and meaning.

Nonetheless: some of Wesley's language, even in this sermon, does also pose problems for an ecosocial perspective; "The spirit which is in the world is directly opposite to the Spirit which is of God. It must therefore needs be, that those who are of the world will be opposite to those who are of God. There is the utmost contrariety between them." The familiar theological dualism of that passage seems to weaken the chances for an ecologically

viable Wesleyanism: suddenly we are hearing the old opposition of spirit and world. With no distinction of "world" from "creation." Taken out of context, it can cancel the sermon's own vision: of God as the soul of the universe.

Perhaps then there is nothing to do but acknowledge that "world" in this usage leans directly on John 18:36, and the kingdom "not of this world," with *kosmos* naming that which directly opposes the will, the way, the word of God. One can then insist that in that sense "the world" signifies the dominant civilization; the civilization now operating in globalized white economic and cultural opposition to the Earth itself. And we can underscore that such passages need contextualization, that in our context it is no longer responsible to use the word "world" as a pejorative. We must help "world" now to signify the universe in which the Spirit lives, the world to which God gave and gives life—world as the all of creation, *to pan*.

For some it may be meaningful to acknowledge that Sermon 23's world-soul affords a vivid expression of what would later be called panentheism. When I pronounce that word in nonWhiteheadian publics I immediately add: do not mishear it as pantheism! For panentheism—all in God—signifies an alternative both to the transcendent God-above, which performs the separation Wesley denounces; and to its opposite, the God merely within, which flattens readily into a pantheism long dismissed (and not without reason) as heresy. But Whiteheadians didn't invent the term panentheism; actually, a theologian named Krause in the early 19th century did. My *Cloud of the Impossible* tracks its content as already fully anticipated in *De Docta Ignorantia* of Nicholas of Cusa, 1440.[24] This sense of all creatures existing within the God who is at the same time within all creatures, pervading them, does welcome the clarity of the all in God vs either all is God or God is outside of it all. Such mutual immanence always also involves mutual difference. Thus, the interrelatedness of all creatures—connected but different—reflects the God/world relation. And the metaphor of the world-soul deepens, broadens and enlivens the language.

The anti-dualistic metaphor of the world-soul comes quite paradoxically right out of Mr. Dualism himself, Plato. A passage of Timaeus that got to me in antiquity (well, half a century ago) proposes "that this *Cosmos* has verily come into existence as a Living Creature endowed with soul and

24 Cf. Keller, Cloud.

reason [...] a Living Creature, one and visible, containing within itself all the living creatures, which are by nature akin to itself."[25] That world-soul then occurred commonly in Eastern Christendom, but Augustine found it a "*magna atque abdita quaestio*" [a great and hidden question] (Cons. Evang. 1.23.35) and never identifies the anima mundi with God. Indeed, he remains uncertain as to whether one can properly speak of a world soul and an animated universe.[26] So then most Latin and Medieval theologians rejected the world-soul. It did however revive in the Renaissance. And it found distinctive support in 17th century England, particularly with Henry More, and would likely have been known to the erudite Wesley.[27]

It is not that Wesley was preoccupied with the philosophy of the world-psyche. However, his embrace of the soul of the universe can lend theological depth and breadth—and for many also an attractive metaphor—to his pleas for economically responsible stewardship. And so, importantly, to its extension into a responsible, which now means ecological, theology. For if God is the very soul of the universe then it becomes inescapable that the Earth is of inherent value. The creation, world, *pan*—all of it—has not merely extrinsic but intrinsic value to its creator: in Wesley's words "nature's own significance for God."

It may be that Christians need to sense the interiority to God of that value in order to fight our own most civilized habit: of rendering nonhuman nature external to our humanness. Of treating Earth and its materiality as background to what really matters—rather than as the ground not just of civilization, but of the incarnation, indeed of every enfleshment, every materialization, every bit of creation. Bruno Latour, the leading Continental ecological theorist, may have nailed it with the title of his recent book: *If we lose the Earth, we lose our souls*. That cuts against the soul / body, spirit / earth dualism still assumed by most Christians. Interestingly, this secular thinker ends the book on a biblical note: "'Renew the face of the earth': is this not a revolutionary program?" Latour asks. With Psalm 104 he also embraces

25 Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9 translated by W. R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA 1925, 30.

26 Cf. Augustine, Retractiones, 1.11.4.

27 Cf. https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/world-soul-anima-mundi (22.08.2025). European philosophers such as those of Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schelling, and Georg W. F. Hegel (particularly in his concept of Weltgeist).

the Apocalypse, but not as the sudden End of time: he emphasizes that ecological revolution is radical but works "in detail, slowly, in a multiplicity of fields, through the reformation of a multitude of actions among billions of people."[28] Thus the apocalypse comes through ecologically as the new creation. And we can add: as Wesley's "glorious liberty" of all the creatures of God.

Permit me in conclusion to return to John Wesley as read by John Cobb—in order to emphasize the importance of our multitude of human decisions and actions. Key is that these decisions are never made independently of grace. Grace will not do our ecosocial justice labor for us.[29] It will not silence the groaning of creation. It will not fix the crisis of our age. But neither does it cease to invite us to hear and to respond: indeed, to decide ("decision" being by the way the root of the term "crisis," *krinein*). It still calls us to become critical and graced stewards of a vulnerable planet. And that spirited stewardship lets us participate more vibrantly, more hopefully, in the work of ecosocial salvation. As a collective, systemic work. We can together earn, save, give.

That is one kind of saving. Yet it not irrelevant to the work of salvation. The saving grace will keep our work cosmically soulful. That means none of our burning issues, not even the most urgently encompassing, can block the salutary flow—of energy, life and even joy. Such grace brings "glad tidings of salvation in an age of crisis." The grace tunes us to the soul of the universe. Magnified in our own souls by that glimpse of magnificence, it charges us with an energy that burns no fossil fuels. In its animation we share—along with countless other nonextinct animals—in that liberty of the children of God. All in connection with each other, and only so: "very good." All of us creatures bound—no matter what, consciously or not—by that intimate presence. All of us together in this world that is our parish.

28 Latour, Earth, 81.

29 Cobb, Grace & Responsibility.

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