

Book Review

Before Nature

A Christian Spirituality

H. Paul Santmire

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

pp xxvii + 253, pb, ISBN 978-1-4514-7300-1, \$39.00

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Before Nature: A Christian Spirituality is a book to read slowly. Indeed, drawing on one of Paul Santmire's favourite words, I *sauntered* through the book, captivated by the author's honesty and courage as he acknowledges his own fragile faith – for this book does not set out to be a scholarly exposition, but rather a personal exploration of faith. I use the word 'saunter' to describe my experience of engaging with the author's narrative, because this winsome book invites the reader into what might be described as a leisurely – but not unmindful – journey encompassing personal spirituality, Trinitarian insights and a rich theology of nature. Santmire's style is warm and engaging, and deeply contemplative as he combines insights from theology, spirituality, science and ecology in a lucid exploration of Christian spirituality for today.

The book is structured around four parts. The first part introduces the reader to the prayerful framework of the journey to be taken, grounded in a 'fragile faith'. The next three sections explore the author's Trinity Prayer, focusing, in turn, on Jesus, the Trinity, and the Spirit. The first chapter opens with a description of the author's attunement to the rhythm of the field at his home in Maine, USA, as he 'blessedly scythes with God'. In that simple, yet profound, example of his engagement with God's creation, Santmire affirms his own deep connection with nature, reflecting what he calls a bifocal spirituality, a 'Christian spirituality of nature' that is woven throughout the text. It is, for him, an *embodied* spirituality, grounded in humanity's inextricable immersion in nature, which is 'everything material and living that God wondrously creates'. There is today an ambiguity with regard to humanity's relationship with the natural world: the growing awareness of our need to care for creation in the midst of alarming global climate trends is paralleled by the cultural trend of 'nature deficit disorder' amongst many people today, especially the young. It is this ambiguity – first noted by the author in his ground-breaking historical study *The Travail of Nature* – that has exercised Santmire throughout his life, and *Before Nature* provides for him 'a kind of closure' as he invites the reader into what may be his last major contribution to the Christian ecological conversation. The overriding perspective is therefore *personal*, and it is a

perspective that is not to be found in any other text of which I am aware in the growing body of academic literature on a Christian theology of creation.

The main scaffolding for exploring this spirituality, which for Santmire is meant to be a profoundly transformative experience, is a short prayer that he calls the Trinity Prayer. Readers are encouraged to use this prayer as a means of contemplating the mystery of the triune God, and there are three chapters in the second half of the book devoted to examining more extensively the presence and works of Father, Son and Spirit in nature. Before that exposition, Santmire focuses us on the practice of prayer, affirming with the spiritual guides of centuries past that 'practice makes possible.' The three short utterances of the Trinity Prayer appear disarmingly simple when first encountered: indeed, for those for whom a spirituality of nature is a foreign concept, they may appear too simplistic. However, as the author entwines them throughout his exploration of our experience of God in nature, the naïveté of this conclusion becomes evident as the Trinity Prayer comes vibrantly alive.

Immediately preceding the major section on contemplating the Trinity in nature is a chapter, 'The Ambiguous Case of One Who Prays to Jesus', in which the author acknowledges that his life has played out mainly on the surface of things, in 'the existential twilight': he has had no deep experience of 'the dark night of the soul.' Here Santmire is in confessional mode, acknowledging his own sinfulness and brokenness, and rebuking himself for his Job-like questioning of God, his dysfunctional patriarchalism, and his reluctance to seek spiritual direction. Initially, I was ill at ease with this deeply personal testimony, unsure where it fitted in, but found myself returning to it as the author expounded in a number of places the first line of his Trinity Prayer, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me*. For the truth is that if we are to experience genuine transformation as disciples of Christ in the midst of nature we need to be searchingly honest about our own spirituality, and open ourselves before God with a fragile, childlike faith. Santmire's transparent honesty is deeply challenging here, and it prepares the reader well for the second line of his Trinity Prayer – *Praise Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*.

In this major three-chapter section of his book, Santmire draws from the insights of a number of theologians, including some ecofeminists, in suggesting the metaphors of Giver, Gift and Giving as parallel names for Father, Son and Spirit. He then weaves these metaphors into three 'roughly hewn analogies' of the Trinity, which serve as lenses through which to see the Trinity's presence and works in nature more clearly. These analogies are a Thanksgiving dinner experience, encounters with Niagara Falls, and a traumatic but life-saving moment in a steel plant, described more generically as 'festival communal process', 'powerful torrential flow,' and 'self-sacrificing saviour'. These three analogies may sit uncomfortably with those whose personal life experiences do not resonate with those of the author; and analogies are necessarily limited in communicating the ineffable mystery of the triune God. For Santmire they work because they are *personally* significant. They also serve to illustrate his central thesis that there is a vital connection between the Trinity and the natural world, though – as he admits himself – his analogy of self-sacrifice is difficult to locate in the natural world. Ultimately, for Santmire, the triune God is paradoxically "in, with and under" all things, revealed throughout nature, and he invites the reader to encounter this God through the practice of praying – and singing! – the Trinity prayer. Cosmic

significance is offered in a chapter which highlights the complementary ministries of Jesus and the Spirit (Irenaeus' two hands of God), and in the final two chapters Santmire focuses further on the Spirit in the final line of his Trinity Prayer: *Come Holy Spirit, come and reign*. In this part of the prayer we are invited to call on the eschatological Spirit – the 'eliciting power that moves all things forward' – to transform the groaning of nature into joy in the vast infinitudes of God's future.

Before Nature is a testimony to Paul Santmire's wisdom over the years as he has grappled with delineating a Christian theology of nature. Now in the latter stages of his life, he can look back and afford to be vulnerable and candid in his conversation with his readers: this is one of the book's very real strengths. It is a book to return to again and again if only because it weaves the personal and the theological into a 'spiritual theology' of nature that graciously challenges the reader to ultimately become more fully human in God's good creation.