Theology: Also (Green) Religious Experience Seeking Understanding

Thomas Hughson

Religious experience in contemporary theological epistemology is a theme broad enough to allow for many approaches. This essay grants the concept of ‘religious experience’ tentative validity, subject to later qualification. The actual experience explored will be a ‘green’ experience of non-human nature that many Christians have in common with many non-Christians. The first section describes it in a general way, while the second probes its character as a possible ‘religious experience’. Then, a third section begins to explore its theological significance. A conclusion emphasizes the essential, dynamic partnership between theological method and non-methodical elements, such as religious experiences in general and the ‘green’ experience in particular.

1. What Is the Green Experience of Nature?

The green experience of nature is typically a post-modern mode of human consciousness of non-human nature that intends, feels, judges, appreciates, and relates to non-human nature as worthy of respect close to reverence. Treating the modern ideal of progress with irony, it alters the human/nature relationship from a primarily utilitarian approach to nature as available resource to a primary respect for nature from within membership in what naturalist Aldo Leopold called an ecological community.¹ It is commonsensical rather than theoretical in the sense that it is primarily an affective, practical sensibility. Nonetheless it can incorporate knowledge of natural science, direct observation of concrete details in animals, plants, and terrain, immediate presence to nature in wilderness, or in pocket parks within urban areas, as well as in poetry and art. Nourished by scientific knowledge, it does not derive from it. Since I maintain that it is primarily not secondarily a direct, affectively-toned relation to nature, it will be helpful to point to some examples of theoretically sophisticated

writers whose relation to nature nevertheless did not spring from either their theoretical knowledge or from ethical universals common in society.

John Muir's daily, boyhood enjoyment of the natural environment in Scotland and later in Wisconsin grounded both his adult love for science and his steadfast devotion to preserving wilderness in California. Similarly, Aldo Leopold's change of mind about the conventional wildlife management plan to exterminate wolves to protect deer herds did not stem from his grasp of a new theory but from seeing what he called the "green fire" dying in the eyes of an adult she-wolf he had just shot and mortally wounded. American Protestant theologian Sallie McFague's own love for nature and her professional commitment to ecotheology did not stem from theoretical knowledge. Rather, her love arose in experiential, personal contact with nature — unsupervised girlhood forays to look at turtles in a Cape Cod pond, adult hiking in the woods. She underlines the lasting impact of a child's 'first naivete' in regard to nature. Without this absorbed wonder an adult's 'second naivete' enlightened by science, general education, and nature writing, seems much less likely. The roots of an educated, adult love for nature are direct experience and a first love.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that these direct experiences of nature do not consist only or largely in the kind of overwhelming episodes of oceanic feelings of oneness with the cosmos that McFague criticizes for blinding people to the actual otherness and the independent finalities of natural, non-human beings. That is not to belittle the appeal of sunrise and sunset vistas, it is only to anchor love for nature in closer, more patient, more frequent kinds of presence wherein non-human nature does not provide so obvious a spectacle. Muir, it is true, combined a rapturous sense of oneness with majestic Sequoia trees and the rugged Sierra Nevada mountains with careful study of glaciation. Christian theologians too enter into reflection on green experience of nature on the basis of something more direct and less theoretical than an interest in overcoming Western Christian Schöpfungsvergessenheit that neglects the First Article in the Creed.

2. See especially, John Muir, The Story of My Boyhood and Youth, with Illustrations from Sketches by the Author (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913).
To say that green experience of nature is postmodern does not deny all dependence on modernity. In fact, it takes place in people whose historical and social reality bears the imprint of economic relations to nature shaped by age-old agriculture, then by modern science, technology, and secularization, all of which are presupposed influences that function as conditions for the possibility of green experience. That is, science, technology, and secularization—however much they have led into the environmental crisis—have enabled people in the modern West to disentangle a positive experience of non-human nature from practical fears of predators, unpredictable droughts, climate changes, and unreliable food supplies. Chthonic powers that haunted pre-scientific cultures, often believed to exercise a more or less capricious sovereignty over major aspects of human personal and social existence, such as birth, health, prosperity, death, social survival, war, peace, etc., do not for the most part trouble the modern West, though some nostalgia for the positive elements in those cultures may make some wish they did.

However, “For Inuit hunters, weather ruled. Humans were puny figures who lived in a voracious and everlasting country of winters ... Neervik ... was the goddess of the waters ... and was easily angered.” Whatever the many other merits and the overall integrity of the Inuit way of life, it was not a green experience of nature. Freedom from fears of Neervik and others is typically modern not pre-historic, and not (to a lesser extent) pre-modern. That’s the point missed by critiques that blame Christianity and the Bible for modernity’s exploitative dominion over nature. Gentile and non-Christian religious cultures have spiritual depths often overlooked or minimized. Nonetheless, as the deuter-Pauline Letter to the Colossians indicates, the missions of Christ and the Holy Spirit did change perceptions of non-human nature in the direction of freedom from intimidation by cosmic powers. Christianity and her headstrong child, modernity, have liberated the West from many fears projected onto and rebounding from non-human nature. Too much so, some might feel.

At the same time, doubts about modernity have arisen. Late-nineteenth and twentieth-century applications of science and technology to weaponry put to rest, if nothing else did, the comfortable modern ideal of progress through reason, science and technology. World War I was the

watershed. The development and use of atomic weapons to conclude World War II, followed by nuclear standoff in the Cold War, forced recognition that advances in scientific knowledge of nature do not guarantee progress in human well being. This, and a much less common criticism of the technological imperative ("if it can be done, it must be done"), have ushered people from narrow modern optimism to a broad, ill-defined postmodern condition. Skepticism about the modern ideal of progress typifies the postmodern condition. That skepticism belongs to the green experience of nature.7

As a result, contrary to Francis Bacon's well-known counsel, more and more people tend to relate to non-human nature apart from a typically modern, anthropocentric assumption that nature's very existence is for the sake of humans, whether as an object for scientific knowledge or as a resource for practical uses. Yet this does not represent an anti-scientific turn. To the contrary, outstanding nature writers, ecological theologians, and ordinary nature-lovers, Christian and non-Christian alike, proceed in light of scientific understanding of evolution. So a postmodern, green experience of non-human nature is not indifferent to science, but it does underscore the difference between science and wisdom. One thread in wisdom's tapestry is movement beyond relating to non-human nature on the basis of its relation to human sustenance and understanding.8

This sensibility likewise perceives the world as an ecological community embracing humanity and non-human nature. Green experience of nature involves a sense of commonality with nature. This is a being-with-nature that accompanies respect for the in-itself-ness of every non-human natural being. The being-with nature, including the community with it, recognizes that prior to being an instrument to human ends, which it also secondarily is, non-human nature exists for its own ends. Often, this is remarked in the phrase: 'the intrinsic significance' of nature. Moreover, the ecological community is asymmetrical. Humans depend on non-human nature in ways that are not reciprocal. Fish don't need fisher-folk. Wheat can flourish in an uncultivated way without farmers. Mountains don't need hikers. Minerals and metals don't need miners, steel mills or manufacturing. Most of non-human nature (certain viruses, bacteria and parasites excluded) flourishes without depending on human existence,

7. For a similar view see the "Greens" entry in Stuart Sim (ed.), The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 2002) 264-265. He comments that "The Green movement can be regarded as postmodern in its generally skeptical attitude towards progress...", 265.
8. McFague, Super-Natural Christians, 91-117, for example, proposes a subject-to-subject relation to nature as a substitute for the commonly practiced subject-to-object relation.
would continue without it, and may be harmed by it. While it once may have been the case that humans were on the prey list of certain carnivores, they are so no longer. No large predators had or have the human species as the main source of food.

Aristotle isolated reason as the specific difference that distinguished humans from other animals. This involved but did not emphasize generic commonality. His attentive study of various animal species and individuals evoked a sense of wonder. Yet this kind of fascination did not necessarily encompass a sense of community with the natural realities analyzed, distinguished and classified. In that respect the wonder that generates methodical, scientific investigation of nature differs somewhat from the kind of wonder in a child’s ‘first naivété’ or in the green experience of nature as a ‘second naivété’. Nonetheless, Aristotle’s often-criticized substance/accident analysis pointed out that every non-human living being had the ontological status of a substance that existed of itself not in or as part of another entity. His substance metaphysics held that, prior to a status of being instrumental to use, non-human animals had a primary status as existing substances. His metaphysics, consequently, is compatible with green experience.

This means, for example, that an ant, a tree, a deer, a horse, a wolf, possibly a mountain or solar system, each exist with an independent tendency to their own perfection or flourishing, not with an internal, constitutive orientation to human flourishing. Their existence tends toward their own flourishing. Secondarily and potentially, they also can become objects for human acts of understanding, appreciation, and use. Consequently, natural entities are-for-us as instruments to human ends only because they first of all exist-in-themselves. Reversing this priority, or blindness to it, as if non-human natural realities were first of all instrumental to human ends, is the error that produces the instrumentalist mentality rejected in the green experience. Indeed, because of an ontological status that involves, with human animals, change and mortality, non-human animals form a community of mortal existents with human beings who likewise exist both in-themselves and for-others. Animal rights advocates, nevertheless, pin the blame for instrumentalism squarely on Aristotle whose view in *The Politics*, followed by Aquinas, was that since “nature makes nothing to no purpose, it must be that nature has made them [animals, plants] for the sake of man.”⁹ Here, his analysis of

---

purposes does not clarify the primary ontological status of what secondarily becomes instrumental, leaving his principle of subordinate purposes apparently irreconcilable with a green experience of nature. He seems the philosopher of species-ism.

Species-ism is "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species." Species-ism, like sexism and racism, is regarded as a "prejudice involving a preference for one’s own kind, based on a shared characteristic that in itself has no moral relevance." Animal welfare and animal rights advocates locate its most objectionable feature in human indifference to animal suffering. Sometimes this critique minimizes the significance of human difference and in that fails to do justice to the animal/human relation. For example, the anti-species-ism argument doesn’t account for the fact that non-human animal species, not the human species, are the most relentless utilitarians and instrumentalists. Only the human species relates in non-utilitarian ways to individuals and species by, for instance, acknowledging the sentience of fellow animals as a reason not to kill and eat them. Many other predatory species, such as lions and wolves, do not have or exercise an option to switch over to a prey-friendly, ethical vegetarianism. Nonetheless, I will hazard the opinion that the green awareness of natural community among all animal species is a positive theme redeeming an otherwise overdrawn critique of ‘species-ism’.

I am not arguing, though I suspect it is true, that an experiential (with shades of Schleiermacher!), personal sensibility like the green experience sketched above has given rise to and has sustained green currents in

Yamamoto (London: SCM, 1998) xiii. Aquinas mediated Aristotle’s instrumentalism to Western Christianity, according to the criticism of Andrew Linzey and Dan Cohn-Sherbok (eds.), After Noah: Animals and the Liberation of Theology (London: Mowbray, 1997) 7. In answering questions such as, is it lawful or not to kill a living thing to take as food, Aquinas in the Summa Theologicae Ia, 64, 1, stated that it was lawful to use plants for animal food or animals for human food since the less perfect exists for the more perfect, and so animals are for the good of man. Animal rights advocates who criticize this view seem to assume that Aquinas’ ethical instrumentalism (it is legitimate to use animals and non-human nature, which is there for use) is the same as ontological instrumentalism (non-human nature does not have an existence except as instrumental to the human good). However, in Aristotelian/Thomist analysis of instrumental causality, there is no denying an independent existence to substances that exist in their own right yet may also serve as instruments to human ends.


Western cultures in a more basic way than has agreement with various theoretical principles. Green thought about the environmental crisis — imaginatively receiving a new "universe story,"12 or debating the moral equivalence of all sentient life,13 for example — however influential these may be, probably follows from green experience, be it the experience of a back-yard or a household pet. I propose only that a non-instrumental experience of nature verging on reverence supports a broad green current in contemporary Western cultures more basic and pervasive than Green political movements, though with an affinity for them. It seems likely that an affective sensibility of appreciative respect for non-human nature nourishes rather than derives from ethical concern for the ecological crisis, for the environment, for wilderness, for endangered species of animals, and for humane treatment of domesticated animals.

2. Green Experience of Nature: Is It 'Religious Experience'?

Now, recognition of non-human natural realities as real and worthwhile, independent of how humans understand or use them, has fallen within the ambit of ethical concern in churches. The purpose in this section, more in line with the philosophy of religion, is to see if that green experience of nature qualifies as somehow a religious experience, in the sense of being an instance of, or closely related to, experience of the sacred.

A prefatory surmise is that the adjective, 'religious', has so deeply qualified the noun, 'experience', that discrete semantic, philosophical and historical analyses of their separate meanings cannot arrive at the meaning of the noun/adjective synthesis. The combination has become irresolvable because, to a significant extent, two centuries of usage in a Western, mainly Jewish and Christian, context has supplied a tacit referent for 'religious experience': biblical and post-biblical accounts of contact with the divine. So 'religious experience' has become *suigeneris* in meaning, rather than simply being one more logically distinct species of the genus, 'experience', alongside 'political experience', 'aesthetic

experience’, etc. This confers an advantage. I suggest that the concept of ‘religious experience’ can survive a (welcome) deconstruction of the modern Western categories, ‘religion’ and ‘religious’.¹⁴

That is, hermeneutical deconstruction of ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ probably can show that they have carried meanings able to be suborned into subservience to the exercise of Western power over some non-Western peoples. For example, the US government and military, dedicated to upholding the US Constitution with its First Amendment protections of ‘religious’ liberty, crushed the Plains Indians in the decades following the US Civil War. This campaign executed by the US Cavalry disrupted ties binding the Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes to their traditional lands, to the buffalo herds and to a way of life dependent on both. Land and buffalo were sacred; they had religious meaning and powers. Deliberate destruction of the buffalo herds and forced confinement of people to reservations violated the Indians’ practice of religion, not to mention their political sovereignty. But their diffuse kind of religion spread through all dimensions of life was inaccessible and unrecognizable because it didn’t fit the US concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ that divided off ‘religion’ as a sphere of institutional activity separated from the rest of life which was then deemed secular.¹⁵

Governmental violations of Indian religious liberty were invisible to white Americans because religion didn’t seem to be involved at all, only supposedly non-religious realities like land and buffalo. In light of that, it has to be admitted that the concept of ‘religious experience’ has the potential to be drawn into and made subservient to abuses of power rather than being purely an academic concept circulating in a realm of free inquiry, truth, and justice. That, I think, does not terminate its effective life, but an historically-justified hermeneutic of suspicion does need to raise a constant question about how the category, ‘religion’ and its cognate ‘religious experience’ do or do not serve the interests of policies enacted by nation-states, and perhaps the expansion of global corporations.

So, 204 years after Friedrich Schleiermacher’s On Religion,¹⁶ the concept of ‘religious experience’ has proven as problematic as it is invaluable


and open to development. The green experience of nature, though, does not instantiate the major developments in the meanings of that concept. In what way then can green experience be called a 'religious experience'? At the very least, many contemporary religious teachings have responded to the ecological crisis by advocating a revised relation to nature on grounds of renewed fidelity to religion. The green experience has made inroads into Christian concern insofar as churches have placed the ecological crisis on their agendas. But is it also religious in a stronger sense? I think so. The World Council of Churches 1990 World Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation in Seoul, South Korea affirmed that “God loves the creation ... Because creation is of God and the goodness of God permeates all creation, we hold all life as sacred ... the world, as God’s handiwork, has its own inherent integrity: that land, waters, air, forests, mountains, and all creatures, including humanity, are ‘good’ in God’s sight.” These statements refer to the cosmos in its own right as sacral reality because created by God, not because human beings later dedicated or consecrated it.

Such respect for non-human nature involves apprehension of its reality and worth pre-existing the self-evident intelligence and power of humanity, as manifesting attributes of the Creator. But the language of environmental concern, contrary to postliberal arguments that language and doctrine produce rather than express religious experience, has not by itself generated the green experience of nature. The proof is that the green experience has tended not to solidify or exemplify traditional religious language and doctrine but to challenge them to develop. In light of the WCC statements, awareness of beauty, power, consistency and unpredictability in non-human nature coupled with respect for nature’s own reality can be a conviction that the cosmos is sacred. The green experience, consequently, belongs to, or is close to, religious experience since its feelings of respect for nature indicate a being-moved in a way that is close enough to reverence to qualify as somewhat like experiences of the sacred. This justifies thinking of the green experience too as in a broad sense ‘religious’, or at least in some way as ‘spiritual’. That is, modern


secularization, science and technology have not done away with appreciation for the sacred depths of nature. Nor did a theology of secularity in the 1960’s and 70’s suppress it, despite the fact that secular theology “virtually denied any veneration of nature issuing not only from non-Christian religions or religion in general but also from Christian adoration of God the Creator of the cosmos.”

Not specifically Catholic nor exclusively Christian, the practical, green sensibility has not arisen in response to, though it does not need to oppose, such Christian mediations of divine things as Scripture, tradition, liturgy, witness and personal prayer. Nor does it stand in place of, or have a capacity to be, a proof for the existence of God, since the experience need not coincide with theism. Clearly too, it differs from what spiritual theology has called ‘experimental’ knowledge of divine things, as well as from private revelations, insofar as its object is not an invisible reality in the economy of salvation, such as Mary, Jesus, the Trinity, the Eucharist as real presence of Christ, saints, angels, etc. It is a humble experience both in comparison with those of the great mystics and saints, and because it concerns ‘humus’, the earth we walk over beneath skies we recognize as a physical cosmos. In the life of St. Ignatius Loyola, it would be akin to his nighttime experience of stargazing rather than to his Trinitarian vision at the Cardoner River.

But respect for nature doesn’t instantiate important Western understandings of religious experience. First, it doesn’t fit under sociological theory that, like Max Weber’s, sees the content of religious experience to be in some sense negative — limit, contingency, chaos, the problem of evil. It has positive rather than negative content and in that respect sits closer to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, and Mircea Eliade, than to William James. Second, however, it is not the same as Schleiermacher’s “feeling of absolute dependence,” Otto’s “awe of and attraction

20. Ignatius’s habitual prayer to Christ as “Creator and Lord” kept creation in view.
to the Numinous,” Eliade’s ritual ordering of the cosmos, William James’
soteriological ‘religious experience’ of union with the divine, Edward
Schillebeeckx’s analysis of an “experience of grace,”25 Bernard Lonergan’s
idea of “faith” as reception of divine love prior to “belief” in religious
word or deed,26 or Karl Rahner’s theme of the “supernatural existential.”27
All these conceive the content (object) of religious experience to be God.
Respect for nature verging on reverence doesn’t necessarily involve a sense
of divine otherness. Despite absence of a definite, felt reference to the
divine, non-human nature and human embeddedness in it are felt to
possess some sort of sacral depth,28 even though finite, visible, and quan-
tifiable. The green experience can be accommodated by Lonergan’s idea
of religious experience as a dynamic condition of being in love with God,
but only if that condition can be understood as mediated by knowledge
of nature, so that God remains a clouded ultimate Source rather than
being, with Schleiermacher, that on which nature and humanity alike
are immediately felt to depend.

With that foregoing and major qualification, I will nonetheless retrieve
two things from Schleiermacher’s concept of religious experience. First,
and contrary to a postliberal position that assigns a determining role to
language and doctrine in religious experience, experience of reverence
for nature, no less than, for example, experiences of consolation or deso-
lation described in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, occurs with a
spiritual spontaneity that does not simply fill in, derive from, or apply
theoretical or theological propositions. It takes place in a primary mode
like that discussed in Christian tradition as spirituality or piety. Conse-
quently, I think that even the mitigated postliberal view that all experi-
ence is theory-laden also over-determines any experience by making it
something prefigured in theory and thought. The postliberal view seems
to rule out new experience not preceded by an explicit, formulated idea.
Does that mean that the owl of Minerva flies at dawn not dusk, yet
already anticipates the whole day’s labor in some type of foreknowledge?

Still, I will qualify Schleiermacher’s primacy of experience by suppos-
ing that interpretation belongs to rather than follows after experience.

Here the nuanced view of Schillebeeckx, that every act of experiencing contains an element of conceptual interpretation (perhaps informal), corrects the Schleiermacherian tradition. But Schillebeeckx too may be overly strong since his analysis does not allow clearly for an interpretative capacity in pre-conceptual meanings. I refer to meanings absorbed in everyday, practical participation in social practice and interaction, in an apparently 'thoughtless' or at least non-deliberated way. One approach to thinking about this is through Hans-Georg Gadamer’s rehabilitation of truth in the form of valid, productive prejudice whose truthfulness may well be affirmed in practice without a methodologically satisfactory justification being available to everyone on all occasions. So I would move to the view that experience always occurs within personal and social horizons that lend interpretative possibilities. Horizons bound our knowledge and interest from a given standpoint. They do not dictate content. They are implied frameworks with room for new experience. Horizons serve as interpretative frameworks whose initial impact, for example, may be only to evoke a sense of distress before new data or ideas, or contrarily to let a sense of peace predominate in the process of assimilating new data or ideas.

Green experience of nature is a new experience that occurs within contemporary horizons, such as an evolutionary worldview, postmodern irony about the ideal of progress, and concern for the environment. But the most basic characteristic of green experience, I propose, is not its meaning or horizon or interpretation, but its truth. That is, the experience takes place as the gradual dawning of true judgment in a person, able to be communicated to others, that non-human natural realities really exist. They are to be reckoned with as independent of human existence, thought, science, purposes, hopes and plans. Contrary to arrival at truth by methodical procedures and a series of conclusions, this judgment happens with spontaneity apart from any method, as if evoked by the reality of nature. The truth is like that involved in ordinary acknowledgement or recognition of some human persons as really existing and significant. This kind of judgment can emerge within affective apprehension of nature and exceeds sensory knowledge as well as concepts.


A second element retrievable from Schleiermacher’s concept of religious experience is affective passivity. Affective passivity means that people could be said to undergo rather than produce religious experience. In fact, that passivity would seem to be a principal feature by which to distinguish its authenticity from anything reflecting the prior self-interest of the subject or subjects who are in that sense recipients. From Schleiermacher to Schillebeeckx, from Otto to Lonergan, ‘religious experience’ is closer in meaning to the Greek concept of suffering (pathos) than to empirical knowledge based on experience (episteme) that contrasts with an opinion (doxa) based on someone else’s experiential knowledge. Since religious experience is the most profound sort of passivity, religion is humanity’s most basic passion, and that about which people can be most passionate.  

Religion is a passion before it becomes a belief or a movement in a person or a group. That passion need not be the privileged trait of a charismatic founder whose followers march into routinization. Like suffering, religious experience takes place in human persons or groups without anyone’s invitation, apart from an individual’s or a group’s thought, desire, plan, work and hope. Yet it enters so intimately into subjectivity and into social bonds that humanity seems like its home, where it can be respected or disregarded. It occurs in and to people, whether they seek it or not. Preparation may precede and dispose people to it. When young native-American men set out on a ‘vision quest’, they put themselves in a position for religious experience. But the vision would have no authority if it were received as anything less than an encounter with what was other. 

Once undergone by an individual or group, religious experience often leads to subsequent production of various means to communicate it, or a resultant way of life. Such means have included myth, ritual, segregation of sacred places and times, oral and written word, special practices, etc. For example, Black Elk, an important late nineteenth and early twentieth
century Lakota Sioux shaman, dreamed of a healing harmony among his people. He dreamed a carefully arranged ritual in which painted riders and horses turned in unison and paraded in rows according to colors. This was a dance of horse groups. The dream was a religious experience but its full reality as a benefit for his people was realized only on the day it was carried out in a sacred performance, which he, like an inspired choreographer, guided or produced with the cooperation of horseback riders from his clan. The dream became a public rite, a sacred product.

At the same time green consciousness of nature's sacrality does not contain something essential to Schleiermacher, the feeling of absolute dependence. Moreover, I assume that there is merit in the critique of Schleiermacher, Otto and Eliade for including interpretative or explanatory principles in allegedly purely descriptive accounts of religious experience. Belief in the existence and creative activity of God is an interpretative element that explains the cosmos and the experience. Once that is postulated as internal to the feeling, the description contains its explanation. It is true that this obscures philosophical analysis of religious experience. More to the point here though, it purports to locate a purely affective foundation for all other elements of any religion. Such an approach, I agree, incorrectly isolates passive affectivity from thought.

Affective passivity in green experience of nature means only that the felt awareness of nature as worthy or respect comes from experiential knowledge of non-human nature rather than from human subjects or society. It does not necessarily incorporate a feeling of dependence on an Infinite Source, only a being-impressed in a specific way by nature. Yet, to come upon Schleiermacher's mistake of trying to found religion in a supposedly pure, affective experience prior to thought and decision doesn't also demand rejection of a characteristic role for affectivity in religious experience. Rather, correction and development is called for, of the sort provided in diverse ways by Edward Schillebeeckx, Bernard Lonergan and Charles Taylor. With Schleiermacher, they accept affective passivity as a defining trait in religious experience. Yet unlike Schleiermacher, all underline a structure of intentionality in

33. Black Elk's dream was inspired too. Nicholas Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life-Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* as told through John Gneisenau Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow) by Nicholas Black Elk; foreword by V. Deloria, Jr.; with illustrations by Standing Bear (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 2000).


religious experience that keeps affective passivity and interpretative consciousness internal to the experience.

For example, Lonergan emphasizes that affective spontaneity in any area can be a "felt apprehension of values" that exist in realities outside the one experiencing the feeling, and argues that the impact of divine love brings new light to familiar phenomena ("faith is knowledge born of love"). Schillebeeckx highlights the irreducible role of pre-theoretical interpretation internal to any experience of Jesus or of grace (similar to Lonergan's felt apprehension of values). Taylor extricates the social dimensions of religious experience neglected by William James. Only Lonergan, however, does not treat religious experience as primarily soteriological. This opens up space for an interpretative experience of nature as somehow sacred, yet not soteriological in the sense of, for example, William James's sick soul burdened by a sense of sin finding relief.

So is green experience religious? The affirmative answer arises in attention to two poles in the human/nature relationship. One is respect for natural entities primarily as existing-in-themselves rather than as being on hand for-us. This, I take it, characterizes the green experience. The other pole is a relationship to natural entities as resources for-us able to be instrumental to our food, clothing and shelter. That is, along with a legitimate for-us-ness in our attitude to nature as resource for our sustenance, there is also a prior, yet easily overlooked, in-itself-ness of natural realities. The green experience of nature advances into or rediscovers the in-itself-ness of nature, without (in reasonable, moderate opinions) denying the other pole, the for-us-ness of nature. This evokes respect. And the respect is illuminated and interpreted by faith in God as Creator.

3. Theological Reflection

The green experience of non-human nature, granting it a sacral or religious quality, does not involve its own, complete, universally accepted interpretation. An atheist, for instance, can experience nature as sacral, yet not as created. That is, the green experience is not self-evidently theist or creational despite being sacral. True, Paul in Romans 1 teaches that creation witnesses to the Creator. He qualifies this in the spirit of

Israel’s wisdom literature to the effect that universal human sinfulness blocks passage from glimpses of the Creator’s existence to glorification of the transcendent One. Both Jewish and Christian faiths interpret the experience of non-human nature in one fundamental way. Nature, the cosmos, is something that has been created, not simply organized from pre-existing, possibly eternal, matter. That was and is not self-evident from the experience of non-human nature itself. Many interpretations became and remain available. Israel’s creation faith, for example, emerged amid many ancient Near Eastern creation myths and narratives. May not all of them, including Genesis, arise from some variation on appreciative respect for non-human nature as somehow sacral? This is to infer that some manner of experience of nature as sacral belonged to all the creation myths but under various interpretations. Israel’s creation faith can be understood as Israel’s interpretation of that sacral experience, offered in opposition to rival interpretations given in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. Were not Israel’s lapses from the First Commandment, whether by a golden calf at Mt. Sinai or by King Solomon’s infidelities or popular adoption of Canaanite, Philistine, etc., worship at the same time the Israelites embrace, if only fleeting, of alternative interpretations of a sacral experience of nature, contrary to the creation narratives in Genesis 1–2?

Could the experience of nature as almost sacred be the primordial disclosure of the transcendent and immanent divine Source? Informed by science, not by the discredited idea of a positive, primal monotheistic revelation to all ancient peoples, Thomas Berry proposes that “the universe, the solar system, and the planet earth in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being.”39 If this includes all of non-human nature, then not only is Berry’s proposal theologically correct but important. And yet it is incomplete. That ‘primary revelation’ is not self-evident but always includes an interpretative component. Is the physical world the fall-out from a primordial murder and dismembering of Tiamut by Marduk? Or is it the overcoming of material chaos by a divine organizing power? Or is it a revelation of a Creator Who calls everything into being? Israel’s creation accounts in Genesis, wisdom literature and the prophets asserted a ‘primary revelation’ of the universe that interpreted the sacredness of nature as due to its being created. Yet, suppose that the experience of nature as

being interpreted within the horizons of meaning open to Israel was not of 'creation' but of an ambiguous sacral nature open to many interpretations, that is, not self-evidently a 'creation'. Then, to affirm it as 'creation' completes the already experienced sacrality of nature by relating it to the meaning of an all-creating God.

It is well known that Claus Westermann corrected Gerhard von Rad on the relative importance of Israelite creation faith. Von Rad had argued that the Hebrew Scriptures treat the creature/Creator relationship as something secondary, derived from the soteriological revelation given above all in the Exodus.²⁰ Westermann showed that in the Hebrew Scriptures, a prior, lived relation to God as Creator and Source enveloped and supported faith in God's deeds through Moses. It can be suggested that the green religious experience of nature re-enters that sacrality of nature prior to 'creation faith'. In that light, green experience like the ancient Near Eastern experience of a somehow sacred nature lacks a full and self-evident interpretation and so could be interpreted in many ways. But it is open to 'creation faith', belief in and doctrine on God as Creator. This means the green experience is primordial yet incomplete.

This experience is accessible without Jewish or Christian faith, since access to it occurs in those deliberately distancing themselves from biblical religion. Jewish and Christian faiths interpret but do not produce or annihilate the experience. It is a religious experience that in its priority to a complete interpretation, as in 'creation', can be something Christians and Jews have in common with the rest of humanity. That commonality is rich in theological significance despite a tradition, as it were, of inattention to religious experiences Christians have in common with others. Indeed, Edward Schillebeeckx commented somewhere that Christians and theologians often have settled their thought in the religious districts of specifically Christian experiences of divine grace, thereby impoverishing their knowledge of God and their ties with non-Christians. I agree with that judgment, but another perspective disagrees.

According to that way of thinking, theology looks first of all to the incommensurability between any religious experience and Christian faith in divine revelation available in the Scriptural Word of God. Then, with Karl Barth, it affirms the saving power of the truth in God's Word, and rejects the theological significance of any religious experience other than that formally identical with Christian faith. This path suits those believers, church leaders and theologians – Protestant and Catholic – who

⁴⁰ For Schillebeeckx's position, see Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord, 515ff.
already think that the most authentic Christian response to postmodern, religiously pluralist, possibly post-Christian cultures is to magnify the 'Christian difference' in faith and morality.41 In such a perspective, the paramount task of theology in examining any kind of religious experience that Christians have in common with non-Christians is to identify and explain the 'Christian difference', so as to clarify the soteriological superiority in explicit faith over anything, any experience, outside the realm of Christian faith. It concludes in a definition of any supposed common ground as confusion, and condemns this as the deterioration of Christian faith into syncretism. In my judgment this approach lacks humility before divine abundance.

The path indicated by Schillebeeckx looks to the concrete universality of divine love and grace, and takes into account the incompleteness of Christian knowledge of God's ways, while granting always a sufficiency of that knowledge for salvation. Such a path goes on to affirm the infinite resourcefulness of the uncreated Logos Who has become incarnate, and the Holy Spirit, both relating to all creation. This approach also associates itself with a primarily redemptive rather than condemnatory raison d'être for Christianity. On that basis theology starts by withholding negative judgment on new religious experiences in Christians, seeks their meaning in light of the totality of Church and gospel, and does not confuse tentative theological exploration with pastoral advice. This is the path here. May it not be that the patristic concept of sperma Logou scattered throughout creation may be found not only in ideas in non-Christian sources but also in religious experiences not specifically Christian, such as the green experience?

For that reason, green experience of non-human nature may be of interest to those thinking about inter-religious dialogue. In a very broad, indirect way Vatican II's "Decree on the Church and Non-Christian Religions" (Nostra aetate) approved Catholic attention to it when it observed that "throughout history even to the present day, there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life."42 There is no reason to assume that this statement precluded Christians too from having an "awareness of a hidden power which lies behind the course of nature..."

Equally, there is no reason to construe "awareness of a hidden power" as a Cartesian awareness, divorced from affective apprehension of nature as sacred.

Admittedly, it is not immediately apparent exactly where and how inter-religious dialogue can accommodate a felt apprehension of nature as somehow sacred. This is particularly the case if the presupposed model for dialogue proceeds, as I witnessed in one symposium on *Dominus Jesus*, according to the earliest initiatives in Christian ecumenism where each side to the dialogue presents its reality – be it practice, belief, institution, ethic, or spirituality – in expectation of deepened mutual understanding that leaves all parties where they were beforehand. This format envisions no modification of starting-points. Yet, a sense of nature as somehow sacred incorporates awareness of nothing distinctive to a given religion. It has the characteristic quality of being more primordial than religious division. So it would not fit on the agenda of an exchange model of inter-religious dialogue, though it could be brought into other kinds of inter-religious dialogue. It would fit most obviously in dialogues with indigenous peoples adhering to traditional, tribal ways of life in Africa and elsewhere.

Theological reflection on the green experience also can begin to think about the differences between non-human nature and fallen creation. A re-reading of the creation narratives in Genesis has become common. For instance, McFague explains the importance of the five divine blessings upon what has been created. The Creator concluded each of the first five days by pronouncing a blessing on what had come forth. The five-fold, "and it was good," expresses divine approval for what divine love and wisdom had brought into existence. What existed prior to humanity was 'good' by itself not by its usefulness to Adam and Eve. Heavens and earth, sky and sea, plants and animals were already real and good before humanity came on the scene. This is the context for understanding the mandate to exercise 'dominion': it is to be a limited imitation of the divine kind of creative sovereignty that treats non-human nature as intrinsically real and worthwhile apart from its extrinsic relation of usefulness to humanity.

This position can be developed if the idea of integrity expands. There are two aspects in the integrity of non-human nature: (1) existence independent of humanity that deserves respect, (2) being created and existing apart from sin. The first was affirmed by the 1990 WCC Convocation in

43. McFague, _Super, Natural Christians_, 164ff.
Seoul, when it spoke about nature's integrity as its reality prior to a relation to humanity and its worth as intrinsic, apart from what serves a human good. The WCC affirmation belongs to a new reading of Gen 1 that focuses on God's blessing of non-human creation as "good" prior to human existence. For the WCC, that independent value in non-human creation has become a guiding principle for a Christian environmental ethic.

But there is more to the integrity and goodness of nature than that. A second meaning of integrity has to do with the sinlessness, the innocence, of non-human nature according to Genesis. The green experience of nature contains inchoate apprehension of human beings belonging to a community of finite, natural realities with a whole cosmic history. But this is compatible with and recovers a kind of presence in nature recounted as part of what Genesis describes in terms of Adam and Eve in Eden before the Fall. It's always Eden in non-human nature, though not the idyllic paradise we like to imagine. This is to conclude that reverence for nature typical in the green experience is a postmodern resurfacing of universal human access to what can be thought of as the pre-lapsarian 'religion' of proto-humanity, of Adam and Eve. This would be a way of being in communion with Creator and creation without external, organized or, strictly speaking, salvific elements. The green experience, then, is non-soteriological, proto-religious experience rather than an instance of a kind of 'religious experience' that generates all specific religions, as Schleiermacher imagined was the case.

So the hypothesis briefly and tentatively entertained here is that the green religious experience can be understood within Jewish and Christian horizons as postmodern recognition that non-human nature has always existed in a pre-lapsarian condition. A pre-lapsarian condition has always been true of non-human creation, predator/prey relations and all. Animals did not fall into sin, have remained unaffected by it internally, and do not need salvation. Pre-moral, non-human natural beings did not originate sin, do not bear its guilt, cannot initiate sin or concupiscence, and do not transmit either original sin or concupiscence.

As Aquinas pointed out, non-human animals love and obey the Creator in a pre-moral way by instinctually following their natures that tend to their flourishing. Consequently, they not only are innocent of sin but exist in obedience to their Creator, by contrast with their human co-inhabitants of the planet. This does not seem to contradict Church teaching on original sin, nor the more recent emphasis on a pervasive, socially constructed sin of the world. The human Fall into sin, according to Paul, subjected creation to futility from which it groans for release
by the power of God's redeeming grace. The groaning for release can be understood as the finitude of physical existents in time, with death as a conclusion. An alternative possibility—a creation composed of immortal animals, plants, and cosmos—would be so distant from known reality as to be more than a pristine version of it. Nature's subjection to futility can be understood as non-human nature instrumentalized to the futile purposes of human sinfulness. For example, the rider of a powerful horse might head to a violent deed in which the horse's speed and strength enable the rider to rob, murder and then make an escape. But the horse remains innocent, as did lions killing Christian martyrs in the Roman Coliseum, or the wooden beams of the Cross of Christ, the lead in a murdering bullet, the hydrogen in a hydrogen bomb. All are innocent, pre-moral instruments subjected to human ends. Here, pre-moral articulates a contrast with humanity called to set its own course but also conveys the idea of unwavering fidelity to the Creator by instinctual actions.

Theology traditionally has not dwelt upon a pre-lapsarian proto-religion, a religion-before-religion. Many would object to the idea as unsavory speculation on what is at best a lost possibility and not anything actual, a new case of a hypothetical natura pura. Others might dismiss it as part and parcel of what Genesis presents more by way of the setting for an etiological myth explaining sin and death than as a revealed moment in humanity's existence. In either case it would be speculation on something that no longer has any significance for the historical economy of redemption. But if religion-before-religion surfaces in the green experience of non-human nature, then what might seem to be merely a speculative possibility is something actual and common, but not necessarily known.

Moreover, a regained proto-religion does have redemptive significance. In a fallen human world it cannot be other than the experience of sinful people in disordered societies. Nevertheless, the green experience has an effect supportive of salvific realities, though its content is pre-soteriological. It renews and restores respect for non-human creatures that sin had impeded. To that extent, respect for non-human nature verging on reverence can be considered an event of grace in which a dimension of human existence begins to shift into proper alignment with non-human creatures and so to become in that area more in accord with the Creator of all. This kind of shift, not necessarily a matter of methodical judgment or deliberated decision but a gradual, spontaneous openness to non-human others, is conversion insofar as it is a transformation of the subject and the subject's world. It invites revision and introduces novelty into familiar, problematic ways of relating to non-human nature.
Religious conversion, according to Bernard Lonergan, is a dynamic condition that spontaneously changes attitudes. Respect for non-human nature verging on reverence is a change from an instrumentalist attitude toward the whole of non-human nature, not only that which is the object of a given perception. Something brings about this change. Is it an advance in theoretical knowledge? Whatever the source — and the green experience of nature is at least a strong possibility to the extent that a person or group accepts the change — respect verging on reverence becomes a moral orientation influencing the whole of human existence relating to non-human nature. Reasoning from effect to cause, where a green attitude takes hold in a person or group, there a change amounting to conversion has produced it and underlies it. For example, the environmental movement has that moral orientation. If this analysis has been correct, what has generated this most basically is a change from indifference or instrumentalism to respect verging on reverence for non-human nature. The environmental movement therefore depends on an unnoticed conversion. In this regard Jewish and Christian ‘creation faith’ clarifies an experience to which all peoples have access. ‘Creation faith’ brings into the light of divine revelation a conversion in regard to non-human nature that so far lacks an agreed upon theological name.

If that is so, then to the extent that Christianity and the Church affirm, support, encourage and bless this green experience, Christianity and the Church will act in accord with the Creator and Lord. May it not be that an underdeveloped, deteriorating ‘creation faith’ underlies the decline of faith in Western Europe and North America? Correlatively, may it not be that recuperation and deepening of ‘creation faith’ by attention to the green experience can become a new pre-evangelization as groundwork for any new evangelization in postmodern Western cultures?

To conclude this section I would like to note a perhaps obvious direction in systematic theology consistent with the green experience become ‘creation faith’. Biblical wisdom Christology including the Pauline theme of Christ as the new Adam, the deuto-Pauline theme of Christ as first-born of creation, and Johannine Logos Christology would be a fruitful place in Scripture from which to develop a line of reflection that could complement or challenge some other approaches today. Vatican II’s focus on the Church as the (potentially) new unity of the human race seems a promising theme for ecclesiological reflection. The green experience also is a place from which to renew or reclaim liturgy as celebration of finality to God’s glory in the whole of creation.
4. Conclusion: Experience, Method, and the Non-Methodical

By way of a conclusion, I will advert to two methodological issues. Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* will be the background. First I will try to clarify a bit more the role of religious experience in theology. It is well known that early twentieth-century Catholic teaching barred religious experience from Christian faith and Catholic theology. In 1907, the anti-Modernist encyclical of Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, and the decree *Lamentabili* closed the door on religious experience in reaction against an erroneous immanentism that subordinated revealed truths to subjective experience, or sought to derive all revelation from it. Reversing the usual modern sequence of Catholic theology retracing steps already taken by Protestant theology, in the late twentieth century, postliberal Protestant theology followed the path of Pius X by likewise rejecting religious experience as a theological principle. The postliberal argument applies the philosophical view that language constitutes the forms for, rather than expresses the content of, experience. This inverts Schleiermacher by insisting that religious language and doctrine produce religious experiences, rather than the other way around. On that view, religious experience can be accepted as a fact, but is not able to be a principle for theology. However, this view fails to see that Schillebeeckx, Rahner, Lonergan, Taylor among others do not simply carry on Schleiermacher’s affective foundationalism in sustaining use of religious experience as a principle in theology.

So there is no need to treat religious experience and revelation as antitheses, or as in a one-way cause/effect relationship from either side. Rahner, Schillebeeckx, and Lonergan have shown how experience and truth are interdependent. There can be new, unexpected religious experience underived from prior knowledge or conviction. But it takes place in some reference to already actual tradition, knowledge, and historically-effected personal and social horizons, all of which supply subliminal interpretative perspectives often embedded in practice rather than professed in theories. In three ways this discussion of the green experience of nature has headed along this path, rather than a liberal, Schleiermachian path or Lindbeck’s postliberal path.

First, the essay affirms an original spontaneity in the experience of nature underived from prior knowledge or custom yet not without a link

with or reference to personal and social meaning. Yet the affirmation does not make religious experience so unto itself that it lacks a prepared context of common meanings, which people often acquire practically by participating in typical practices, such as economic activities in earning a livelihood, political activities such as voting, or cultural activities such as recreation. Lonergan refers to this kind of knowledge as a culturally relative common sense, clearly distinguished from theoretical knowledge, and the green experience of nature in respect verging on reverence occurs in reference to those common meanings, though they don't produce the experience. For example, the green experience of respect for nature occurs within a postmodern horizon of meaning that no longer idolizes progress.

Sometimes according any priority to experience is thought to be exactly what hermeneutics overcomes in the turn to language. But Gadamer, for example, is not so doctrinaire. He does not so much establish the unremitting priority of historically determinate language in every possible human experience as he shows why any experience remains incomplete, still inchoate, apart from expression in some specific, culturally shaped language that eventually links the new experience to the social horizons of a tradition. Pre-linguistic experience such as producing or listening to music, or producing or appreciating sculpture, (or a green experience of non-human nature) is always underway toward language, so that for Gadamer experience comes to completion in the social act of communicating its fact, meaning, and meaningfulness.

Second and theologically, the discussion placed the green experience of nature in a positive interpretative relationship with revelation and the doctrines of faith, above all the First Article of the Creed backed by Jewish monotheism. Both profess that God created non-human natural realities and human beings. They do not eternally and necessarily emanate from a First Cause, nor are they products of a Supreme Organizer of chaos, or artifacts from a local deity or spirit that presides over a particular region, mountain range, river, or forest, etc.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that theological attention to the green religious experience exemplifies how an empirical turn keeps theological method true to its non-logical, non-methodical operations. Green religious experience invites theology to appropriate its indispensable partnership with what is not predictable, controllable, or logically derivable.

from the accumulated body of theological understanding. Theological method is a way of raising and answering questions in an ordered movement toward increased understanding of the significance and role of Christianity in its cultural matrices. But only divine understanding fully comprehends what it brings into existence out of love: creation and the economy of redemption centered in Christ and the Spirit. By analogy, this divine knowledge might be thought of as logical and systematic because it is in possession of all facts, relations, causes and effects, consequences, etc., of created reality, including outcomes from human freedom. This might be taken as the fullness with a standing of a goal which theology seeks to approximate asymptotically, though Aquinas more modestly saw the knowledge of the blessed in heaven as the source to which theology was subalternate.

Yet the unlikeness to systematic theology, of course, is greater. Divine knowledge (and the knowledge of the blessed) does not consist in discursive movement in reasoning from facts to truths, or from truths to truths, or from truths to meanings. Logic does not pertain. This contrasts with mortal faith and theology, which do move in that way, so that logic is important for correct movement in reasoning. The temporality of logic as distinguished from the eternity of vision points up its relative, provisional role within mortal theology. This means that the subject matter of theology, divine revelation and faith, is not like human, theoretical knowledge pre-organized logically so that logic and method would be merely attaining a pre-existing order in understanding. This suggests that logic and method in theology cannot be definitive for theology. But this need not be taken as the only reason not to define theology primarily in terms of logical operations.

Lonergan defines method as “a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results.” He adds that, “... the operations envisaged are not limited to strictly logical operations, that is, to operations on propositions, terms, relations ... describing ... formulating problems and hypotheses ... deducing implications.”

Some non-logical operations are, “... inquiry, observation, experiment, synthesis, verification.” Success in the natural sciences has resulted from scientific method combining logical operations of deduction, inference, classification, and formulation with non-logical operations of discovery, experiment, and verification. In fact, the dynamics of intentional

47. Ibid.
consciousness are acts or operations that do not consist in logically ordered inferences, classifications, formulae. For example, neither sensory attentiveness to objects, nor moving to inquiry about them, nor checking an impression are purely logical operations. On this basis one expects that theology, too, has non-logical operations akin to discovery, experiment and verification in the sciences.

For example, fifteenth and sixteenth century European voyages of ‘discovery’ (who was dis-covered? Exotic others, Europeans, or both to each other?) brought new lands and unexpected peoples into the ken of Western Christian theology and philosophy. New realities were new data for theology because they were significant for Christian faith and mission. Did the inhabitants of the Indies have immortal souls? Ought they be evangelized? Various answers were given. This was a matter of empirically discovering new facts and coming to grips with them theologically, not only of logically inferring new conclusions from theological principles already gained from revelation. New experiences of human reality, of alien religious outlooks, raised new questions about their relation to Christian mission.

Another example is green experience of nature. It too, is a non-logical operation with an aspect of being a new fact present to theology. If theologians pay attention to it, they might be said to ‘discover’ it for theology in a way that is not true for revelation and faith, which are theology’s constant source. Like a discovery, recognition of its integrity and theological potential comes about in a “Eureka!” or “That’s it!” moment in relating to non-human nature as other than human and as extrinsic to, even when instrumental for, human purposes. This means that green experience is a new datum. Once accepted as a datum relevant to theology, theological method then can guide operations probing, interpreting, organizing, hypothesizing, and revising with logical rigor. But more importantly, as noted in the previous section, the green experience of non-human nature can be understood theologically as a form of religious conversion to creation faith, perhaps minor by comparison to gospel conversion but real nonetheless. As such it provides part of a personal foundation for theological thought on Christian doctrines.

Chapter II of *Method in Theology* outlines the functional specialty of foundations. Lonergan addresses moral, religious and intellectual conversion as realities in the theologian foundational for three further specialties, doctrines, systematics, and communications. Religious conversion cannot be produced by theological content or method. It is a matter of the Spirit and the theologian’s personal development as a baptized
believer, yet objectifying the horizon of religious conversion is the proper goal of foundations. Religious conversion does not consist in exercise of a methodical task but contributes the substance for methodical tasks. And that is the case for the green religious experience too: it presents theology with a new fact of experience that consists in a type of intellectual, moral and religious conversion. Theology seeks to objectify the new horizons, then put them into relation with other doctrines of the faith, and understand them as part of the unity of faith. Finally, communications has the task of bringing this Catholic result into dialogue with other kinds and fields of knowledge, with evangelization, with other Christian churches, and with other religions.