

Sex, Earth, & Death in Gay Theology

j. michael clark

(i) Erotic Connections for Ecology

Because I am a theologian whose ideas have been fundamentally shaped by the lived, sexual experience of gay men, both my understanding of what justice means and my perspective on ecology or environmental ethical theory are firmly grounded in or connected to the erotic. Both justice and ecology are relational matters, clarified by how we come to understand our most intimate (and usually also sexual) human relationships. More specifically, as I have internalized the work of Carter Heyward and Jim Nelson in my own theology,¹ I have come to affirm with them that our fundamental need for connectedness, love, and self-affirming acceptance—our erotic drive toward connectedness with all things—undergirds our quest for mutuality and, through the realization of that quest, our efforts to establish justice in all relationships, not just our sexually expressed ones. In other words, our sexuality is not so much about where, how, or with whom we put our genitals, but is rather something that permeates our lives and that both urges us toward and sustains our relationships—even those that are not genitally consummated ones. As such, our sexuality enables—nay, compels—liberational, justice-seeking activity in the world.²

As my understanding of erotic empowerment has thus expanded to encompass that energy which not only com-

pels justice-making in all my human relationships, but which also compels justice-making in all other relationships as well, I have concluded that the care and tenderness of our specific relationships must inform all our values, all our ways of relating to and seeking justice within the world—both biospheric and geospheric—lest we remain in conflict with ourselves: One cannot make-love and make-hate simultaneously. Of course, if I am going to affirm that erotic empowerment also informs ecology, I have to address my specific sexuality as well. In other words, I have to inquire as to what the specific experiences and perspectives of being gay or lesbian in a homophobic society permeated by AIDS can bring to ecological discourse.³

Ecofeminist Anne Primavesi has noted that “by becoming aware of patterns of domination [and exploitation] in our own lives, we learn to connect these patterns with the domination of non-human nature.”⁴ Indeed we do, for we are reminded that the same dualisms which link nature, women, and sexuality extend to gay and lesbian people who are also viewed as primarily and excessively sexual and unspiritual. We, too, are subject to heteropatriarchy’s devaluing and disvaluing reductionism. In fact, our experience of total disvaluation as valueless (even as “bad”) and of violence against us as gay men and lesbians enables us also to see the extent to which our society also disvalues nature and acts violently upon both the human and nonhuman environment.

In fact, we can construct a gay ecotheological analysis in contradistinction to primarily male “deep ecology” and as a further extension of ecofeminism. According to deep ecology, an anthropocentric world view of human self-centeredness or selfishness has led to environmental problems; in contrast, according to ecofeminism, an androcentric world view of masculine privilege and social structures has devalued and exploited both women and nature.⁵ Gay

ecotheology insists that both these views are incomplete: The predominantly western, white, heteromascu- list world view is the problem; not only are women, nature, and sexuality devalued, but heteropatriarchy’s hierarchy of values and categories disvalues diversity. What we gay men and lesbians see is not just a devaluing which leads to domination and exploitation, but a disvaluing which strips away all value and which thereby leads to exclusion and disposability—to being acceptable for extinction.

Ecofeminism has articulately addressed the patriarchal hierarchy of value which devalues (which lowers value) in order to dominate, use, and exploit. Gay ecotheology extends this to address the heteropatriarchal hierarchy of value which disvalues (which strips away all value) in order to get rid of, to use up, to dispose of as having no further use or no use whatsoever. While ecofeminists work against the devaluation and domination of self and world as utilitarian objects for a masculine society, gay ecotheology works against the disvaluation and exclusion of self and world as disposable, worthless commodities in a heterosexist society which disdains diversity and eliminates the unnecessary—that which has no utilitarian value.

Especially for those of us who are gay men or lesbians, disvaluation, exclusion, and disposability must also factor into ecological analysis, in addition to devaluation, exploitation, and domination, because we see our society virtually willing to throw away our earth, our home, as well as because we carry within our collective memory an awareness of just how often human beings themselves have been treated as expendable and disposable. In the history of the gay and lesbian communities, never has our own expendability been so evident as in the rising incidence of anti-gay/lesbian violence and particularly in the AIDS health crisis. The same value hierarchy that insists that nature is reducible to expendable resources also insists on dichotomizing innocent

and not-innocent victims of AIDS. Gay men, IV-drug users, people of color, and third world countries where AIDS rages heterosexually are still devalued and disvalued. Our expendability mitigates the urgency of cure or treatment. And the experience of our expendability becomes a paradigmatic metaphor for western culture's attitudes toward all the earth. Hence, gay ecotheology adamantly opposes any disvaluation and exclusion which leads to dispensing with diversity and disposing of life. Potentially, at least, gay men and lesbians together can become the embodied witnesses for an ecotheology which discloses that our gay and lesbian existence is not only a mode of being-in-the-world, but also a way of being-with-the-world as co-partners in the inclusive processes of healing and liberation.

As we realize the absolutely equal and intrinsic value of all that is, as well as the fundamental and erotically informed interconnectedness, relationality, and interdependence of all things within the web of Being, we cannot help but question the human arrogance which has permeated heteropatriarchy. We are in fact compelled to exchange egocentrism for ecocentrism, to exchange anthropocentrism for what Primavesi has termed "ecological humility."⁶ "Ecological humility" can also be understood as part and parcel of an important Jewish concept. The concept of *tikkun olam* entails our obligation to be about the business of repairing the world, both in its human and nonhuman, its biospheric and geospheric aspects. It does not assume that humanity is the pinnacle of creation, but rather celebrates the intrinsic value and rich diversity of all that is and reminds us of our humble interdependence within the web of Being. *Tikkun olam* also requires that we assume the tasks of caring, cooperation, and responsibility. It is our obligation to love the earth and to love life itself, even though we are mortal and our individual lives must end.⁷

(ii) An Ecology of Death

Because I am both gay and HIV+, I am all too aware of such mortality. As a result, I am specifically interested in exploring what an erotically empowered, ecological theology has to say about death. One thing is certainly clear: Our traditional Christian understandings of eschatology—of death as somehow not-death, not really—have had extremely negative environmental consequences. Traditional eschatology has functioned as yet one more sanction for devaluing and, ultimately, disvaluing the earth and this embodied life. As Catherine Keller has noted, the "drive to transcendent unity" with the divine, outside or beyond this life and this world, is "a profound impetus in all patriarchal spirituality, and it always achieves its end at the expense of nature and multiplicity."⁸ Devaluing this earth inevitably leads to the careless disvaluing of the diversity of life on earth by means of exploitation to the point of the extinction of species; eliminating complexity works toward eliminating any viable future for life on earth. The danger of patriarchal, linear thinking is that it assumes both a literal beginning ("creation") and a literal ending ("eschaton"). Coupled with a transcendent, otherworldly spirituality, such linear thinking also implies that we can or that we should work the earth to that end and thereby hasten the arrival of the "next" world. Such otherworldliness not only devalues and disvalues this world, but actually sanctions exhausting a clearly expendable earth.⁹

One clear alternative to such otherworldly eschatology, however, is very difficult to accept. Watching so many of our friends die "due to complications from AIDS" before their fortieth birthdays while we gay men monitor our own health and bodies and T-cell counts makes the idea that when we die, we're dead, period, altogether extremely unpalatable. Nevertheless, we cannot pursue escapist solutions to this problem. Karl Peters

named our shared dilemma in his paper discussed during the 1992 American Academy of Religion meetings. He said, "The atomistic, individualistic understanding of human nature makes it very difficult to see that there is anything positive for ourselves in our own dying."¹⁰ And, he's right. An isolated and individualistic understanding of human nature is so ingrained in us that we obsess about the loss in death of our individual, subjective, experiencing center—what Peters calls the "phenomenal self"¹¹—and we will do anything in our mental, spiritual, and physical power to avoid confronting our own mortality and dealing with our own death as the end. Peters argues that we must instead come to see ourselves "in a bigger picture, not just as individuals but as part of larger systems,"¹² as part of familial and relational networks, as interwoven within the biosphere, the geosphere, and the cosmos. Rosemary Radford Ruether also challenges this stubborn individualism which clings to the phenomenal self, because this individualism both denies death and disvalues (other) life.¹³ Our own "personal selves" or "phenomenal selves" are transient. Just as we emerged out of a greater oneness, through conception and birth (out of erotic empowerment if you will), and have "individuated" throughout our embodied lives, so in death we must relinquish individuality and merge back into oneness. And, this is very hard for our phenomenal, subjective selves to accept.

An ecological perspective may help. Ruether reminds us, for example, that "in nature, death is not an enemy, but a friend of the life process. The death side of the life cycle is an essential component of that renewal of life by which dead organisms are broken down and become the nutrients of new organic growth."¹⁴ Peters echoes her wisdom when he says, "In a finite world, the possibilities of existence can only be actualized in sequences in which some things give way to other things. ...Death is a necessary good

in that it allows for new forms of life, new ways of living and thinking to be born."¹⁵ He even goes so far as to argue that it may be possible to see our individual deaths "as contributing to the good of both others and ourselves in the context of ongoing human society and continuing [nonhuman] life on our planet."¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the early Judaic roots of our dominant western religious tradition do not encourage either individualism or death-denial. Two key elements (among others) for a Judaic ecology are relationality (with god/ess and the world, intimately and covenantally interwoven one with the other) and mortality (as human limitation and as limits on human power, use, and abuse). In fact, prior to Hellenic influences, Judaism "saw mortality as natural rather than a problem to be overcome. Its vision of blessedness had focused on a healthy and prosperous life in a full term of years, not escape from mortality altogether."¹⁷ Just as the mandate of *tikkun olam* precluded an exploitative relationship to the earth, so an ecology built upon the cyclical renewal of earth and creatures, notably in the periodic Jubilee year, precluded linear, apocalyptic, end-time thinking, prior to the rise of later messianic expectation. According to Ruether, this Jewish perspective that "mortality is our natural condition, which we share with all other earth beings, and that redemption is the fullness of life within these limits, is a more authentic ethic for ecological living"¹⁸ and, I would add, ecological dying as well.

This strand in Judaism brings me back to Karl Peters' paper. He defines the phenomenal self as a "symbiotic union of biology and culture."¹⁹ This "symbiotic union" is clearly relational and interactive, because he goes on to say that, "as webs of reality, each of us has the possibility of continuing in particular ways beyond the death of our phenomenal selves"; moreover, "our cultural, biological, and cosmic continuation constitute a kind of immortality, not of ourselves as self-conscious

subjects, but a kind of objective immortality—of how we continue in terms of our influences on others in our society, on the human life form, on other forms of life, and even on the earth itself."²⁰ Peters implicitly shares an important ethical and ecological mandate with the early Jewish perspective: We are called to construct



our lives so as to make positive, quality of life differences in the lives of others, both human and nonhuman, both biospheric and geospheric alike. "Objective immortality" then means that our impact on the quality of life for others and for the earth itself continues. Even without ego, or names, or other individualistic identification—and certainly without indi-

vidual, subjective, phenomenal experience—our influence is interwoven into the ongoing, processive cycles of the web of Being. The question remains, however, as to whether even "objective" immortality, just by the very use of the word "immortality," doesn't risk becoming just one more ruse by which we avoid confronting the very hard reality of our own personal deaths. That when we die, it's over. Ended. Period. And this is where I get stuck.

Both intellectually and ecologically I know that life and death are one, that just as we came out of that oneness, we must return to it. Any otherworldly eschatology is certainly ecologically untenable. Any immortality beyond that of our attention to and impact upon the quality of life for others and for the earth itself, here and now, is impossible and, ultimately, undesirable. I cannot fathom what it would be like to live forever, nor do I think I would really want to. At the same time, I certainly don't want my subjective experience of my relational network to come to an end. I do not want to leave my spouse behind and I do not want him to leave me behind. I do not want anyone else to leave "due to complications from AIDS." And yet, I cannot deny the reality and the finality of death for my phenomenal self, for my subjective, experiencing, individual self. I am left not with some calmly, objectively achieved, intellectual truth, but rather with the paradox of two seemingly incompatible emotions: Both deep gratitude for life and passionate grief, whether for another's or for my own ending, are legitimate emotions held in tension. Importantly, "passionate grief" also embraces our anger and protest against the realities of suffering and death.²¹

From an ecotheological perspective I must conclude that death is the final word for our individual, embodied, subjectively experiencing, phenomenal selves. At the same time, death is not the final word for our lives as "symbiotic unions of

biology and culture” whose influence upon the relational web of Being continues affectively beyond our deaths. We will continue to have an influence on other life—for good or for ill; we just won’t be able to experience that. That we are not atomized and isolated individuals, but beings interwoven with/in/to Being provides an ethical mandate here—the same urging toward justice first experienced in erotic connectedness. As a result, even though death does have the final word for our phenomenal selves, we cannot live for number one in any reckless or irresponsible sense. Death’s finality does not obviate human or environmental ethics.

As we open ourselves to life with gratitude and meet death with appropriate grief, we can begin to take responsibility for our dying as well as for our living. We must find in our gratitude and wonder at this erotic and sensuous life the empowerment to trust through both our fear of the unknown and our grief at leaving embodied relationships and experiences—our grief that our subjective life must end—and thereby allow ourselves to be embraced anew by the divine oneness. Nobody said it would be easy. But, a sweet bye-and-bye eschatology is not only escapism, but an escapism that impugns the earth and damages life with reckless, devaluing disregard, and that, as a result, also threatens to deny the value of our personal lives as well. Rather than have the value of our lives so cancelled out, we can embrace our gratitude, our grief, even our protest—all our erotically embodied passions—and choose an absolutely trusting, eschatological leap of faith. It is a hard and painful choice, but it can also be a liberating and empowering one, freeing us from a fearful obsession with death to being more fully alive in the present. Fortunately, the strength of our erotically empowered and embodied, loving relationships—our personal ecosystems—can enable us into and through such a sacred passage.

(iii) An Ecotheology of Life

As I have wrestled with these concerns, I have become more and more willing to argue that our best understanding of the divine is one which insists that god/ess is interwoven into and through all that is; all the individual expressions of life together constitute the divine. Just as we experience a relationship over time as something over and above the two individuals in that relationship, god/ess is something that includes all that is but which, as the whole-cloth of all that is, cannot be simplistically reduced to the parts. The metaphor which has consistently come to mind is that of a quilt. A quilt is made up of various pieces of fabric, different designs, different textures, which must be sewn together into a whole-cloth for the quilt to exist. A simple pile of swatches of cloth (a simple total of the parts) does not make a quilt, but their interrelatedness into a whole does. Each piece of the quilt is a part of the whole-cloth, just as each living thing is a part of the divine. Just as “quiltiness” is a part of each piece of a quilt once it is sewn into the whole, so the divine is interwoven into and through each individual life which participates in the whole of life, of Being itself. Every individual life, both human and nonhuman, geospheric and biospheric, embodies or incarnates the divine.

This also means there is no first cause, no divine quilt maker. The cosmic quilt did not originate outside itself. There is no creator God in this traditional sense. Unlike humanly crafted quilts, the cosmic quilt just is. And, as a result, good and evil are not warring opposites in the fabric of life. Good and evil constitute a unity, not a dualism. Reality simply is. Sometimes the fabric in a particular swatch of cloth is weaker than that in other swatches; sometimes the threads which bind piece to piece are not as sturdy. As the life of the quilt progresses, those weaker pieces tear; they undergo suffering. And, surrounding swatches are diminished by the loss of

their weakened and “suffering” neighbors; humanly speaking, they undergo grief. But the suffering and the grieving which the pieces of the quilt experience are not imposed from outside; they are not caused by some moral agent, some supreme quilter who purposefully chose weak fabric or sloppy stitching. Although I may protest against this reality, I cannot blame the fabric of life for the fact that I will not last forever, but I can rejoice that, because the quilt of life is organic, as I pass out of existence, other pieces of life-fabric will be born and will grow into their rightful, although equally transient, places within the quilt. Importantly, as well, the whole-cloth does not punish some swatches or patterns for differing from other swatches or patterns. Diversity is the very richness of the quilt.

And so, I find myself trying to affirm that both good and evil, life and death, even death from HIV progression and AIDS, are simply part and parcel of the whole. I may not like that reality, but I cannot escape it. We have erred whenever we have conceptualized the divine as a moral agent who was anthropomorphically assigned all power, all knowledge, and all goodness. We have erred whenever we expected the divine to act, morally good, as a rescuer. We have erred whenever we blamed the divine for acting, morally bad, as the cause of so-called “natural evil.” And, we have also erred whenever we accused the divine of weakness, moral or otherwise, for failing to rescue us from reality, however difficult to bear it may be. While human evil (e.g., injustice, homophobia) rightly demands human correctives, suffering and so-called natural evil (e.g., AIDS) are our experiences of natural processes which are really, in and of themselves, morally neutral components of a morally neutral and given whole-cloth, however grievous those processes and experiences may be to us. This is not to deny the reality and the pathos of our experience. Our pain, our grief, our suffering, and our deaths are certainly

real. Indeed, even though so-called natural evils do not have any ultimate Final Cause, these occasions demand appropriate human response, which is to say: compassion. In and of itself, HIV is also morally neutral. Our experience of its activity in our bodies and our experience of the ways in which it brings many of us to premature ends are together something which we certainly experience as evil, and we rightly protest its reality and struggle to find ways to overcome its power. But we cannot blame the divine for its existence; rather, we must turn our ethical considerations toward those humans who use this occurrence of experienced natural evil as occasions for enacting human evil, human hatred, and human injustice.

Carol Christ has said that she believes that "all that is cares."²² Ron Long has argued that the divine is not a creator, or even a personal being, but is best understood as resistance (to human injustice and to occurrences of natural evil) and as hope (in the fulfilling of human justice and in the overcoming of human suffering).²³ I have tried to synthesize these ideas.²⁴ I know that god/ess is not a being as such, not a creator, not a first mover, or a divine quiltmaker. Rather, the divine is interwoven with/in/to the very fabric of life; s/he is the whole-cloth of Being itself, the organic quilting of all that is. And yet, I believe that we often experience this as personal, as if god/ess in godself was still someone with whom we could relate, with whom we could enter into dialogue in prayer or worship. I have wanted to exculpate this anthropomorphic image of the divine from responsibility for evil, as if the divine and evil were separable, but my own radical monotheism will not allow such dualism. Nevertheless, I still "experience" the divine as companion, friend, co-creator and co-sufferer, as comfort in suffering and empowerment in the pursuit of justice.²⁵

Perhaps the quilt image will help again. As one swatch within the fabric of life, I can speak of the whole, not as

something objectified outside myself (as an I-It relation), but as the whole of which I am intimately a part (as an I-Thou relation). To speak of and even to the whole, metaphorically as if it were not-me, does not mean that I do not recognize that I am a part of that whole-cloth with whom I commune in meditation or prayer, or about whom I speak theologically. The divine is as intimately interwoven with/in/to my being as I am with/in/to godself. Our lives and our deaths are a part of that whole. We bear responsibilities to contribute well to the quality of the relationships, the ties that bind us, within that whole. That responsibility is not limited merely to our sexual partners or to other humans; it is an ecological demand: The very givenness of the quilt of life, the sacred fabric of Being, demands our just caring, cooperation, and responsibility for all the rest of the fabric, whether human or nonhuman, biospheric or geospheric, for each individual piece that, like ourselves, contributes to the rich diversity of the whole.

Notes

¹ Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), *Touching our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989); James B. Nelson, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983), *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), *Body Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

² J. Michael Clark with Bob McNeir, *Masculine Socialization and Gay Liberation: A Conversation on the Work of James Nelson and other Wise Friends* (Las Colinas, TX: The Liberal Press, 1992), and, J. Michael Clark, "Men's Studies, Feminist Theology, and Gay Male Sexuality," *Journal of Men's Studies* 1.2 (November 1992): 125-155;

the ensuing discussion is a reorganization and summary of ideas previously published in these resources.

³ J. Michael Clark, *Beyond our Ghettos: Gay Theology in Ecological Perspective* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993), pp. 12-20, 88-90, and, "From Gay Men's Lives: Toward a More Inclusive, Ecological Vision," *Journal of Men's Studies* 1.4 (May 1993): 347-358; the ensuing discussion represents excerpts and summaries of the analytical paradigm originally put forth in these previously published resources.

⁴ Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991), p. 43.

⁵ Marti Kheel, "Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology: Reflections on Identity and Difference," *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, I. Diamond and G.F. Orenstein, editors; (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), pp. 128-137.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷ Roger S. Gottlieb, "Weapons of the Spirit: Jewish Resources in the Struggle against the Environmental Crisis," unpublished paper, roundtable presentation, American Academy of Religion, Kansas City, November 25, 1991.

⁸ Catherine Keller, "Women Against Wasting the World: Notes on Eschatology and Ecology," *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, I. Diamond and G.F. Orenstein, editors; (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), p. 257.

⁹ Cf., *ibid.*, pp. 250, 255.

¹⁰ Karl E. Peters, "Ethics of Dying in Light of a Social Ecological Understanding of Human Nature," unpublished paper, roundtable presentation, American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, November 23, 1992, p. 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), p. 251.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁵ Peters, "Ethics of Dying," p. 4.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁷ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 71, cf., pp. 208-220.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁹ Peters, "Ethics of Dying," p. 7.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 12, 16, emphasis added.

²¹ For extensive studies of the element of "protest" in theology and fiction, respectively, see: G. Tom Milazzo, *The Protest and the Silence: Suffering, Death, and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) and Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God* (trans. M. Wiesel; 1979, New York: Schocken Books, 1986).

²² Carol P. Christ, "Rethinking Theology and Nature," *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, I. Diamond and G.F. Orenstein, editors; (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), p. 69.

²³ Ronald E. Long, "God through Gay Men's Eyes: Gay Theology in the Age of AIDS," *AIDS, God, and Faith: Continuing the Dialogue on Constructing Gay Theology* (R.E. Long and J.M. Clark; Dallas: Monument Press, 1992), pp. 15-18.

²⁴ J. Michael Clark, "Toward a Lavender Credo: From Theology to Belief," *AIDS, God, and Faith: Continuing the Dialogue on Constructing Gay Theology* (R.E. Long and J.M. Clark; Dallas: Monument Press, 1992), pp. 51-55.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 54-55, cf., 77-80.

J. Michael Clark is an itinerant academic and co-founder of the Gay Men's Issues in Religion Group of the American Academy of Religion. He lives with his spouse, Bob McNeir, and their ecosystem of dogs, birds, fishpond, flower and vegetable gardens on a hill overlooking downtown Atlanta. Author of a dozen books in gay studies, his most is "Beyond Our Ghettos: Gay Theology in Ecological Perspective" (Pilgrim Press, 1993).

