Recognizing Encounters with Ultimacy across Religious Boundaries

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"The Mass on the World" on a Winter Afternoon: Contemporary Wilderness Religious Experience and Ultimacy

https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2018-0021
Received April 17, 2018; accepted June 25, 2018

Abstract: Contemporary studies of wilderness spirituality are based primarily in quantitative social science, and disagree over the relative influence of shared stories and religious traditions. In a study of visitors to California's national parks and trails, Kerry Mitchell found that backpackers reported heightened perceptions, fueled by such dichotomies as the encounter with the spectacular rather than the mundane, and with divine organization rather than human organization in wilderness. I argue wilderness experience informed only by natural scenery falls short in encountering ultimacy. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's "The Mass on the World" offers a unified rather than a fragmented vision of divine relationship to the natural and the human. Multiple readings can inform the wilderness sojourner, including a basic, open reading as a prayer shared with all nature; an environmental reading considering suffering and the act of Eucharistic offering; and a constructive reading to address dichotomies and fuse humanity and nature into an integrated cosmic future.

Keywords: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, nature mysticism, wilderness, ultimacy, environmental theology, Eucharist, hiking

1 Introduction

The idea that an isolated sojourn in a natural setting is conducive to religious experience is ancient indeed. Long before Christian desert monastics and Hindu forest yogis sought insight in terrains free of human occupation; shamans and youth on the threshold of adulthood sought visions and oracular dreams in the shadow of mountains or the silence of caves. Many of the wilderness experiences recounted in the world's religious literature concern ultimacy or direct encounters with God, the meaning of existence, or the structure of the cosmos. Among the best known are the hermits of traditional Chinese religion, Moses' vision of God on Mount Horeb, Christ's forty days in the wilderness and Muhammed receiving the Quran on Mount Hira. Additionally, many longer pilgrimage routes climb or circumambulate isolated peaks, such as the route shared by Bons, Hindus and Buddhists around sheer-sided Kailas in the Himalayas, where the peak itself is a physical manifestation of Vishnu and thereby of the ultimate.[1]

In the US, advocates for designation of national parks, wilderness areas, and long-distance trails have argued their spiritual and religious values contribute to their public benefits. The definition of these religious values or qualities remains nebulous, both in terms of scholarship on American religion and the management of the natural areas and their visitation. Aside from the confusion generated by the language of spirituality

1 Johnson and Moran, *Mount Kailas*.

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versus religion, the current literature on wilderness recreation often merges aesthetic experience with spiritual experience. While this is not summarily incorrect and the two are integrally related or interactive, equating the sublime with the divine raises multiple theological questions. Consistent with the call for a special issue of *Open Theology*, this paper concerns a reading of Teilhard de Chardin's "The Mass on the World," by a non-Roman Catholic. The thesis of this paper is current academic conceptualizations often fail to consider both written tradition and ultimacy in wilderness religious experience, thereby truncating and popularizing its interpretation in post-industrial contexts. I examine Kerry Mitchell's theses and findings in a study of visitor religious experience in wilderness areas in California, and compare de Chardin's engagement with ultimacy with that of Mitchell and his subjects. Emphasizing the insufficiencies of aesthetics alone, the concluding discussion proposes three potential readings of "The Mass on the World" for wilderness trekkers and suggests that de Chardin's cosmological insights can close the "ultimacy gap" left by passive appreciation of wilderness grandeur.

2 Reading experience: "The Mass on the World"

In my own life I visit wildland areas for a variety of purposes including environmental field work, exercise, bird watching, socializing with friends and intentional religious practice, particularly mindful walking or settling into a sheltered spot to pray. The range of experiences has been rich and variable, and has informed my research on religion and the environment. Some encounters though stand out among the many hundreds of trail miles, spectacular views, and contemplative interludes. My first permanent job was as a research scientist in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, with its towering old growth forests, profusion of spring wildflowers, and misty ridge lines. A park naturalist, who had grown up as a committed and knowledgeable Roman Catholic, sometimes joined my spare-time explorations of the waterfalls and promontories. Adulthood and independence had brought it doubts, but we shared an interest in spiritual practice and writers like Thomas Merton and the Buddhist poet, Gary Snyder. One winter Sunday when the high elevation roads were icy and the park was exceptionally peaceful, we decided to take an easy backcountry route along Little River and make a short climb to a notch in Sugarland Mountain known as Husky Gap. The low elevation path offered an even slope and minimal packed snow. One of us, I can't remember which, tossed a worn copy of Teilhard de Chardin's *Hymn of the Universe*[2] into a day pack, to provide some mutually acceptable inspirational reading if we decided to sit for a spell.

Remarkably for the Great Smokies, the parking lot and the trail were empty of visitors as we set out. The sun's low angle accentuated the dusky browns and grays of the barren trunks. Capturing the sparse radiation, the river foamed and sparkled, bracketed by the muted tones of its mossy banks and boulders. Appreciating the water's many surges and diversions, we took a silent meditative break at the edge of the bank. The valley was quiet, with a slight breeze sporadically swishing through the branches. In the afternoon haze, the trees stood solemn and expectant, as if waiting for their own Sunday worship. My friend and I decided we would take turns reading de Chardin's "The Mass on the World"[3] for a deserving stand of yellow poplars (tulip trees). This robust patch of second growth had regenerated after a brutal round of clear cutting by commercial loggers. They were the adolescents of the arboreal realm, just old enough to bloom and fruit. A few of the more resilient would grow to magnificent size in three hundred years or so, when the cove finally recovered from its human inflicted wounds. It was easy to recite for so non-judgmental a congregation, as we passed the text back and forth, gliding from one passage to another.

"The Mass on the World" begins with "The Offering" and de Chardin confessing to God that he (or the reader) has no bread, wine or altar. A Jesuit and paleontologist, de Chardin composed the prayer when he was on a scientific expedition into the desert of Ordos, in Inner Mongolia. The occasion was a holy day when he could not celebrate a ritual mass. Some of his friends reported the date as Easter 1923, but it was

2 Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn*.
3 Ibid., 11-31.

more likely the Feast of the Transfiguration.[4] Breaking away from traditional concepts of consecration, de Chardin declares; "I your priest will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world." Acknowledging the sun illuminating the horizon and awakening "the living surface of the earth," the officiant places on his paten, "all the harvest resulting from the renewal of labor" and into his chalice he pours "all the sap which is to be pressed out this day by the earth's fruits." The sacred vessels are not material but "the depths of a soul laid widely open to all the forces which in a moment will rise up from every corner of the earth and converge upon the Spirit."[5] Following a description of the vast and anonymous masses of humanity, de Chardin petitions: "Receive, O Lord, this all-embracing host which your whole creation, moved by your magnetism, offers you at the dawn of this new day." Concerning the believer and unbeliever, he calls: "Lord, make us one."[6]

The core of the text reflects on fire, energy and power – over the earth and within the earth. Following the offering, de Chardin, proclaims that without thunderbolt or earthquake (or any form of earthly drama), "the flame has it up the whole world from within. All things individually and collectively are penetrated and flooded by it, from the inmost core of the tiniest atom to the mighty sweep of the universal laws of being…."[7] The incarnation and the death of Christ is of "this world which your flesh has assimilated, this world which has become your flesh…"[8] Invoking Biblical texts, "The Mass" depicts Christ as the universal origin:

> Glorious Lord Christ: the divine influence secretly diffused and active in the depths of matter, and the dazzling center where all the innumerable fibers of the manifold meet; power as implacable as the world and as warm as life; you whose forehead is as white as snow, whose eyes are of fire, and whose feet are brighter than molten gold; you whose hands imprison the stars; you who are the first and the last, the living and the dead and the risen again; you who gather into your exuberant unity every beauty, every affinity, every energy, every mode of existence; it is you to whom my being cried out with a desire as vast as the universe, 'In truth you are my Lord and my God.'[9]

In the penultimate paragraph of the closing prayer, de Chardin proclaims: "For me, my God, all joy and achievement, the very purpose of my being and all my love of life, all depend on one basic vision of the union between yourself and the universe." The final passage relates all existence to the person of Christ, when de Chardin dedicates himself "to your [Christ's] body in fullest extension – that is to the world become though your power and faith the glorious living crucible in which everything melts away in order to be born anew."[10]

Reading "The Mass" aloud delayed our departure for Sugarland Mountain, but we decided to see how far we could climb before the impending sunset would force us to turn back. As we gained elevation we glimpsed views of the surrounding slopes through the trees. Just before we reached the Gap, I had a sensation that is difficult to describe. I stopped because of a tremendous feeling of presence, as if the entire cosmos were opening and the very essence of the mountains surrounded and infused us. The light was fading, yet I perceived it as more vivid and intense. Looking back, I could see that my friend had also halted. She was looking out across the ridges as if in awe, yet there was barely a prospect. The overwhelming presence locked us to the spot. We didn't speak, as we were sharing the experience, which from a Christian perspective could be interpreted as an encounter with the divine or the primal creative Spirit. After several minutes had passed, we simultaneously detected departure rather than cessation.

Following a momentary reorientation, we went wordlessly on our way. On rambling back down to the river, my hiking companion finally reopened conversation by asking me: "Susan, what is so special about Husky Gap?" I replied that there was nothing special about it: the gap doesn't have much of a vista especially when the leaves are on the trees, and it was logged over. As far as I knew nothing of historic interest had transpired there, and no one had ever lived there. It was just the least obstructed way to cross a

4 Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn*, 5; King, *Spirt of Fire*, loc. 1870.
5 Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn*, 11.
6 Ibid., 13.
7 Ibid., 16.
8 Ibid., 29.
9 Ibid., 25.
10 Ibid., 31.

ridge and get from one stream valley to another. And there was nothing unique about the poplars enjoying "The Mass on the World," either, other than their scientific generic name is *Lireodendron* – tree of lilies – due to their dramatic golden flowers.

3 Reflections on wilderness and religious experience

The events surrounding the riverside "Mass on the World" have several features typical of numinous or mystical religious experience as described by authors such as Evelyn Underhill,[11] including the perception of a presence infinitely larger than the self, the reception of beauty beyond visual and auditory aesthetics, the feeling that the presence is both within and without, and the understanding of unity in the cosmic fabric. The individual person does not precipitate the experience, and is taken by surprise by the encounter. Terms such as pleasant or fulfilling fall short in explaining what occurred, as does the word "awe". While nothing novel for readers familiar with the world's sacred texts, it brings up questions concerning contemporary definitions and expectations for wilderness spirituality, particularly concerning the roles of aesthetics, spiritual practice, and ultimacy. Prior to returning to a reflection on de Chardin's "Mass", it is worth considering how academics define and describe contemporary wilderness spirituality.

A first observation is that in the United States, social science research is increasingly determining the "official" relationship between wilderness and religion, and the analysis favors the civic and public aspects rather than the theological. Additionally, social science preferentially interprets research outcomes relative to demographic variables like age, gender, and other personal characteristics, rather than relative to variables of experience and belonging, such as what books the respondent has read (a difficult factor to appraise in any case). Most wildland surveys solicit information from individuals, rather than using focus groups or other communitarian sources of information. Having committed the sin of collecting multiple-choice and one sentence responses myself, I do not wish to discredit legitimate and informative methodologies. Surveys and questionnaires, however, focus on the mathematical means and "the common patterns" rather than on minority views and the unexpected. In contrast, margins and borders weave though the historical narratives describing religious experience in wilderness, and the extraordinary is often the lynchpin of the plot. As I have previously documented, the biblical accounts emphasize theophanies and the supernatural– grappling with God or Satan – and the outcomes are the Law, prophecy or innovative if difficult ministries.[12] Belden Lane has summarized many of the modern American religious writers pursuing ultimacy in natural or wildland settings.[13]

The language of ultimacy is difficult to incorporate in a general survey of backpackers or river rafters. One of my attempts in a questionnaire administered to Appalachian Trail (AT) long-distance hikers was the statement: "This trip made me more aware of the beauty of God (gods, spirits)," – rated from very untrue to very true. Statements such as this, however, can be problematic for Buddhists, and even people raised in the Abrahamic faiths may not ordinarily think of God as "beautiful" but might prefer other terms like "glorious". The statement received a mean score of 3.3 out of maximum of 5.0, and 36% of the respondents rated this statement as true or very true, indicating that a significant number of the hikers were associating beauty with the divine, while certainly not everyone was.[14]

In a recent study of spirituality in public wildlands, Kerry Mitchell interviewed or surveyed long-distance hikers on the John Muir Trail (JMT) in California, and vehicle-based travelers to Yosemite National Park and Muir Woods. Mitchell also interviewed US National Park Service staff relative to their own views of the spiritual or religious significance of the natural areas.[15] Mitchell concentrated on the role of the state in managing and programming visitor experiences, and on the functions of individuality and civic platforms

11 Underhill, *Mysticism* (originally published in 1911).
12 Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness;* Bratton, "Battling Satan."
13 Lane, *Fierce Landscapes*.
14 Bratton, *Appalachian Trail*, 169-170, 187-191, 222.
15 Mitchell, *Spirituality & State*.

in American religion.[16] Mitchell's interviewees on the JMT often interpreted their experiences in terms of the dichotomy between wilderness and civilization, including "focus/distraction, simplicity/complexity, calm/turmoil, need/desire, spectacular/mundane, newness/familiarity, nature/human, divine organization/human organization."[17] Several of Mitchell's twenty-two JMT informants disavowed any religious ties or preferred to term their experiences spiritual rather than religious. Trekkers from different backgrounds, however, reported similar perceptions, such as the role of grandeur in perceptual shifts, a sense of wonderment, and a freedom from materialism or a modified perception of the meaning of "things".[18]

Mitchell makes the radical claim that his research demonstrates that there was no "community of memory" informing the hikers, nor was there a tradition of "shared stories". He concludes his study demonstrates "that spirituality could arise as an effect of social management but without reliance on a particular community for its transmission." He then infers that the spirituality of the JMT, which arose from the difference between wilderness and civilization, "was a product of state management."[19] Mitchell also concludes that with the removal of society, hikers are "left only to themselves and nature" in terms of understanding their experiences, thus wilderness spirituality is ultimately defined by self-reflection.[20] My friend and I celebrating "The Mass on the World" with the trees were, in comparison, sharing stories and expressing a form of communitarianism rather than individualism. De Chardin's mass was certainly not a Park Service sponsored interpretive program.

In concert with down-playing the possibility that implicit religion, informal communities, and the popular media play roles in programming the hikers' sensibilities, Mitchell's analysis challenges the very concept of ultimacy in wilderness spirituality. My study of the Appalachian Trail published in 2012 noted that more religiously knowledgeable interviewees did report numinous experiences, while these were rare. Further, many hikers were praying and engaging in meditation while walking the Trail, and a few were studying sacred texts. The hiker logs at the hostels, for example, contained quotes from Buddhist poetry and historic writings.[21] Although about a quarter of the Christian respondents on the AT seemed unaware that a long-distance hike might generate religious experience, a cadre of the most committed religionists, including Christians seeking a deeper relationship with God, Buddhists schooled in meditation, and a pagan with a high level of ritual engagement, were utilizing the Trail as an environment for immersing themselves in spiritual or religious practice, or, in a few cases, for intentionally engaging ultimacy. The AT research also found that hikers who belonged to a church or a Christian organization were far more likely (25.5%) than hikers who did not belong to a church (7.0%) to describe God as close, caring or providential, while those hikers who did not belong to a Christian organization were more likely to describe their experience in terms of peace, harmony, non-ego, simplicity, and similar terms.[22] In terms of transmitted traditions, the level of prayer and contemplative practice had a significant correlation with multiple experiential variables, including those related to self-actualization and feelings of peace and harmony.[23] A significant number of AT hikers (57% of those who answered the religion specific questions, 40% of all the respondents) reported their contact with nature was causing them to think about God,[24] that is they were at least entering the process of exploring ultimacy.

The question however, remains: is Mitchell correct that the spiritual wilderness experience on American public lands is informed primarily by nature and self – and relatively disinterested in ultimacy as expressed in shared stories or experienced in shared spiritual practices? Or, did I find evidence for experience informed by tradition, because I am schooled in it? Much of the world's literature on the contributions of

16 Kerry Mitchell was quite critical of other scholars pursuing related topics, particularly myself and Bron Taylor, because we did not attempt to quantify the role of the state in our studies.
17 Mitchell, *Spirituality & State*, 66.
18 Ibid., 74-84.
19 Ibid., 86.
20 Ibid., 88.
21 Bratton, *Appalachian Trail*, 188.
22 Ibid., 184-185.
23 Ibid., 160-165.
24 Ibid., 223.

religious experience in wildlands or natural settings to the understanding of ultimacy concerns prophets, ascetics, shamans and literati, as well as such key leaders as Gautama Buddha, Moses, Ismael, and Jesus of Nazareth. Among multiple religions, calling, training or disciplined practice are pre-requisites to even the most basic search for a personal transformation, and are absolute requirements for the rigors of a "vision quest" or ascetic wildlands sojourn. Mitchell casts the wilderness trip as a democratic enterprise, and a form of public religion.[25] Is the experience of "everyman" the only experience that matters?

Mitchell's informants often report spiritual experience in aesthetic language, with an emphasis on the sublime. The spiritually informative scenes or events are spectacular or dramatic. The backpackers describe heightened perceptions or perceptual shifts, that result in feelings of awe, of being insignificant, or being connected to a whole.[26] This form of perceptional shift is common among AT hikers as well. The self-reported perceptions imply a hierarchy of intensity, driven by the quality and interest of the scenery. It also suggests the influence of American visual culture, with its intensely colored Sierra Club calendars, and films incorporating footage of aerial sweeps over glistening peaks. Considering the place of the 21st century in the history of western thought about nature, European painting once largely ignored landscapes and treated them only as background. The stunning vista has more recent roots in Renaissance use of natural allegories, followed by Romanticism's focus on nature and John Ruskin's formal aesthetics of the picturesque versus the sublime.[27]

American visual culture is often passive – the realm of the spectator who buys access to the peaks with a tank of gasoline in the family suburban utility vehicle. In exploring ultimacy, Hebrew and Christian historic texts often use the power of the landscape as a step up, and then leave the mountain top and move to a higher level of encounter with the omnipresence or other characteristics of the Holy, such as Moses seeing God through the sapphire floor. Conversely, in the case of Buddha under the bodhi, there was no greater or overwhelming landscape. Further, the historic wilderness religious figures are not mere viewers but interact with the holy. In selected circumstances, such as Jonah and the sea monster or Elijah fed by ravens, a prophetic figure or sage is fleeing from social threats, a religious calling or God. The motif of wildlife or natural phenomena such as storms rescuing or redirecting the religious specialist is widespread among the world's faiths. The great sea creature returned Jonah to his mission to Nineveh rather than digesting him. In our trip to Husky Gap, my hiking companion and I were participating with other living creatures in "The Mass" as prayer to God. The setting was not a prospect across an open meadow to Yosemite Half-Dome or a view from Mount Whitney, but a pleasant if undistinguished swath of Appalachian second growth. It was not special or best. In reflecting on the ordinariness of the locale, the experiential sequence was toward the all-encompassing qualities of the divine, and moved past the aesthetics of individual natural objects or features. This raises the question, if the hikers treat aesthetics and spirituality as synonymous, should the religious scholar accept this definition? Is an intense aesthetic experience, by itself enough to define or describe ultimacy?

4 "The Mass on the World" in today's wilderness context

As the original is more properly a prayer, fans of Teilhard have adapted "The Mass on the World" to a liturgical format, making it suitable for outdoor services. This conversion is not the same task as opening the text to today's wilderness travelers, especially if they are intent on "reading" nature alone. Most hikers would not be familiar with Teilhard works. Even the Roman Catholics are probably not on average conversant enough with theological cosmology to absorb the nuance in Teilhard's celebration. Typical conduits for introducing "The Mass" to today's wilderness might include incorporating it in an anthology of inspirational readings for outdoor activity, or preparing an annotated version for perusal on cell phones. In considering how to introduce "The Mass" to a wilderness readership, without much background in the concept of ultimacy, I

25 Mitchell, *Spirituality & State,* 88.
26 Ibid., 74-79.
27 Andrews, *Landscape*.

propose three modes of reading: 1) an open and naïve reading accompanied by engagement with nature much like the river trail experience; 2) an environmental reading engaging the state and value of the non-human; and 3) a cosmological reading addressing the dichotomies Mitchell observed among California wilderness travelers. In annotating "The Mass," a first step is to encourage the hiker to take advantage of sacred texts to open doors to perceptions of universal order or the divine. Avoiding the us-them attitude toward nature and its interfaces with humans and the Holy opens unforeseen connections. As David Richo points out, "the structure of nature reveals God's way of being." Teilhard asserts natural phenomena "by overflowing and dissolving our narrow standards or measurements reveal to us the dimensions of God."[28]

4.1 An open reading

For the first reading, the key is to challenge the wilderness traveler to consider the wilderness/civilization dichotomy and to ask how expertise, be it scientific or religious might inform one's vision of the landscape and the reality within it. John Muir's passion for natural history and his scientific knowledge provided him with a much more spatially and temporarily informed view of the Yosemite than today's casual tourists experience. His Christian upbringing, whether he had remained true to his father's Presbyterian values or not, taught him to open himself to the divine within the cosmos. Teilhard similarly had a scientist's eye and a theological education. As Jesuit theologian Thomas King argues, Teilhard rejected articles of faith that closed either the scientific or the theological visions. Like science, Christianity was an exploration, open to the acquisition of knowledge. Teilhard distinguished between abstract knowledge, like geometry or academic theology, and that of experience, such as his mysticism and his scientific excursions into physics and deep time.[29]

Teilhard's "Mass" transcends the traditional boundaries of sacred space and challenges human authority to sacralize. The world as altar is beyond our powers and authority to consecrate. Teilhard sought ultimacy in the very essence of the physical, though the lens of scientific attention to energy and biological process. His imagery is reminiscent of the most exciting cosmological and evolutionary discoveries of the early 20th century, including Albert Einstein's radical merger of the identities of matter and energy. This aspect of de Chardin's theology of nature has offended his detractors and critics, who continue to attack his work as heretical and inappropriately modernizing the immutable and holy.[30] Yet, De Chardin's theology opens doors to understanding wild nature as far more than daunting slices of the earth's crust. Reading either Muir or Teilhard does not require a binding commitment to their visions, but offers bridges to even deeper understandings, without unnecessary clutter, into the encounter with the basic forms of the material.

The reader should not confine the concept of the Mass to its routine and oft perfunctory Sunday formats. The idea of sharing the celebration with the wilderness itself will be foreign to many experienced backpackers and rafters. Offering the mass, be it among the slopes and conifers of the Sierras, or in a humble pocket of wetlands on a heavily developed stretch of ocean beach, approaches God at God's own altar. Having the trees, grasses, birds and arthropods join in "The Mass" moves them from aesthetic subject, to creatures with lives of their own. Beginners will benefit from contemplating Teilhard's theme of unity – between humans and nature, Christ and the cosmos, matter and energy, and all humanity and God. Teilhard's conceptualization of the cosmos shares some features of Buddhism including an intense sense of ultimate oneness, and a grasp of "the immense simplicity of things."[31] A memorable introduction to nature mysticism is not a guaranteed finale, yet "The Mass" opens the possibilities of vision beyond or perhaps, within, the geology, topography and biota.

28 Richo, *Ablaze*, loc. 260.
29 King, *Teilhard's Mass*, 38-50.
30 Smith, *Theistic Evolution*.
31 Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn*, 18.

4.2 An environmental reading

Even though I was ecologically well trained well before the wintery afternoon by the river, I now read de Chardin with even more of an environmental consciousness, and find this stimulates inquiry into ultimacy. As a young priest and French stretcher bearer, de Chardin had experienced one of the most destructive applications of industrialization in the barrages, bunkers, and machine gun nests of World War I. As Ursula King has noted, he began to focus on the meaning of things during his wartime service, and then later expanded this to the meaning of energy and the material in "The Mass". His first thoughts about "a cosmic offering" appear in his war journals.[32] On the other hand, his decision to refuse an officer's commission as a chaplain, and to remain with the enlisted rank and file gave him an overwhelming feeling of unity with them – and with all humanity. He would at the same time consider the soldiers suffering extended violence and bloodshed as sacrificial victims, representing all humanity in the ultimate communion defined by death.[33] What does his nature mysticism imply about the travail of nature? How does "The Mass" relate sin and suffering to cosmic outcomes and the human end game? Is God going to leave us to drown in rising seas, just as God left de Chardin and his comrades to struggle through the explosions, blasted mud, and stinking cadavers of the trenches?

Celia Deane-Drummond has recently edited a volume of multi-faceted and insightful essays on Teilhard as a source for Christian environmental philosophy. Several of these papers focus on the holistic nature of Teilhard's cosmological ruminations.[34] In considering an environmental reading of "The Mass on the World," I find it more challenging than an open reading as it questions how the sensory aesthetics of wilderness – not just the visual but the auditory, olfactory and kinesthetic – inform us. The self-contained backpacking trip has no energetic dependence on the local environment – no risk of starvation, no struggle to collect herbs or capture game. The prospect on the natural is of a "perfect" landscape, in a moment in time – no masses of ice slicing into bedrock, no natural climate shifts driving large mammals north and south. Environmental ethicists have, in fact, wondered if the tourist experience undermines environmental comprehension by presenting an "unreal" slice of the planet's surface, closing out human suffering. The wilderness emerges as a fantasy realm – an expansive "Disney World" for the affluent and the athletic.

"The Mass on the World" encompasses the entire planet in the Eucharist. Rather than distancing the human from the natural and the pleasurable from the trying, the Mass unites All. Teilhard standing by himself in the Mongolian steppes was celebrating with all humanity. The bread is human toil and the struggling of all life, and "this wine, our pain, is more, I know, than a draught that dissolves it."[35] He petitions God: "be pleased yet once again to come down and breathe a soul into the newly formed, fragile film of matter with which this day the world I clothed."[36] The Mass turns hurt into renewal, and death into transfiguration, not just for humanity but for the earth. Evolution and biodiversity are both the fruit of travail and struggle. De Chardin asks God "to pronounce over this earthly travail your twofold efficacious word..." and "Over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day say again the words: This is my Body."[37] Suffering is a mystery, yet what we categorize as natural beauty results from it. The elk's antlers arise from combat, the height of the sequoia tree from competition for light and its elevated crown and thick bark from the repeated stresses of surface fires. The sequoia seedling thrives in the ashes of a burnt over dead log on the forest floor.

The passive aesthetic perception of wilderness – especially of the photographic calendar variety – is shallow because it captures nature from a safe distance and views it only at a moment in time. It mutes the destructive forces and sheer explosions of energy that brought Yosemite Half-Dome and Mount Whitney into existence. Romantic artists, such as JMW Turner, incorporated human misery into depictions of sublime

32 King, *Spirit of Fire*, loc. 1854-1880.
33 King, *Teilhard's Mass*, 8-12.
34 Deane-Drummond, *People and Planet*.
35 Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn*, 13.
36 Ibid., 14.
37 Ibid., 15.

and unconquered nature in picturing the human cargo sinking with a storm-embroiled slave ship. The indigenous peoples who gathered acorns and pine nuts on the lower slopes of the Sierras, experienced the mountains as both a struggle and a blessing. What we now call wilderness was both a realm of suffering from food shortages and harsh winters, and of stunning beauty as the light of celestial deities swathed sacred peaks. Teilhard's offering of "suffering and labor" connects the genuine processes of nature to the human condition, and ultimately the fate of the earth.

We humans are sinking deeper and deeper into environmentally destructive behaviors, like attempting to commandeer Fire and its precious energy, because we do not understand our excesses as desecrating the altar. Without the offering there is no sacred renewal, and the "fragile film of matter" clothing the World becomes increasingly tattered and worn. The sequoias as pillars of the wilderness cathedral are crumbling at their pinnacles, as air pollution, climate change and repeated drought stress turn their great age and grandeur against them. Browning needles, sparse foliage and a dearth of saplings betray a less than primal Eden. For the scientifically and spiritually informed eye, the wilderness is hardly untrammeled. Its travail and longing are evident at the trailhead. Rather than being "off-topic" for a wilderness trek, it is the Eucharistic vision of Teilhard, which melds the growing crisis to his unified concept of divine order. Teilhard was not an inter-stellular tourist alone in the galaxy. He understood communion with nature and with God as a planned and thoughtful act – an offering of self to which God responds. As Mary Grey concludes: "What Teilhard expressed as cosmic praise and thanksgiving needs to be placed in the wider context of faith in the God of broken creation, who will offer us redemptive possibilities even at this hour of danger."[38] The passive aesthetic of wilderness falls short spiritually because it is exactly that – passive and disengaged. Further, the passive aesthetic forwards individualism – the offering, in contrast, is on a shared table, with the explicit goal of redeeming all creation and all humanity.[39]

4.3 A cosmological reading

The third and constructive reading of "Mass on the World" directly addresses the dichotomies: focus/distraction, simplicity/complexity, calm/turmoil, need/desire, spectacular/mundane, newness/familiarity, nature/human, divine organization/human organization. While this dualism can introduce new questions about personal meaning, the dichotomies are inherently barriers to greater understanding. I think that from Teilhard's perspective these would be, in terms of ultimacy, false social constructions based in the recreational nature of the experience. While the spectacular heights and depths of the Sierras might unmask God's work and presence, God is no more or less active on the JMT than in the trenches of World War I. If we see the natural and human as dissimilar, it is because we consider ourselves as commanders of our destiny. The trembling leaved aspens growing at the foot of a landslide are actors in a play, where we are well-heeled spectators. As Thomas Berry has argued, we must be "present to the earth," and "go beyond the human into the universe itself and its mode of functioning."[40] If we began trapped in the center of labyrinth, then the distant wilderness view of the world on a broad horizon just takes us around one corner of the hedge. While we recognize the labyrinth is larger than we thought, we are hardly measuring it from the outside.

Teilhard's incorporation of human organization within divine organization and identification of the world as an infinite and all-encompassing altar extend more value and honor to nature and to the non-human than the idea that we humans reside in cluttered workshops of our own. Teilhard's concept of Fire penetrating matter and his recognition that energy is at the same time matter confronts the dichotomies of simplicity/complexity and spectacular/mundane. "The Mass on the World" describes the Fire penetrating "without earthquake, or thunderclap...so naturally has it flooded every element, every energy, every

38 Grey, "Eucharist", 119.

39 Ibid., 119-120 for a more in depth discussion of the effective role of the Eucharist.

40 Berry, *Great Work*, 219; Grey, "Eucharist", 110.

connecting link in the unity of the cosmos; that without even a ripple, been endued with life."[41] There was, after all, nothing special about the trail to Husky Gap.

Teilhard decribes engaging "the immense simplicity of things," as part of a process of initiations ending in "the point where I can no longer see anything, nor any longer breathe, outside that *milieu* in which all is made one."[42] There is nothing wrong with aesthetic enjoyment, and it brings the spark of love into the celebration. Teilhard though does not end his journey standing in a valley meadow looking up at Yosemite Falls in the twilight. He instead asserts he has moved above the fractured. He has mastered matter, although not in the sense of superficial consumerism:

> Rich in the sap of the world, I rise towards the spirit whose venture is the magnificence of the material universe but who smiles at me from far beyond all victories; and, lost in the mystery of the flesh of God, I cannot tell which is the more radiant bliss; to have found the Word and so be able to achieve the mastery of matter, or to have mastered matter and so be able to attain and submit to the light of God.[43]

5 Conclusion

In the wake of post-modernism and the breaking down of old, entrenched hierarchies, the field of religious studies has broadened the range of spirituality and spiritual experience. This generates the conundrum that every step of a wilderness hike could be considered spiritual. And in one sense this is true. Yet, in exploring ultimacy, the world's religions have identified active pursuit based in application of tradition, prior training, divine appointment, or spiritual discipline as lynch-pins of efficacy. The roles public wildlands and nature reserves play in fostering democracy and civil society, as well as encouraging a civic environmental ethos are critical to their social functions. The average or typical experience, however, falls short in terms of religious insight as it is locked in dichotomies rather than pursuing unity, and emerges from passive viewing rather than from active communion. "The Mass on the World" and de Chardin's cosmological insights can close the "ultimacy gap" left by mere passive appreciation of wilderness grandeur.

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41 Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn*, 16-17.

42 Ibid., 18-19.

43 Ibid., 20-21.

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