

Myth, Mutual Interaction, and Poetry

with John Hedley Brooke, "Darwin and Christianity: Truth and Myth"; Andrew Robinson, "Creative Mutual Interaction in Action"; Richard Skinner, "A Sonnet for Christopher"; and Margaret Boone Rappaport and Christopher Corbally, "Tracing Origins of Twenty-First Century Ecotheology: The Poetry of Christopher Southgate."

TRACING ORIGINS OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ECOTHEOLOGY: THE POETRY OF CHRISTOPHER SOUTHGATE

by Margaret Boone Rappaport  and Christopher Corbally 

Abstract. With the goal of better understanding how science, religion, and poetic art came together in the work of Christopher Southgate, the authors first explore his spiritual poetry. They come away with a better understanding of the author's commitment to a broad naturalism that contributes, along with his own faith experience, to his prose works in the emerging field of ecotheology. The authors conclude that Southgate's work is part of the worldwide emergence of a theological rationale that supports environmentalism, the protection of species, and the conservation of biodiversity. The authors find Southgate's poetry warm, appealing, accessible, and re-readable to good effect, but with a thread of danger and warning throughout. Both features are quite appropriate for the environmental movement in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: biodiversity; ecology; ecotheology; environmentalism; naturalism; science and religion; Christopher Southgate

It is not the usual biochemical researcher who transitions to ministerial practice and theology in the academy. Add to that, a long history of poetry writing and publishing, and we have an interesting puzzle. There were only a few strands of biography as clues to this puzzle when we decided to examine Christopher Southgate's poetry for this *festschrift*. From our

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own studies, we knew that the intersection of science, religion, and art in a single individual is not unexpected in our species; their similarities are one of our own themes.¹ Still, this quality of mix is rarely seen and even more rarely found in full public view for everyone to examine and explain. For most people, that would be nerve-wracking.

Therefore, our first tentative suspicion, before reading Southgate's poetry, was that its writer might be somehow courageous, modestly so, of course, because we both know him. Unlike most mortal souls, he has had the nerve to publish a book, in fact, a goodly number of them—a datum that makes him an “outlier” on some scale. Yet, we were struck by something more. He was also brave enough to publish the quieter, more complicated, emotional reflections of the self that we call poetry. We suspected that Christopher Southgate had an important kind of bravery, one that young people could well emulate. His lesson was clear: “Be brave enough to enter on the public stage with *everything* you've got!” It is not the military kind of bravery, or the martyr's, but the bravery of the mind exposed by art. Poetry is not even camouflaged by trendy explanations, like paintings can be. It is out there, exposed and exposing.

We asked ourselves how science, religion, and poetic art came together in this writer, knowing that the science came before the theology after a “profound conversion to the Christian faith,” at least chronologically according to biographies. Still, it seemed to us that his history followed a logical course. Learning science comes in one's youth, when one is fresh and sharp. Theology comes later, with a gain in wisdom. Poetry is an old man's sport that makes its practitioner appear young, so it is ageless. The sequence of events in Southgate's biographies suggest that science was “not enough” or somehow wrong, but we know, at the same time, that the author maintains a fondness for scientific terminologies, concepts, and history. It is obvious from his poetry, especially *Easing the Gravity Field; Poems of Science and Love* (2006), which includes a stunning historical poem titled “Taboo” about Otto Hein and Lise Meitner, and their work on nuclear fission. In that work, science and love become different sides of the same coin, made of the same stuff. To this day, the author's commitment to science is obvious in his continuing research in biochemistry, for example, research on an organic molecule that can “interpret” its environment, to begin in 2018, as “Cooperation and Interpretation in the Emergence of Life” (cf. John Templeton Foundation, Online; Lehman et al. 2014).

Did science, religion, and art maintain boundaries in his work, or did they link up and cross-reference? One of us, a poetry writer, shrugged, suggesting that was the wrong question. “Poetry was always there,” like what the other of us calls “the habit of prayer.” Poetry writing and prayer have a great deal in common. With shared conviction, we decided where

to begin our poetry reading. We would focus first on Southgate's spiritual poems, published most recently as *Rain Falling by the River* (2017).

Five sections of poems are preceded by a single short epigraph from Etty Hillesum²: "We have to become as simple and as wordless as the growing corn or the falling rain." That injunction would, in the end, tell us exactly how science, theology, and art linked up to produce Southgate and colleagues' most important series of prose works, in our view, at least from a policy perspective: *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Southgate 2008), *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in an Age of Ecological Crisis* (Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate 2010) and *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives* (Hunt, Southgate, Stavrakopoulou, and Horrell 2010). The three works form a kind of set; once the first was written, the other two were virtually required and admirably achieved as collegial compilations. Once the notion that cruelty to other animals and hastening their extinction could be seen as "evil," there were both theological and scientific inconsistencies that had to be addressed and followed to their logical endpoints. These were in addition to the "problem" of how a loving God can allow a world of suffering and "evil". Here, we hold back on our own views, especially of the latter inconsistency, hoping that Southgate will address these issues directly in a major compilation of ecotheological poems. It is the perfect format for managing the ambiguities that burst forth out of any union of religion and environmentalism.

Hillesum's modest epigraph is a massive charge that would, if followed, upend the present world order. To reduce the human footprint to that level of quiet is possible, but it is a tall order. If this is Southgate's commitment, too, then where did it come from? Let us go back to the writer's spiritual poems to discover why he may have suggested this commandment for the epigraph to his book of spiritual poems, and how exactly he could have derived his environmental thesis—his ecotheology—especially if one traces out *The Groaning of Creation* to its logical political formulation.

Southgate's devotion to simplicity, naturalism, beauty, reverence, and quiet shine throughout his spiritual poems, and they do so with the intricate use of carefully selected details about very specific events, places, people, and some catastrophes that are just plain shocking. An example of the latter is "Mozambique," about a woman who gives birth in a tree while flood waters swirl around her. It was difficult to read this poem and *not* think about Bangladesh, where Dacca will be one of the first cities to flood completely with global warming. Another catastrophe is the author's two-time experience with Ground Zero in New York City. Even some of the quietest and most contemplative poems about old, dusty, and beautiful sacred buildings can warn of potential danger, as in "Torcello: Looking East," which is noticeably ominous by clothing Mary in black: "Only the Virgin, vast in black on a pale gold ground, / Contemplates this vision

with serenity. / The walls tell you: sit quiet – in the humblest place — / Until you feel the Judgement is behind you.”

On first reading of Southgate's *Rain Falling by the River*, the sensations are pleasant, quiet, reverent, and nurturing—that is, until the second reading. In these lovely poems, one then finds the edgy quality of an iconoclast and dissenter, as if he is often waiting for another cataclysm or looking back on one. We were both especially delighted by the author's moving poem, “Mission Santa Clara, California,” because one of us is a Jesuit. The poem recalls martyred Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter. The poet remembers: “They lost eight from here, in El Salvador, / Gunned down by the Government.” Even in this beautiful compilation of poems, prayers, and conscientious studies of sacred spaces, there are threads of warning and a petulance with an established order. Landscapes are made evocative of his faith, as in “Yosemite/III retrospect”: “And if / it be true, and I believe it, / Nature sings of her creator, / Yosemite then's a cradle of this praise.” However, unlike so many other poets of faith, the author embraces change as part of the natural order in “Yosemite/II from the Merced River: “and these hills are to be sought, / to change me, as they themselves / change.” This is the scientist speaking again, one who knows well that geological and evolutionary change are a part of a world made by God. We conclude that it is change he can accept, but suffering, not so much. It is a useful distinction when considering his ecotheological writings.

Simplicity, grace, and natural beauty appear to be his ideal, but the reality of *Rain Falling by the River* is a set of small masterpieces in which there are often tucked images that warn of judgments yet to come and change at both a slow pace and a fast and violent one. This particular approach to the natural world and the humans in it could not be better chosen for someone who goes on to explore nature's suffering (and therefore, logically, its desecration by humans) and who helps to set the stage for a theological rationale for environmentalism. Southgate's is not a pastoral image, as one imagines on first reading, but one in which change, violence, and irrationality are firmly embedded.

We would now like to focus on form as it relates to thesis. The conveyance of ideas at the roots of any movement is critically dependent on the way that concepts, images, processes, issues, and warnings are crafted. We propose that, if the works of Southgate go on to assume importance in the world history of ecotheology—and thence, we propose, to affect the broader environmental movement—they exhibit one especially useful quality. They are a pleasure to read! One reviewer wrote that reading a Southgate poem revealed new things with every re-reading. We would agree, as we have described above. His poetry is brimming with meaning about serious problems. The way this is achieved is worth noting, because social movements (from the Russian Revolution to the Health Food Fad)

are all about PR (public relations), if nothing else. The medium massages the message, to misquote McLuhan and co-authors (1967).

The language of Southgate's poetry is never so dense as to be off-putting. Some modern poets are so parsimonious with their words, so determined to pack multiple meanings into a few compulsively arranged words, their poems become cracked and dry. They cannot be read *with pleasure*. This is not Christopher Southgate's style. He is a careful architect with his construction of images; he is clear with the precision of a scientist; and he is masterful at conveying a summary feeling for each poem. Furthermore, many of them have narrative movement; they move from one part of a larger plot to another. At the end, the reader knows intuitively the lessons of each poem. They are *accessible*. Many are comforting while others are alarming, but they are all thought-provoking.

As a brief aside, we note that the author's book-length poem, *A Love and Its Sounding: Explorations of T.S. Eliot* (1997), focuses on very difficult personal subjects and an equally troubling life course for Eliot. It can be exhausting to read the details of his marriages, breakdowns, conversion to Anglicanism, including a mystical experience, and assumption of British citizenship, in the years surrounding World Wars I and II. This was a tumultuous period of history, which makes Eliot's many accomplishments in poetry, play writing, and literary criticism all the more remarkable and important in documenting the mood of the times.

Our view is that it is somewhat amusing, therefore, that the tone of Southgate's poem about Eliot remains much the same as his spiritual poems, and its openness and appeal remain solid and sympathetic. The poem does not take on a calamitous feeling because many of the events described in the poem (and narrated in short side-notes facing the poetry text) are calamitous. At times, the living poet even appears to be giving a bit of good advice to the now-deceased Eliot, with whom he appears to commiserate. This is very generous, but it also reflects Southgate's essentially positive, upbeat, and constructive approach to personal problems (of which Eliot had many).

It is important to emphasize that this is ideally the type of personality one wants at the foundation of a major policy shift on the environment, and it encourages one to reconsider his call against cruelty to all animals as more practical than it first appears. If the "love" in *A Love and Its Sounding* belongs to anyone, it belongs to Southgate. While this commentary seems a side-note itself, we emphasize how important it is to write poetry with clear purpose, and also how the writing of it clears both head and heart. Poetry writing, like prayer, is healing.

We guessed that poetry writing might have begun early because of published poems dating to the early eighties, as in *Beyond the Bitter Wind; Poems 1982–2000* (2000). Southgate earned his doctorate in biochemistry early, in 1977, at the age of twenty-five. We wondered if poetry writing

then hung on into phases of work in science, ministerial practice, and academic theology as a nurturing form of rational inquiry that balances ambiguities and manages unanswerable questions. It is true: The scientifically trained theologian is always grappling with them; for example, constructing a scheme where “divine glory” is given the task of finding its way in “a Darwinian world” (2014). However, managing conflicts and making them productive (of something other than confusion) can be tiring. Poetry writing can be difficult, but it is rarely tiring. It is energizing and always right, or if not right, left for perfecting on another day. It is easy to know when a poem has gone as far as it can go, on any day, because one loses interest, not in the topic but in the fabrication process.

Conundrums are the stuff that poetry adores, so we suspected that after struggling, for example, with the conflicts between theology and evolutionary biology, as in *God, Humanity, and the Cosmos*, now in its third edition (2011), poetry might be a relief for this author because it does not require solution or resolution. For poetry, ambiguities hang in the air, and opposites sit undisturbed, if not quiet. As an anthropologist and a priest, we each knew from our own respective work of the great benefits found in a high level of tolerance for the vague and equivocal. In Southgate’s case, a tolerance for ambiguity also becomes handy in—of all unexpected places!—policy development in modern industrialized societies, unintended as this might be. Those of us who have served in the major administrative capitals of the modern world are always fascinated by the origins of major policy shifts. They are difficult to trace. They emerge with grunts and, yes, groans in the most unlikely sociopolitical venues. Their histories meander in and out of governments and world organizations, and it is almost impossible to predict when they will take off and assume a life of their own.

When we look at the sequence of this author’s published works in theology, we sense we are on a track back into the origins of modern, cross-national environmentalism. For the twenty-first century, a more theologically informed approach might be needed to spark political and economic action that flagged in the twentieth, or at least was not communicated well. In Southgate and colleagues’ ecotheological books, we see a rationale forming: *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in an Age of Ecological Crisis* (Horrell et al. 2010) and *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (Hunt et al. 2010). All these prose works use characters and texts that are already familiar to a broad population, which is very astute if one thinks about how ideas worm their way into people’s thinking, and thence into policy and law.

Southgate’s productivity in the period around 2010 suggests a major breakthrough for the author, which is confirmed when one looks back two years to *The Groaning of Creation* (2008). This book surely does not advertise itself as a policy piece. It is a work in theology. Yet, many people

have been waiting for a theological rationale to behave toward other species with respect, and with conservation in mind. Calling disrespect for animals and wastefulness of resources “evil” is jarring but quite effective. Our own view has always been that human conservation of other species and ensuring their protection simply makes sense. We are the only species who can bring this about in the modern world context; other species cannot do it. We are left with a heavy mantle.

Granted, to some, calling human environmental improvidence “evil” may seem extreme. For many, the prevention of cruelty to animals is one thing, but to suggest that killing animals for food might be ungodly is enough for some people to mutter “wooly-headed thinking” or even toss the work aside. Furthermore, many people have been schooled that early humans managed to survive and feed their evolving large brains (the ones that would eventually conserve other species) by first scavenging, and then hunting, which surely causes injury and death to their prey. To intimate that self-preservation of our human ancestors is contrary to biblical scriptures is a jolt for so many. Even worse, their views can then become confounded with social movements focused upon the proposed advantages of vegetarianism and veganism (not to mention its “raw” version). These are separate movements, with their own rationales, their own target populations (which are very different), and their own histories, but they are related to environmentalism.

Irrespective of all these concerns, many people seem to be searching for religious reasons to radically change their behavior and their votes on many issues related to Earth’s ecology. At first glance, it seems an odd pairing: theology and environmentalism. However, most human social movements, including the most violent of all, revolutions, always dip back into the inventory of images from traditional faiths, sacred texts, and a broad rationale given as “what God wants for us.” The pairing of religion and social movement is not unusual, just new for this movement.

It is important to acknowledge that it is useful to have an extreme form of the environmental movement’s rationale—a type of “manifesto”—from which to retreat just a few steps into a realistic program. Initially, one has to stretch the conclusions of *Groaning* and take them all the way through evolutionary time to today. In the current milieu, if harming animals can be seen as evil, then other forms of environmental desecration and destruction of biodiversity can be seen as evil, by extension. The religious belief system at the foundation of this notion is accessible to most people in the way that Southgate presents it, including in his poetry. Recall, “evil” is a word rarely used in policy or politics, but it can and will be quoted. Many people have been looking for a scheme of values for living that prevents mismanagement of waste, commercial enterprise that ruins the environment, and air that cannot be cleaned even in time for our grandchildren. “It may already be too late” is given as a cause for inaction. The answer comes back clean:

No, it's not too late, not if you are one of God's children, and believe in Judgment Day. Others wail "it will cost too much money," to which the answer comes back even cleaner: How much money is too much money, to pay for God's work?

Our firm conclusion is that the most recent of Southgate's prose writings belong to a worldwide literature that fundamentally justifies enormous changes in public psyches and both political and commercial actions regarding the environment. His writings, especially the poetry, help us to understand how much needs to change within ourselves to solve our planet's environmental crisis, and just how drastic some of the changes will be. The prose is useful, but the poetry gives us the images and feelings that change people's minds and hearts. A theologically based rationale for saving planet Earth is forming, and we, in this short essay, have had one window onto that birth process. After all, the metaphor for *The Groaning of Creation* was taken from a biblical text that harkens to birth, to creation, and rebirth, not death, although these scriptures do remind us of the pain we endure while alive, as well as the painless salvation we can anticipate. "Groaning" comes from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans 8:22-23.

22 For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

23 And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. (King James Version)

Paul's words give us hope for salvation, and by extension, part of our work toward salvation is to change our polluting ways. There is a payoff, a big one: survival, maybe even salvation. The point is worth driving home.

There are related windows onto the development of a spiritual and religious basis for environmentalism (Deane-Drummond 2008, 2016, 2017; Drees 2009; Pope Francis 2015), but Southgate is clearly an important character in this phase of the movement to form a theologically driven environmental credo. Perhaps his poetry gives us a clue to the puzzle of how this happened; that is, how poetic art joined already well-formed science and theology within a single scholar, to produce a foundational building block for new social policy. It is quite possible, given the three major human ways of rational thinking (science, religion, and art), that a nonlinear, emotion-informed, but rational way of thinking helps to educate about complex policy positions in ways that science cannot. This is a theme we have addressed before, but we did not have quite such a good example at hand (Rappaport and Corbally 2015, 2016).

It is interesting that, given Southgate's productivity around 2008–2010, environmental themes do not often appear openly in his poetry, but more frequently and cogently as a broad and heartfelt love for the natural—for animals and family, as in the poems "Adolescent Leopard" (1982) and

“I Am Always Thinking of You” (2006); for landscapes, as in the poems “Dartmoor—After Snow” (2012) and “West Highland Sonnet” (2000); for skies, as in the poem “Total Eclipse of the Sun, August 1999” (2000); and for weather, as in the poem “Montpellier” (2012).

Southgate’s poetry relies on careful and accurate observation skills (those of a scientist, after all) of people, their surroundings, and changes in natural events. After their full poetic documentation (which includes feelings about those natural things and events), there is less mystery about the author’s concern for preserving them. We see some of this, and anger, too, about environmental contaminants in the poem, “The Whole Earth Is Our Hospital” (Southgate 1991). We wonder, was this why he left bench biochemistry? It was just too contaminating? At that date, still well within the twentieth century, some of us were certain that environmental policies would soon change, but we were mistaken. Sometime in the early 2000s, one of us remembers voicing the suspicion that environmental policy shifts would not be accomplished without the aid of religious belief, and that may have been right. Whether the emergence of theologically driven environmentalism accomplishes its goals is another matter, but we hope it does. We seem to be short on time and running out of fixes.

Naturalism finds a friendly and comfortable home in Christopher Southgate’s poetry, but overt environmentalism is rarer. So, we looked for themes in his spiritual poems that might be—along with his clear knowledge of science—the source of a theology that could be used for a broader purpose. It made sense, after all, that spirituality combined with his full faith in his own Christian experience constitute, we believe, the wellspring from which his concern about Earth’s fragile environment comes.

NOTES

1. Authors are co-founders of the Human Sentience Project, Tucson, Arizona, whose mission is to conduct research and educate on human sentience and its highest expressions in science, religion, and art. <http://TheHumanSentienceProject.org>.

2. Esther “Ety” Hillesum was the author of confessional letters and diaries which describe both her religious awakening and the persecutions of Jewish people in Amsterdam during the German occupation (Wikipedia).

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