EVOCATIONS OF GRACE

The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics

Edited by

Steven Bouma-Prediger *and* Peter Bakken

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To the memory of my father, Curtis Prediger,
and of his father, Joseph Prediger

To my father, Stewart Bakken,
and in memory of my mother, Marion Bakken

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Foreword

Picture a shuffler, virtually blind, who has to "see" with his inner ey Picture him black coat clad under black beret, with white flecks dried skin and dandruff he cannot see to dust off. He does not only shu fle; he can stride and lope, but usually he looks lost, at least lost thought. If we could picture his inmost heart, we would know it to ha been heavy. For years his beautiful musician-spouse lies passively home, a victim of multiple sclerosis. He also looks lonely, unless he being followed by overhearing students who track him around theolo school campuses in Chicago's Hyde Park. You have heard that peop make some fuss over him and that he is worth fussing over. You wond why, and how that can be.

Then you hear him speak in a classroom or chapel and see him hal smile. Almost at once your curiosity about this figure is satisfied. This Joseph Sittler, theologian, rhetor, teacher, exemplar. And after heari him you know you want to follow up on him through what will becon his legacy, his writings. Disappointment follows. Sittler has written se eral important small books, but there is no large corpus — how I would have loved to play with that term in respect to his writings! — there cannot be as much plumbing of his depths as you might like.

Fortunately, Sittler was born just late enough for tape-recorders capture him, and he was surrounded by enough note-takers and tra scribers to assure that a significant number of his lectures and classroo

presentations survive. Finally, some of those influenced by him have begun writing dissertations about Sittler and his theology and, better for us, have gathered and edited writings. I am happy to say that *Evocations of Grace* is the most significant venture of this sort to date, and one can only hope for more like it.

I once read a now fugitive line by a Dutch or Belgian phenomenologist whose name eludes me. I know the English edition was bound in bright red. (Noticing that but not remembering names and publishing details is a nice Sittlerian touch.) The philosopher said something like this: "The great person is one who sees already what others do not see as yet." On those terms, Sittler was a great person.

Since the editors introduce this book and its contents quite systematically and satisfactorily, I will try to put "Joe" Sittler's endeavor and their achievement in a context.

Never heard of him? Some of us are chilled at the thought that the effect and recall of a theologian who spoke more than he wrote might before long be forgotten. He might pass into oblivion with the two generations that followed him, many of them already gone and others on the exit ramp. This book helps assure that he will continue to have effect, and to reach people for whom he will be only a literary name and not a rhetorician or a presence.

Hear of him, as you will "hear" him on these pages. Years ago I recall discussing Jewish theologians with some critics. We got to talking about Abraham Joshua Heschel. His juniors made efforts to categorize him. Conclusion: he was essentially a rhetorical theologian. Sittler is his Christian counterpart.

We can still play with categories. I didn't know until I read the introduction to this book that he had been hired at the University of Chicago to be a "biblical theologian." He was that. But not so if that meant that he had joined the company of biblical scholars who exegete texts, molecule of ink by molecule of ink. Think of him more as a "diviner" of scriptures, who worked with them the way water-witches walk over surfaces until their device is pulled magnetically, as it were, to the flowing sources. I've heard of Origen and Luther belonging to such a school of biblical theology. Sittler lived in, was engulfed by, walked in the light of, and ransacked elements of biblical worlds, but look for no precise and formal "biblical theology" here.

When he taught at Chicago we liked to speak of people in his are and discipline as "systematic" or "constructive" theologians. Sittler wa not systematic. Repeat: Sittler was not systematic. That fact probabl cost him some points against some of those who were given to scrupu losity and protectiveness about their disciplinary definition. He was nc a member of the club. Here and there one can sense that he felt a bit le out of their company, but he chose the route he took and knew there' be a price for him to pay. Fortunately for us, he paid it. This is not a slar at systematic theology so much as a bow to the notion that theology ca take numerous forms.

Constructive theologian? Yes, very much so. He could never read tex and let them lie there. He had to shape and build out of what he read, be a Gerard Manley Hopkins sonnet or the Gospels. He constructs a who theology of nature and grace on the pages you are now opening.

An ethicist? He wrote on ethics, and there are pages here where h acknowledges that he is stepping into the role of the moral theologia But here as so often he does not follow the rules, and no more turns mo alist than he is able to stand back and discuss ethical principles from distance.

The editors speak of him at one point as being a practical theologia and he was that, by emergent more than by historic definitions. True, h could also "theologize" on the basis of a psalm, a glimpse of nature, Richard Wilbur poem, loving the result the way the art-for-art's sal and poetry-for-poetry's sake people do. There is intrinsic beauty ar value in the effort and product. It is hard to picture a reader not simp enjoying Sittler enjoying creation. But one also finds Sittler saying litt about a theological truth without running it through the wringer *praxis,* or seeing anything happening in practice that did not demar and deserve some theorizing. Yes, he was a practical theologian.

Not desperately urgent about categorizing but hoping to be of he to readers, I would go back to the Heschel parallel and speak of Sittle rhetorical theology. He did speak and write to persuade. Sittler knew t *pathos,* the situation of a suffering humanity that was not simply lookii for grace but dealing with a dis-graced nature. He embodied *ethos,* t character of a credible respondent to situations in the natural world well as in the questing heart. And Sittler was ready with *logos:* conte having something to say.

We co-taught a course of restless seminarians in the 1960s, when relevance was to be the norm for all that we transacted. One day he said to the class, "We give you all the instruments for being relevant, for getting society's ear. And when you get it, you haven't the faintest idea what to say into it." "Saying" became urgent.

Once I was on a program with Sittler during an occasion when he had the audience in tears because this would be his "last" such appearance. He often said that, but would then take new commitments and show up again. Someone in response to his talks queried: if Sittler were asked to put into one sentence the first step for the reform of the church today, what would it be? "Watch your language!" he barked, and that was it. This shows up on page 89 where he quotes Alfred North Whitehead's aphorism that "style is the morality of the mind." One reads it in the marvelous sub-chapters on the rhetoric of recollection, the rhetoric of participation and reenactment, the rhetoric of cosmic extension. Of the middle of these three he writes on page 101: "This type of rhetoric proposed that in the actual life, obedience, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is concentrated both the reality of alienation and its conquest by the grace of God."

I've pointed to them in other portraits of Sittler but must revisit some lines (condensed from Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, here on page 161) that get close to Sittler's appeal as a rhetorical theologian. The mighty works of literature on which he so consistently drew "traffic not with cold, celestial certainty, but with men's hopes and fears and breakings of the heart, all that gladdens, saddens, maddens us men and women in this brief and mutable traject" of life in what Sittler calls "the creation which is our home for a while, the anchorage of our actual selves." He used to complain that much literature did well with the phenomenology of evil, but that we needed a phenomenology of grace. You will find it hinted at and pointed to on the pages that follow.

Sittler had, and has, a lot to say into society's ear. And, as this collection makes clear, when he deals with "ecology, theology, and ethics," it all gravitates to, gets focused on, and deals with both "nature" and "grace." The editors are most helpful in introducing that theme, but there is little danger that the unintroduced newcomer could forget it for a minute or a page.

What is the big deal? Sittler grew up in a "grace" tradition of Saint

Paul, Saint Augustine, and Martin Luther, the masters of grace-talk an experience. But from the same writers he lifted up for view a neglecte theme — "nature," and how grace related to it. In doing so, as early a 1954, before semi-secular savants were saying it, he was noticing th threat to nature, the unheeding practice of most citizens and believer and the urgency of the task of alerting all to "care of the earth."

Sittler was in his prime during the fading but still dominant times Protestant neo-orthodoxy, which tended to sever nature from grac unbiblically, he thought. When he made the most important speech his life at the World Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1961 he w met, as the editors point out, with cheers from some (e.g., Eastern O thodox), jeers from others (e.g., neo-Orthodox), and incomprehensic from still others. Joe saw already what they did not see as yet. His "co mic Christology" was so new to them that they did not remember that was as old as Paul's Letter to the Colossians or Irenaeus, or Augustir and Martin Luther on their good days. But they began to learn, and keep learning.

The editors like to point out that Sittler's reflections on the enviro ment date from the time when Rachel Carson and her kith and kir were only beginning to waken the world from its ecological slumb One notes happily that they do not dwell long on the "who was the first" theme, which gets boring after a paragraph or two. They move i stead and at once to the more important question: What is in it for today, if it is still ahead of us, if it still has promises of what we do n see or have not seen "as yet"? To see that get disclosed, it is time for to turn you over to capable editors, in whose debt we are, and to Jose Sittler, in whose debt they are as well.

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episode in the frantic pursuit of relevance, a desperate attempt to retrofit Christianity in self-defense against its secular critics.

As a rough generalization, the late and breathless arrival of theologians on the environmental scene cannot be denied. But it is not the whole story. Alarm at the havoc that modern industrial society has wrought on the life-supporting services of the earth predates Earth Day 1970 — and even the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. In the 1940s and 50s, a handful of theologians were arguing that environmental degradation is a profoundly spiritual matter. Among them was the American Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler (1904-1987).[3]

The Environmental Crisis as a Theological Issue

Joseph Sittler was born in 1904 in Upper Sandusky, Ohio, the son of a Lutheran pastor. As he later said, his experiences in the rural Midwestern congregations his father served disposed him, from an early age, toward theology that attends to the whole creation and "that can penetrate the ordinary problems of human existence, including the care of the earth."[4] He graduated from Wittenberg University (Springfield, Ohio)

3. For other pioneers in relating theology to environmental (or conservation) concerns, see: Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Holy Earth* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1915); V. A. Demant, "Christian Strategy," in *Malvern 1941: The Life of the Church and the Order of Society; Being the Proceedings of the Archbishop of York's Conference* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1942), pp. 121-49; W. C. Lowdermilk, "The Eleventh Commandment," *American Forests* 46 (January 1933): 12-15; and Daniel Day Williams, "The Good Earth and the Good Society," in *God's Grace and Man's Hope* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), pp. 158-77.

4. Joseph Sittler, "Closing Address: Creating a Rhetoric of Rural Values," in "Preliminary Report: A Family Farm Action Agenda," xeroxed booklet from "A Time to Choose: An Ecumenical Event on the Future of Family Farm Agriculture in Wisconsin," (8-9 March 1985) (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Conference of Churches, 1985), p. 38. For general biographical information on Sittler, see Jerald C. Brauer, "In Appreciation of Joseph Sittler," *Journal of Religion* 54 (April 1974): 97-101; Moira Creede, "Logos and Lord: A Study of the Cosmic Christology of Joseph Sittler" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Louvain, 1977); Sonia Groenewold, "Theologian Joseph Sittler, 83, Dies," *The Lutheran* (ELCA) 1, no. 2 (27 January 1988): 22-23; Joseph Sittler, *Grace Notes and Other Frag-*

in 1927 with a major in biology and English, and from Hamma Div ity School in 1930. From 1930 to 1943 he served as pastor of Mess Lutheran Church in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. While a pastor, he c tinued his education at the University of Heidelberg, at Case West Reserve, and at Oberlin Theological School. In 1943 he became prof sor of Systematic Theology at Chicago Lutheran Seminary in Maywo Illinois. While teaching at Maywood, Sittler studied at the University Chicago (although he never did complete a Ph.D.).

Preaching at the University of Chicago's Rockefeller Chapel Sunday in the early 1950s, Sittler cited Fairfield Osborne's *Our Plund Planet,* one of several postwar books raising environmental conce about the booming American postwar economy and its plethora of t technologies.[5] Sittler began with a forceful statement of the spirit relevance of such concerns:

> It is necessary for the preservation of man's body, the sanity of his mind, and the salvation of his soul that he be related to nature in a right way. The quest for this proper relationship is an ancient one, and two contemporary discussions have brought it to the attention of our day. The title of one of these books, *Our Plundered Planet,* may suggest an exaggerated sense of crisis, and the discussion may in detail be open to criticism. But the principal problem is not. That problem is this: When man relates himself to nature as one who plunders her, he ultimately destroys what he uses. When nature is regarded only as an inexhaustible warehouse of oil, ore, timber and all other materials, then she is ruthlessly plundered. This problem cannot be solved by economics, for the disposition to plunder is not an economic problem at all. It is the creation of a lust grown rapacious; and lust and rapacity are problems of the spirit of man before they ever become events of economic history.[6]

ments, ed. Robert M. Herhold and Linda Marie Delloff (Philadelphia: Fortress I 1981), pp. 125-26.

5. Fairfield Osborne, *Our Plundered Planet* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 19

6. Joseph Sittler, "God, Man and Nature," *The Pulpit* 24, no. 3 (August 1953 (published under the rather banal editorial blurb, "A timely sermon for summer'

The essays in this volume, as well as additional pieces listed in the bibliography, document Sittler's continuing preoccupation with this theme throughout his career.[7]

Sittler not only recognized resource conservation as a serious societal problem at a time when such concern tended to be dismissed as irresponsible fear-mongering,[8] but also saw it as a fundamentally *spiritual* — and thus theological — problem. Thus we have, in Sittler himself, an indication of how an earth-affirming theology has roots that go deeper than the desire to defend Christianity against the charge that it is ultimately responsible for the environmental crisis.

Nature and Grace

If Sittler had only been one of the first of many theologians to address the environmental issue, the writings in this volume might be of merely historical interest. However, Sittler had a distinctive approach to the subject. His rubric of choice for reflecting on the environmental problematic was the ancient theological dialectic of nature and grace. Immediately following the paragraph already quoted, Sittler sounded what was to be the keynote of his theology of ecology throughout his career:

7. Although the latest piece included here is from 1975, Sittler continued to reflect on these issues until his death in 1987. By the mid-1970s, Sittler's failing eyesight meant that he could no longer write out his theological musings, but had to rely on his considerable gifts of memory and extemporaneous eloquence. Thus, most of his publications from his retirement from the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1973 until his death were in fact transcriptions by others of his oral remarks. With the exception of "Nature and Grace in Romans 8" we have not included such transcriptions; while they contain much that is of interest and testify to the continuing vitality of Sittler's mind, he was not able to rework and refine them to his satisfaction in the way that he could his written compositions. For examples of these later transcribed works, see Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations,* ed. Linda Marie Delloff (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) and idem, "The Sittler Speeches," in *Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook 1977-78,* ed. Phil Schroeder (Valparaiso, Ind.: Valparaiso University, 1978), pp. 10-61.

8. See Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), pp. 193-94.

> Many of you must be reading with delight and instruction the other book that bears, although indirectly, upon our problem — Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us.* What sets this book apart from and above similar descriptions is a quality of wonder in the manner of it. The lady writes of plankton and the turning of the tides with a positive, spiritual grace. She stands beside her massive and venerable subject as a receiving child, reverent before its enduring mystery. To stand in wonder before what I did not make and whose processes and rhythms I can neither alter nor arrest may be a means of grace, a path to understanding.[9]

Sittler deliberately cast environmental ethics in terms of high charged religious doctrines central to Christian, particularly Lutheran, ety — namely, grace and christology — rather than in terms of teachir that are less central (but more commonly connected to environmental cc cerns), such as creation and stewardship. The "Commencement Addre reprinted in this volume, delivered at Maywood on May 8, 1959, is early expression of Sittler's effort to develop a dynamic, capacious theol of nature and grace. "Nature" in this essay is not merely "human natur the motions and structures of the human spirit as tending toward or av from God, but also encompasses the whole of society and the physical vironment, "artificial" as well as "natural." Likewise, the reality of grac not simply that divine acceptance whereby an individual's sins are f given, but a disturbing, even violent energy that is a living and act presence in the whole of creation. It is grace not against or above or ider cal with nature, but grace *transforming* nature.[10] The social and cosmic t bulence of grace surfaces again and is amplified in such later reflection "The Role of Spirit" and "Nature and Grace in Romans 8."

9. "God, Man and Nature," 16. All but the first two paragraphs (quoted in full and above) of this sermon were incorporated into Joseph Sittler, "A Theology for Ea *The Christian Scholar* 37 (September 1954): 367-74. (Reprinted in this volume, pp. 31.) The sermon continues with the sentence beginning, "There is a meaning in nonhuman world of nature . . ." in that essay (see p. 24 of this volume) and incl about half of the material in section II (excluding the portions referring to orthodoxy, Keats, and Goethe's *Faust*) and all of the material in sections III and I

10. See James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for prochement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 120-25.

The Cosmic Christ

Grace, for Christian theology and experience, is focused in the person of Jesus Christ, "the point, as it were, at which God becomes historically present, radiant, incandescent, available for our knowing and historical reality."[11] Thus, to examine ecological issues in the context of nature and grace raises the question of Christ and the cosmos. Sittler not only raised that question as few others in this century had (notably Teilhard de Chardin, whose works were at that time only beginning to be widely known), but he did so in the widest forum available: the World Council of Churches. Sittler thought big. It is as if so vast a problem could only be effectively and adequately addressed within the whole global Christian communion itself, and only such an all-embracing topic as humanity's relationship to the universe in the light of Christ could provide a common ground upon which the far-flung and diverse churches could pursue the unity they sought.

After joining the Federated Theological Faculty of the University of Chicago in 1957 as a professor of biblical theology, Sittler continued the active participation in ecumenical and denominational studies that he had begun at Maywood. From 1951 to 1966 he was a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, and a delegate to several Faith and Order Conferences and WCC Assemblies. Sittler's ecumenical involvement was, by his own account, the crucible for the maturation of his thought as well as a forum for its expression.[12] "Called to Unity," his address to the World Council of Churches General Assembly in New Delhi in 1961, was by far the most public and influential of his statements, and is widely regarded as a milestone in ecumenical theology.[13] In that address, Sittler appealed to the witness of the

11. Sittler, *Gravity and Grace,* p. 19.

12. Joseph Sittler, *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), pp. 7-11. (That chapter is not reprinted in this volume.)

13. For studies placing the address in the context of the ecumenical movement, see Conrad Simonson, *The Christology of the Faith and Order Movement,* Oekumenische Studien, no. 10 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), especially pp. 94-95 and 179; Moira Creede, "Logos and Lord," especially pp. 94-98; and J. A. Lyons, *The Cosmic Christ in Origen and Teilhard de Chardin: A Comparative Study,* Oxford Theological Monographs (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 59-68. For a contemporary perspective, see "The Ecumenical Century," *Time* magazine, 8 Dec. 1961, pp. 76-80.

New Testament — especially in the letter to the Colossians — t cosmic Christ" to ground his claim that the sphere of grace and rec tion can be no smaller than the sphere of creation itself. Only a chr ogy of such dimensions can adequately address the depth and magn of contemporary humans' capacities to know, to manipulate — a destroy — the creation. In contrast to some "green theologies" cu today, Sittler argued not for a shift from "redemption-centered" t ogy to "creation-centered" theology, but for an expansion of the c *ference* of redemption to embrace the whole of creation.

The address resonated with the theological orientations and cor of some in his audience: Eastern Orthodox, whose cosmic christ and spirituality were powerful influences on Sittler's own thinking glicans whose theology placed special stress on the incarnation members of Free Churches who appreciated its ethical implica Some hearers were excited by the new theological directions open by the address, while others were unsure of what Sittler was sayir were put off by his somewhat idiosyncratic terminology. Existen theologians were particularly critical of Sittler's cosmological foc too remote from human experience and a temptation to irrespor speculation and mysticism, just as some Lutherans were suspicious lack of traditional language of sin and justification and the novelty expansive understanding of grace.[14] As Paul Santmire has said, "T sponse to Sittler's address at New Delhi was mainly one of polite ference, along with some shocked resistance on the part of repres tives from the then reigning theological guilds in Europe."[15]

Undeterred, Sittler continued to argue for rethinking the rela ship between nature and grace in a contemporary context. It was a another decade before that relationship — in the form of the rela ship between Christian faith and the environmental crisis — entere consciousness of a significant number of theologians.

14. Simonson, *The Christology of the Faith and Order Movement,* p. 179.

15. H. Paul Santmire, "Toward a Christology of Nature: Claiming the Legacy seph Sittler and Karl Barth," *Dialog* 34 (fall 1995): 270.

The Care of the Earth

Sittler's interpretation of nature and grace, defined by the belief that the whole of creation is capable of bearing the grace of God's presence, had a definite ethical import. Humans should deal with creation with reverence and respect, for abuse and manipulation of the earth are, in a profound sense, dis-graceful. This is the heart of Sittler's theology of "the care of the earth." Sittler was already reflecting on these issues while at Maywood (as early as 1953, as we have seen) but they came into full flower during his tenure at Chicago, when ecological issues came to the forefront of public consciousness — and even began to penetrate the inner sanctums of academic theology and the churches.

The year before his New Delhi address, Sittler preached on "The Care of the Earth" at Eisenhower Chapel, Pennsylvania State University.[16] As with the 1953 sermon on "God, Man and Nature," the scripture for the sermon was ostensibly Psalm 104, Sittler's beloved "ecological doxology." But the real text was Richard Wilbur's poem, "Advice to a Prophet" (published in *The New Yorker* in early April, 1959). Sittler returned to that poem again and again to illuminate the deep interior filaments binding the human spirit to the natural, "nonhuman" world. Here, he used it as a springboard for articulating an environmental ethic based on his theology of nature and grace. The proper use of creation depends on its proper enjoyment: "Abuse is use without grace; it is always a failure in the counterpoint of use and enjoyment."[17] The same "ethic of appreciation" appears, with some changes in terminology, in later writings such as "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility" and the final chapter of *Essays on Nature and Grace.*[18] In the latter, Sittler speaks of a "gracious regard" for the natural world which corresponds to the reality of that world as the "theater of God's grace." Such gracious

16. Joseph Sittler, "The Care of the Earth," in *The Care of the Earth and Other University Sermons* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), pp. 88-98. First published in: *Sermons to Intellectuals from Three Continents,* ed. Franklin Littell (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), pp. 18-28. (Reprinted in this volume, 51-58.)

17. Sittler, "The Care of the Earth," p. 97 (p. 57 in this volume).

18. Joseph Sittler, "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," *Zygon* 5 (June 1970): 175 (pp. 76-86 in this volume); *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), pp. 121-22 (pp. 87-190 in this volume).

regard which respects the God-given integrity of creation, Sittler gued, is essential for the survival and flourishing of human beings well as that of the natural world.

Much environmental advocacy, secular as well as religious, tends ward apocalypticism and moralism. But though he could speak pow fully of the torment of creation under human rapaciousness and dis gard, Sittler grounded environmental responsibility in joy, appreciati and celebration rather than in guilt, fear, and obligation.

Moreover, Sittler made an integral connection between the gos and the capacity for such appreciation. For the Christian, it is Je Christ — as the "incandescent" focal point of God's self-giving — t discloses the fundamentally gracious character of all reality. But Christ we are not only enabled to see the grace that inheres in the wo as God's creation: God's action in Christ can give us the capacity to spond appropriately to creation-as-grace. The Gospel's declaration God's acceptance of human beings in Christ liberates us from the a ious and egocentric grasping that strives to possess the world and pl der it. In a sermon on Paul's letter to the Philippians, published w "Care of the Earth" in a collection of his sermons in 1964, Sittler said,

> The Gospel of Jesus Christ proposes something shockingly new, and promises to deliver it to the man who accepts God's acceptance of him and understands himself and the world in the light of that center. This new bestowal to heart and understanding can be indicated in several propositions. . . .
>
> . . . When the world is received as a gift, a grace, an ever astounding wonder, it can be rightly enjoyed and justly used.
>
> . . . The peace of God as rest in God's acceptance of man is not a knowledge that the world can deliver, is not in fact concerned with the world at all. But this same peace ("not as the world giveth . . .") matures to turn upon the world with a deep constructive joy, knows that the peaceless world is precisely the place for the working out of God's will for truth, justice, purity, beauty.[19]

19. Joseph Sittler, "Peace as Rest and as Movement," in *The Care of the Earth Other University Sermons,* pp. 38-39.

A few years earlier (1958), Sittler had published *The Structure of Christian Ethics,* which described Christian ethics as "the engendered response" to "the engendering deed" of God's action in Christ.[20] He did not there discuss environmental or conservation issues, but the themes of Christocentrism, the ecological structure of human life in society and nature, ethics as creative responsiveness, and Christian responsibility in and for the world God has created strongly resonate with both the New Delhi address and the Pennsylvania sermon.

The Ecology of Justice

Sittler continued to pursue and elaborate the themes of nature and grace and Christ and the cosmos through the later 1960s and early 1970s. During that period, "ecology" burst upon the popular consciousness and also found its way, alongside issues of war, race, and poverty, onto the agenda of Christian social concern. And it began — in part as a result of Lynn White Jr.'s essay — to be taken seriously as a subject for theological reflection in its own right. Sittler became less of a lone maverick and was increasingly acknowledged as a prophet and pioneer in articulating a theological basis for the growing Christian concern for the environment.

Modern thought — including and perhaps especially twentieth-century theology — has tended to posit dualisms of nature and history and nature and culture. The vision of the whole of creation as the theater of God's grace, however, allows no such polarization. "Nature" as Sittler used it encompassed not only the biological and physical world, but also the "artificial" world of art, architecture, technology, and social structures. Culture as well as "nature" is an integral part of creation, and therefore the products of human creativity are also capable of manifesting God's grace — but Sittler did not thereby reduce nonhuman nature to a mere prologue to or raw material for culture. "Ecology" was Sittler's metaphor for the complex webbed interconnectedness binding together church and world, self and society, spirit and nature, theology and cul-

20. Joseph Sittler, *The Structure of Christian Ethics* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1958; reprint, Library of Theological Ethics, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998).

ture as the context within which Christian faith must find ever renev expression.[21] He saw the natural environment as itself an integral fa in the shaping of culture, as his adaptation of Frederick Jackson Turn "frontier hypothesis" — that the existence of an expanding fron placed a peculiar stamp upon American culture — in "The Role of Sp in Shaping the Future Environment" and other essays[22] shows. E where, he used the images of nature as the life-giving womb or plac of human selfhood,[23] and he repeatedly pointed out how poets and w ers seem to need to draw images from nature in order to express depths of the human heart.[24]

Nor does the cosmically inclusive scope of grace permit an ultin opposition between the environmental movement and movements justice and equality. For Sittler, the struggles for ecological integ and for racial and economic justice were manifestations of the same namic: The quest is for a gracious response to the grace encountere God's creation, human and nonhuman. "What pollution is to nat ecology, injustice is to social ecology,"[25] namely, ". . . all abuse is a

21. In spite of the title — and its occasional appearance on "theology and ecol bibliographies — Sittler's *The Ecology of Faith* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1 does not deal in any direct way with environmental issues. "Ecology" is used in the aphorical sense just described, with specific attention to the situation of preachi contemporary culture.

22. Joseph Sittler, "Eschatology and the American Mind" in *Charisteria Io Kopp: Octogenario Oblata,* ed. J. Aunver and A. Vööbus (Stockholm: Estonian Theolc Society in Exile, 1954); this essay, with portions of "The Role of Spirit," was par incorporated into "An Aspect of American Religious Experience," *Proceedings Twenty-Sixth Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 26 (1 June 1971), which in turn was reprinted in slightly shortened form as "Space and in American Religious Experience," *Interpretation* 30 (January 1976): 44-51.

23. For "womb," see Joseph Sittler, "Two Temptations — Two Corrections," *tional Parks and Conservation Magazine: The Environmental Journal* 45 (December 1 21; for "placenta," see Joseph Sittler, "The Scope of Christological Reflection," *In tation* 26 (July 1972): 333 (below, p. 196), and *Essays,* p. 108 (below, p. 175).

24. See, e.g., *Gravity and Grace,* p. 18, and *Essays,* pp. 107-8 (below, pp. 175-7

25. [Joseph Sittler], "The New Creation," Chap. 6 in *The Human Crisis in E* ed. Franklin L. Jensen and Cedric W. Tilberg ([Philadelphia]: Board of Social Mi Lutheran Church in America, 1972, p. 96. (In the Foreword, p. ix, Sittler is cr with "primary responsibility" for this chapter, and it is definitely written in his di tive style.)

tortion of right use, for persons as for all things. What is not regarded as a grace will be disgraced into use without care."[26] The theme recurs in "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," where Sittler rejects white paternalism in favor of the celebration of the grace-fulness of human ethnic diversity as a response to what he (unfortunately) terms "the black problem."[27] Sittler worked on the Lutheran Church in America's social statements on Racism (adopted 1964) as well as the one on "The Human Crisis in Ecology" (adopted 1972).[28] In the same way that he named human degradation of the nonhuman creation "blasphemy" in "Ecological Commitment"[29] and elsewhere, the proposed draft of the racism statement he helped draft declared that to pray for an end to hatred and prejudice while practicing racial discrimination was to commit an act of "devout blasphemy."[30]

A Rhetoric of Grace

Sittler's efforts to elaborate and defend his understanding of grace culminated in *Essays on Nature and Grace,* published in 1972. There he reviewed the career of the relationship between creation and grace from the Old Testament, through the New Testament, the Patristic period, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and into the present. He argued for the necessity and possibility of relocating grace within a secularized, managed contemporary existence from which a sense for the world as graced seems to be excluded. Insights from scripture, tradition, and contemporary art and literature were brought to bear on the environmental crisis. One can see in *Essays* and other of his later writings (such as "The

26. Sittler, *Essays,* p. 133 n. 5 (below, p. 185, n. 77).

27. Sittler, "Ecological Commitment," pp. 180-81 (below, pp. 85-86).

28. Christa R. Klein with Christian D. von Dehsen, *Politics and Policy: The Genesis and Theology of Social Statements in the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 46-53, 124-27.

29. Sittler, "Ecological Commitment," p. 179 (p. 84 in this volume).

30. Klein and von Dehsen, *Politics and Policy,* p. 48. Both formulations have been regarded by some as fudging the distinction between faith and ethics, law and Gospel — bifurcations for which Sittler had as little patience as he did for that of nature versus history. See ibid., pp. 48-50.

Scope of Christological Reflection") not only an elaboration of this the and the bolstering of his case with citations from Irenaeus, Athanasiu Augustine, and Eastern Orthodoxy, but efforts to respond to those wl believed that he was going beyond what a sober study of the text cou warrant or straying too far from traditional understandings.

He was also compelled to defend his style of writing and his use literature. Inseparable from the content of his theology was his use language — his own characteristic style, and his use of quotes from p etry and literature. He insisted that his loose, unsystematic manner exposition was appropriate to the dynamic and interrelated character experience, and to the concrete particularity of occasions of grace.[31]

Literary quotations were not just embellishments to his writing, b were integral to his own unique form of argumentation. Throughout h career, and on whatever topic, Sittler's theological explorations were i formed by the human self- and world-knowledge expressed in secul culture as well as by scripture and tradition. In addition to literatu music (jazz as well as Bach) and contemporary architecture were of pa ticular interest. Sittler drew upon these resources for the understandi of contemporary culture that theology and preaching need in order meaningfully address men and women. The importance for Sittler of li erature, as both a theological resource and a stylistic influence, was enc mous.

Secular art and literature (especially poetry), was the "unaccredit witness" to the human longing for, and occasional experience of, Go grace. Sittler's use of secular art as a theological resource was itself tes mony to his belief in the universal scope of grace. He sought to combi openness to the radically novel situation of modern thought and expe ence disclosed in these sources with a faithful obedience to the Bible a the traditions of the church, showing how each can enrich, deepen, a illuminate the other in a kind of "counterpoint." He was particularly tentive to the way in which each of these resources can inform us abo human relationships to the natural world. He approached the enviro mental problematic by examining how human interiority is affected our interactions with the world of nature — our "sense for the world" and how that sense has been broadly and profoundly affected by scien

31. Sittler, *Essays,* pp. 2-5 (pp. 88-91 in this volume).

technology, and other forms of cultural change. Poetry articulated exactly his conviction that grace comes to us in the particular, concrete occasions of our ordinary lives. It is not surprising that the writers he credited with making him an "ecological theologian" were poets and nature writers: Richard Wilbur, Loren Eiseley, Rachel Carson, and Aldo Leopold.[32]

Like the poetry he quoted, his own writing employed vivid, earthy, almost palpable words and memorable turns of phrase. Few other theologians are such a pleasure to read for the way in which they express their insights. On the other hand, many have found Sittler's unsystematic mode of exposition frustrating, or at least challenging. It is often difficult to pin down one of his statements to a clear, determinate meaning. Yet therein lies much of their charm, and continuing value. Like the calculated ambiguity of a great work of art, Sittler's texts continually invite repeated reading, deeper reflection, further exploration. Sittler did not clearly articulate or rigorously argue for a particular theology of grace or cosmic christology, but he did powerfully communicate a sense of how the world would look if you had such a theology; he conveyed the feeling-tone of a truly incarnational Christianity. He evoked more than explained, suggested more than stated, pointed more than presented. His language operates at the level of the *perception* of value — or grace — in nature, not (as in much contemporary environmental philosophy) at the level of elaborating a non-anthropocentric conception or theory of value.[33]

Grace in Action

An ethic is worthless unless it gives rise to effective, concrete action. Sittler accordingly emphasized (in, for example, "Evangelism and the Care of the Earth") that the churches' witness to God's grace in creation must be in deeds as well as words. In the final chapter of *Essays on Nature and Grace,* he even proposed that the vision of the natural world as the

32. Sittler, "Creating a Rhetoric of Rural Values," p. 43.

33. On this distinction, see Erezim Kohák, "Perceiving the Good" in *The Wilderness Condition,* ed. Max Oelschlaeger (Washington. D.C.: Island Press, 1992), pp. 173-87.

creature and theater of grace can be pragmatically verified by the life sustaining consequences of *acting* on that belief.[34]

What does Sittler suggest for how to practically address the ecological problematic? As *The Structure of Christian Ethics* makes clear, his response-oriented ethic is not amenable to codification in terms of principles or rules. The appropriate response to grace is as free and unpredictable as are the occasions of grace itself. Nonetheless, Sittler's theology directs our ethical attention in some specific directions.

The first direction follows directly from the immediately preceding section: attending to rhetoric. Sittler once commented that, while Christian theology has elaborated an elaborate rhetoric of sin, we have no correspondingly well-developed rhetoric of grace.[35] Devising such rhetoric, which can foster the sort of "beholding" of creation that can call forth and direct appropriate responses, may be a necessary part of any effective effort to increase public motivation to care for creation. At a conference on rural values and the family farm crisis in the 1980s Sittler suggested that

> You've got to help yourself find a way to verbalize what you mean by value, by loss, by re-cog-nition — that is, to bring, to articulate, statements about the unrecognized memories. . . .
>
> . . . The farther our children get from existential experience of the land, the more necessary this kind of rhetoric of grace about the world has got to be used in our preaching and teaching and in our listening.[36]

A second directive is to pay attention to the concrete particulars, including — and perhaps especially — the "little" things. Sittler's own environmental praxis (from what little I know of it) seems to have embodied the notion that grace is in the details: that the ordinary and even the seemingly trivial material elements of our daily life have a dimension of transcendent significance. For example, when I was parish secretary at Augustana Lutheran Church in Chicago (where Sittler had serve

34. Sittler, *Essays,* pp. 120-22 (pp. 188-90 in this volume).

35. Sittler, "The Sittler Speeches," p. 44.

36. Sittler, "Creating a Rhetoric of Rural Values," p. 43.

as interim pastor after his retirement from the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1973, and which he continued to attend afterwards), Sittler would come by at Christmastime with a bottle of *good* wine for Holy Communion on Christmas Day. He did not have to explain his rationale; Christianity (as Archbishop Temple said) is a "materialistic" religion; the feast commemorating the Word become flesh is fitly celebrated with a symbol that sensorily communicates the goodness of the material creation.

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, where Sittler remained as Distinguished Theologian in Residence until his death in 1987, is housed in a boxy structure of glass and black metal. "Bauhaus laid *this* egg," Sittler once remarked to me.[37] So Sittler did his best to humanize and naturalize it: at his insistence, a slight curve was added to the concrete bases of the pillars that support the building. He also lobbied to have the building's lawn punctuated by small flower garden plots. When my wife came to Chicago to attend seminary in the early 1980s, she came across Sittler planting crocuses in the L.S.T.C. lawn. By that point, he was too blind ever to be able to see them, but he knew that the flowers — like the architectural curves — would add a "grace note" to the grounds in the spring.

The environmental crisis will not be solved, and hardly ameliorated, by flower plantings, architectural details, or good wine at Christmas. Yet it cannot be adequately met without the sensibility that recognizes the value of the seemingly unimportant. "Grace note" was one of Sittler's favorite terms (it was the name of his column in the Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary *Record* in the 1940s and 1950s, and of the parish newsletter begun during his pastorate at Augustana in the 1970s). According to Philip Hefner, a student of Sittler's, the term refers to one of the notes in a musical composition which are not part of the main melody, but which subtly signal the direction in which it is headed.[38] Grace, Sittler is telling us, often manifests itself to us in the same way: in the seemingly dispensable details and nuances that are

37. Sittler was far from condemning the Bauhaus style or modern architecture as such; it was a matter of the appropriate use of form and materials. See *Gravity and Grace*, pp. 90-93.

38. Philip Hefner, personal communication.

commonly regarded as separate from the "real business" of making a living, being productive, getting ahead. It could be argued that the environmental crisis is at least partly rooted precisely in our tendency to ignore such grace notes — to see environmental values and nonhuman creatures as at best incidental to the "real business" of human salvation or economic progress, rather than as vital clues to the meaning of God's purposes for the whole creation, and of our place within it.

Further, Sittler urges us to remember that creation is a dynamic and interrelated whole. We cannot hope to restore a lost "golden age" of harmonious human-nature relationships, nor can we put the brakes on all social or technological change. But neither are we to blindly swallow every promise made by those who speak for "development" or "progress" at the price of destroying what we know to be good and valuable. We cannot pursue ecological integrity apart from social justice, but neither can we treat nature as merely a human possession and raw material for projects of human progress or liberation. Our environmental ethic must enable us both to preserve the integrity and diversity of the earth and its creatures, and to use them gently and respectfully; and we must cultivate the sensitivity and discernment to the concrete particulars of specific situations so that we enact forms of preservation or use that are appropriate to a given case. We cannot set nature against humanity, or the cultural against the natural, but we must appreciate and enjoy the unique graces that belong to each. In the face of unprecedented situations we need to develop creative responses that are faithful both to our inheritance from the past and to the promise of the future; we need to find new modes of symbiosis between human beings and the rest of nature that are true to the divine intentions for the unity of creation.

Sittler's directives for environmental action are more matters of motivation, attention, and framing rather than formulation of rules or goals. Sittler urges us to respond out of wonder, joy, delight, and amazement rather than out of fear or a sense of obligation; to view the world, at least in part, through the lenses of poetry and art as well as science and experience; to pay attention to nuances of the biblical and everyday language that speaks the world to us, and to the concrete particulars that make up the rich and subtle texture of creation. Sittler's writings also suggest that we try "reframing" environmental issues not, or not only, in terms of values, interests, or rights, but in terms of *grace*. How might

our ecological perceptions be changed by viewing the concrete instances of the fecundity, integrity, beauty, diversity, and dynamism of creation — including human beings and their culture — as manifestations of grace, as gifts pointing beyond themselves to their source in the ultimate and all-encompassing reality of the free, faithful, and self-giving love of God? What creative responses might be made possible by viewing particular environmental problems as occasions for new embodiments of grace in nature? What potentialities for life-enhancing symbiosis might appear if we truly believed that God, humanity, and nature are, in Sittler's words, "meant for each other"?[39]

Why Read Sittler Now?

Sittler remained on the faculty of the Divinity School until his retirement in 1973. In spite of his failing eyesight, he continued to reflect theologically in public speaking and private conversation until the year of his death. Most of his publications during this period were in fact transcripts of interviews or talks he gave without benefit of notes. He was Distinguished Professor in Residence at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago from 1980 until his death from cancer in December of 1987, at age 83.[40] Characteristically, he made the experience of aging and approaching death a subject for his latest meditations — but he also addressed the global threat of nuclear war.[41]

Sittler's loose and allusive style sometimes makes it difficult to determine exactly what he thought or meant by a particular word, phrase, or sentence. Nonetheless, his writings provide paths to follow, directions to explore, a sensibility to strive to emulate. They drive us back to the *experience* of nature as creation, nature as graced, especially as attested by poetry, art, and literature; and to the rich resonances of the language and imagery of the Bible and the Christian tradition. His writings are a good

39. Sittler, "A Theology for Earth," p. 373 (p. 30 in this volume).

40. Kenan Heise, "Rev. Joseph Sittler, Theology Prof," *Chicago Tribune,* 30 December 1987, sec. 2, p. 11; "Rev. Joseph Sittler, 83, Theologian and Author," *Chicago Sun-Times,* 30 December 1987, p. 56.

41. Joseph Sittler, "Moral Discourse in a Nuclear Age;" idem, "Aging: A Summing Up and a Letting Go," in *Gravity and Grace,* pp. 108-18; 119-27.

antidote to the repetitiveness, dullness, and stridency of much Christian ecotheological writing. During his life, Sittler was "mentor to many" as their pastor, teacher, and colleague. Through his writings, he has been and can continue to be a mentor to many more.

This volume is offered in the hope that the encounter with these essays will be productive of fresh insights as we join Sittler in probing the resources of the Christian tradition, brooding over the troubles and turmoil of society and nature, and beholding, in delighted amazement, the shining forth of God's grace in the variegated creation.

Editorial Note

The essays reprinted here originally appeared with varying degrees of footnoting and documentation. To aid the reader and give the essays a more consistent style in this regard, we have tried to provide additional footnotes and more complete citation information where possible. Where we do not know the exact source used by Sittler for a reference or quotation, we have sometimes given a standard edition or used an edition cited by him elsewhere. We have also occasionally corrected typographical errors appearing in the original publications and, very rarely, made slight changes where we strongly suspect that Sittler's intended words were altered in publication. We have refrained from making other changes, such as making the language more gender-inclusive or correcting the somewhat garbled astrophysics on p. 216.

Original publication data for these essays can be found in the bibliography at the end of this book. Essays reprinted here are marked in the bibliography with an asterisk.