

## Book Review

# The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology

Febrianto 

Boston College, Massachusetts, USA  
febriant@bc.edu

Douglas Christie is among many scholars who attempt to make the “ecological turn” to the recent growing interest in ecology. While acknowledging contemporary conversations across various disciplines, Christie approaches this issue differently through a contemplative lens. More specifically, as indicated in the title of the book, Christie draws from the well of early Christian monasticism—something which he is already worked through in his book, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness In Early Christian Monasticism* (1993). In this book, Christie aims to reimagine the nexus of the self and the natural world through a retrieval of the spiritual sense of wholeness amidst a fragmented world (4). Christie’s method and style in writing this book are worth noting. He was inspired by David Tracy’s “critical correlation” method, that is, a “meaningful religious reflection ... [that] involves an effort to correlate classic spiritual texts and common human experience” (16). He does this by arranging his book chapters based on classic themes that include tears (*penthos*), place (*topos*), attention (*prosoche*), word (*logos*), desire (*eros*), self-emptying (*kenosis*), and paradise (*telos*) in the early monastic tradition and reinterprets them in conversation with various sources such as his personal testimonies, classic poet and writings, and even Charles Darwin.

Christie starts his book with two introductory chapters. In chapter 1, he proposes his idea of “contemplative ecology” as a framework to see how our deepest longing and desire leads to awareness of our own self as a part of a larger whole. Christie defines contemplative ecology as “an expression of the diverse and wide-ranging desire emerging within the contemporary culture to identify our deepest feelings for the natural world as part of a spiritual longing” (3). Rather than a pure detachment from the material world, contemplation is a practice of awareness and sensibilities of our interconnectedness with the “ground” where we are standing. Here, Christie expands upon Meister Eckhart’s conception of the “ground of being” to explain the union of the soul with God and the natural world (26). Every ecological reality we live in should thus be seen as a sacred place. Christie elaborates this line of thought further in chapter 2 by showing how this idea is present in the early monastic tradition. Figures such as Evagrius of Pontus and Antony of Egypt were drawn

### Book Title

The Blue Sapphire of the Mind:  
Notes for a Contemplative  
Ecology

### Front Cover



### Author

Douglas E. Christie

### ISBN

978-0199812325

### Publisher

Oxford: Oxford University  
Press, 2012. 488 pages.

Hardback. USD 45.95\*

\*Book price at the time of  
review

© 2022 by author.

Licensee *Veritas: Jurnal Teologi  
dan Pelayanan*, under the term  
of the Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial-  
ShareAlike 4.0 International



Scan this QR  
code with  
your mobile  
devices to  
read online

to geographical images and places like mountains in their contemplation. These places are significant because it symbolizes a bigger picture in which we find ourselves as a part of a larger whole (43). Recovering the sense of wholeness is an urgent task for the presently torn and fragmented world.

Based on this framework, Christie starts to explore several well-chosen themes in the following chapters to make some pathways for constructing this contemplative ecology. In the third chapter (“Penthos: The Gift of Tears”), Christie stresses the importance of opening one’s self to the suffering of the world through the practice of grieving and mourning (70). Tears can be seen as a gift that breaks down the barriers between us and others, cultivating awareness and sensibility to be in solidarity with the suffering world. This idea is then discussed further in chapter 7 (“Eros: Exchange, Intimacy, Reciprocity”) and 8 (“Kenosis: Empty, Emptied”). Eros represents the human desire that is always longing for a deeper intimacy towards others, including the non-human being. It emphasizes the reciprocity that allows us to have a connection or exchange with others (229). Ultimately, this openness to love and be loved by others is grounded in God’s radical act of self-emptying or *kenosis* through Jesus Christ. This radical openness invites us “to become so small, to enter so deeply in the fragile places of existence ... we are called not to flee from it but to embrace it and learn to dwell within it” (274).

This anthropology of the porous self that is open and receptive to the suffering world becomes the basis for Christie in chapters 4–6 as he offers place-making, attention, and listening as ecological contemplative practices. Place-making in chapter 4 (“Topos: At Home, Always a Stranger”) refers to a pattern of living in the tension of dwelling in the world but at the same time being displaced or stranded as an exile. Like the ancient Christian monks, the goal of detachment is to take a step back and become more aware of how the places we inhabit are actually forming and being formed by us (115). This goal can also be achieved by practicing attention (see chap. 5, “Prosoche: The Art of Attention.”) Being atten-

tive helps us not only to develop a deeper capacity to understand the world but also to appreciate the beauty of wonder of the world as a whole. Christie interestingly puts Charles Darwin’s observation of the natural world in the spotlight as a form of ecological practice of attention (170). Place-making and attention cannot be done without the practice of listening discussed in chapter 6 (“Logos: The Song of the World”). There Christie moves to a more distinctively Christian understanding of how the world was created through the utterance of God’s word. This implies that rather than being a passive object, the world always has the capacity to express itself through speech. As a result, practicing our capacity to sit in silence and hear the word of the world is an important task (181).

Finally, the last chapter (“Topos: Practicing Paradise”) revisits the important concept of paradise in Christian ecotheology. By drawing especially from Thomas Merton, Christie tries to see this issue differently and argues that paradise is not really the problem between the present and future but the problem of consciousness. He describes that we are, in fact, “already” in paradise in the sense that we have never been separated from Christ, but we are “not yet” there because we are living in an illusion that we are separated from God (319). Such a paradigm shift brings the conversation to an ethical impulse, that is, to practice paradise by learning “to see and cherish the world, even in its degraded condition, as a whole” (323).

Christie’s book manages to put a higher standard for the agenda of retrieving the Christian contemplative tradition for today’s world. I highly commend him, especially for his dense yet extensive coverage of this book. There are two main strengths that are worth highlighting. First, Christie successfully stretches and expands the contemplative tradition to speak about a complex issue such as ecology through well-chosen themes. Also, I think he wisely tries not to fall into the ongoing debate surrounding ecological issues by stating his proposal as an “approach” rather than a clear methodology. That way, he is free to navigate himself to recover the contem-

plative sources and motives that can spark ecological praxis. The second positive feature of this book is its creative and stylistic approach that tries to draw from various unexpected sources. Christie is able to put naturalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold, poets such as Czeslaw Milosz, contemplative writers such as Thomas Merton, and even the White-Crowned Sparrow in a round-table discussion. While also utilizing theopoetics, he deliberately shows that he is not trying to provide readers with easy answers. Instead, by putting more questions than answers, he is trying to invite readers in a pilgrimage to struggle with the world. This engagement allows him to make his book accessible to readers outside of the Christian tradition, such as scientists or spiritual seekers.

Although I appreciate Christie's effort to push the boundaries of contemplative studies, I still wonder to what extent the Christian contempla-

tive tradition could be stretched to talk about contemporary issues. It is unclear to me how far a text can answer a question not present in that period. Another question for Christie seems to be this: how can we use a text that is produced in an anthropocentric and androcentric background to talk about an issue that is trying to resist those impulses? This is because I believe that the retrieval project has its limit. Appreciation and appropriation of these monastic traditions also need to be balanced by trying to see them from a critical lens (i.e., critical theory, postcolonial theory, etc.). Otherwise, a retrieval will only result in a superficial makeover that maintains the status quo. Nevertheless, I think this book still has much to offer in terms of inviting us to embrace the world as it is and to chart a path for ecological liberation. Perhaps, amidst the harsh reality of the world today, we should dare to join Evagrius of Pontus to dream again of "the color of heaven and the place of God."