

A “Green” Kataphatic Theology: The Eco-spirit of Springbank Retreat Center in Kingstree, South Carolina

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Abstract

This paper explores the emerging “green” theology of Springbank Retreat Center, located in Kingstree, S.C. (www.springbankretreat.org). Springbank labels itself as a “Center for EcoSpirituality and the Arts,” and is a 5,000 acre Christian Center-Dominican Retreat House staffed by Dominican Sisters, whose mission is “to live simply, to create beauty, to respect Earth and all beings and to share the learned wisdom as co-creators with the Divine for a sustainable future. We are called to be a courageous and prophetic voice in today’s world, contributing to the transformation of human consciousness.” Springbank attempts to put this mission into practice by hosting ecumenical ecospiritual workshops and conferences, and by greening its campus. I use participant observation and discourse analysis to analyze Springbank’s history and contemporary practice, where this history and practice is situated into the larger greening of religion hypothesis and the current “ecological reformation.” Because Springbank is part of the Catholic tradition, I utilize Belden Lane’s hermeneutics of a kataphatic theology to also help make sense of Springbank’s mission statement, institutional structure, and workshops

Keywords: Springbank; kataphatic theology; ecological reformation; feminist spirituality; Native American spirituality; climate change.

INTRODUCTION

Current research in the religion and nature/ecology subfield is generating more focus on researching how, if at all, the interpretation of religious teachings and doctrines may trigger a change in biophysical practice. Is there a correlation, if not outright causation, between how a group, or even an individual, interprets their respective religious value system, where this interpretation leads to more “green” and sustainable lifeways? Answers to this question are being generated by using research methods found in both the social sciences as well as the humanities, and while historically the data suggests that the causation is ambivalent (Taylor, 2011), at least with commonly recognized world religions, recent research suggests that the connection is becoming stronger, slowly gaining strength over the last fifteen years. Therefore, how religious practitioners are bridging the gap between an emergent ecotheological interpretive understanding of their traditions and putting sustainable or earth-centered goals and ideals into practice, is a needed area of study. Such study will help the field better understand how religious communities are, if at all, currently bridging the very real gap between earth-centered values and embodied lifestyle practice.ⁱ This paper offers a case-study approach that can help scholars of religion and nature/ecology better understand this gap by focusing on the Dominican-Sisters run Springbank Ecospirituality Retreat Center located in Kingstree, South Carolina. In this paper, I explore how the female earth-centered Catholic spirituality, informed by Native American wisdom, of Springbank, and workshops they host based on this syncretic earth-centered spirituality, is helping to create a strategically subaltern “green” voice within North American women religious networks of faith and practice.

RELIGION, POLITICS, AND PLACE IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOUTH

Religion in the contemporary South (popularly accepted to range from Texas to Georgia, up to southern Virginia, and over again to southern Kentucky) is heavily influenced by a few key varieties of Christianity, including especially Baptist, Methodist, increasingly Mormon, and increasingly Catholic varieties, with the latter's growth due to increased Latino populations. While certain metropolitan areas in the South are slowly diversifying, in terms of ethnicity (moving beyond more traditional African American/Caucasian demographics) and religious affiliation, overall the region as a whole is still firmly entrenched in evangelical strains of Baptist and Methodist churches. Many Caucasian churches swim in the lineage of the Lost Cause (Wilson, 1980), while African American churches swim in an African antecedent (Gomez, 1998; Raboteau, 1978).

In terms of political views, religion in the South tends to be conservative, supporting Republican, and increasingly, Tea Party/Libertarian candidates and platforms.ⁱⁱ This holds especially true for rural communities, compared to metropolitan areas where citizens tend to split evenly amongst Democrats and Republicans, to slightly favoring Democratic candidates. This does not necessarily translate into metropolitan areas being as "liberal" as counterparts in the Northeast or along the West Coast, so that there is still an underlying flavor of Southern evangelical conservatism even in metropolitan areas. Overall, religion and politics interact strongly in the contemporary South, especially for those who are politically conservative, with fundamentalism in Christianity and in politics often times joining to form a very easy partnership that is questing for purity of souls and governmental policies both (Antoun, 2001). This questing is built upon a cultural fracture over values on the right, and behaviors on the left, dating back to the post-Civil War years. The attendant marriage over values in conservative political and religious realms

gained steam in the 1950s and 60s, culminating in the rise of the contemporary Moral Majority and then Religious Right of the Republican party in the 1970s, through the move towards Dominionism in some parts of Christian Republicans today (Wuthnow, 1989; Schäfer, 2011).ⁱⁱⁱ

Of key import is that the interaction between religion and politics in the South, especially since the Reagan presidency, is largely inimical to championing and passing pro-environmental legislation. This tendency is evident today in both Republican and conservative evangelical views about climate change, where statistically most Southern Christian Republicans either deny that climate change is anthropogenic, or if they accept that it is anthropogenic, most are not willing to take seriously the enormity of what climate change means for changing human lifeways (LeVasseur, 2012; Leiserowitz and Smith, 2013; Leduc, 2007).^{iv} Furthermore, conservative views of and interactions with the natural world in the South, whether religious or political, typically are utilitarian in nature, where nature is used for resources (tree plantations, coal extraction, agriculture, tourism) or recreation (hunting and fishing). The dominant American strand of preserving and even revering the natural world, especially from biocentric points of view, and then voting to protect the environment based on these views, is largely absent in the South. It is within this quasi-hegemonic rural, conservative, Republican evangelicalism that is, at best, cautious when it comes to having sympathetic environmental views, that Springbank is located.

LOCATING SPRINGBANK

Springbank labels itself as a “Center for EcoSpirituality and the Arts,” and is on what was once a 5,000 acre land grant given by the King of England to John Burgess in the 1780s. Today the campus covers 80 acres and contains an ecumenical, Catholic Dominican Retreat House staffed

by Dominican Sisters that hosts retreats for other women religious, as well as workshops and gatherings for the public at large. Springbank's mission, as shared on their website, is as follows:

In the Dominican and Franciscan traditions we choose to live simply, to create beauty, to respect Earth and all beings and to share the learned wisdom as co-creators with the Divine for a sustainable future. We are called to be a courageous and prophetic voice in today's world, contributing to the transformation of human consciousness. We hold a deep respect for all life and accept the responsibility to care for Earth and to foster freedom and well-being in ourselves as well as in others. Recognizing the sacredness of Earth and the fragility of its eco-systems [sic], we commit ourselves to the healing of our planet and we encourage others to have a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness and vulnerability of Earth and all life forms.^v

Springbank attempts to put this mission into practice by hosting ecumenical ecospiritual workshops and conferences, with a special focus on both the Divine Feminine and Native American earth-centered wisdom practices, and by greening its campus.

Overall, such a mission statement is not typical for Catholic retreat centers, let alone for a woman-run Dominican retreat center in rural South Carolina, where they affiliate with the local Catholic Church in Kingstree and the Diocese in Charleston, but are surrounded by conservative Baptists and Methodists and other mainly theologically conservative branches of Protestantism. I was initially motivated to research Springbank both for the above mission, as I am curious as to how it was shaped and how it is attempted to be put into practice; but also because of the workshops the center hosts and the attempt by the sisters to "green" their campus. Overall, my research aims to investigate and analyze the religious and ethical motivations of Springbank as they attempt to practice a green Catholic-based spirituality. This includes researching their mission and institutional identity, their attempt to green their practices, their choice of workshop topics, and the demographics of who attends workshops at this ecospirituality retreat center in rural South Carolina. In November of 2012 I attended a weekend workshop titled "Spirituality in a Time of Earth Transition," hosted by Sister Marya Grathwohl of the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters, who

currently resides at San Benito Monastery in Dayton, Wyoming; and I have returned to participate in a workshop on Deep Ecology, held in April of 2013, and again in November of 2014. Most of the research presented below is from interviews and participant-observation conducted during the first workshop, with data also coming from the second and third workshops, discussions with the acting Executive Director and staff, and from a discourse analysis of the Center's public website and e-newsletters.

SPRINGBANK'S ECOSPIRITUAL TEACHINGS AND IDENTITY

Springbank's schedule is structured around offering one, two, and/or three-month sabbatical retreats to other women religious. Participants typically get their own religious organization to pay Springbank, while allowing the sister in question to go on sabbatical to Springbank where they reside, share in meals, and can participate in workshops, while also having access to the arts and crafts building, and the campus as a whole with its hiking trails and canoes. Participants largely come from a variety of North American women religious orders, but may also come from Canada, the UK, Europe, and even Africa. Many sisters tell those who run Springbank that they specifically chose Springbank for their sabbatical location precisely because of Springbank's earth-centered spirituality. One sabbatical participant shared during an exit-interview that they felt Springbank was "unique: the beauty of the place, there's no pavement, all religions are respected, and you can even not follow a religion and still be welcomed."

Of those who live at Springbank, two sisters are largely responsible for scheduling and organizing the workshops. These are the current Executive Director Sister Trina, a Dominican sister who has lived at and managed Springbank since 1986, and Sister Theresa, a sister of Notre Dame de Namur who has lived at Springbank for four years. Sabbaticals are consistently

structured around a repeating calendar, with most of the sabbatical events also open to the public for a charge (such as the ones I attended). Most every sabbatical contains opportunities to participate in workshops themed around regeneration, contemplative spirituality, healing, and earth/environmental awareness and justice (other workshop participants typically come from South Carolina, driving on average two hours in order to reach the rural campus, and the majority are liberal, Caucasian, and female). The last few years have seen Springbank offer a cluster of workshops that center around a contemplative retreat; wholeness/holiness retreat for women; painting as prayer; twelve-step retreat; native drum making; sweat lodge; labyrinth; Native American flute making and playing; deep ecology; shamanism; Celtic spiritualities; Icon writing and painting; and All Beings Confluence, where participants make panels of various non-human organisms in the form of stained-glass icons and other graphic mediums. These workshops are then rounded out by inviting in various speakers from women religious groups, and holding celebrations around the equinoxes and key Christian holidays



The Labyrinth at Springbank.



“Grandmother” Tree, with stature of the Virgin Mary.



Medicine Wheel, constructed in the woods.



“Celtic Tree” and Circle of Trees, off the Universe Story trail.^{vi}

Springbank is clear in its advertising and newsletters that the workshops they offer create a synergy around core key themes: Native American wisdom and practices, environmental philosophy and ecological science, Celtic spiritualities, feminist spiritualities, and Christian-based ecotheologies. For example, Springbank’s January, 2015 e-newsletter that shared its list of Spring 2015 workshops contained the following quotes: “There is newness about our time and we need to be sensitized to the awesome transformation that is being required of us”—Thomas Berry; “The only way for us to escape irreversible destruction is to evolve into the next level of organized unity”—Beatrice Bruteau; and “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of a life system, it is wrong when it tends otherwise”—Aldo Leopold.

Furthermore, and consistent with Springbank’s focus on the seasons, contemplative renewal, and desire to help unfold earth-based consciousness and spirituality, the current sisters residing at Springbank added this narrative to the beginning of this same e-newsletter: “The season of Winter beckons us to go deeper and honor the quiet within; contemplating the possibilities of

enduring peace. May we be co-contributors to the enhancement of Earth's fragile systems and work for justice for the well-being of all." Similarly, Springbank's New Year's 2014/15 emailed Newsletter contained a John Muir quote, as well as a quote from a leading Catholic contemplative monk who factored ecological insights into his teachings, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), which stated, "The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another."

Such sentiments fall within a clear trajectory of contemporary religions taking ecological insights seriously, both within Christianity, and in other religious traditions. My research found that part of the tension Springbank has faced since Sister Trina began organizing its focus from the mid-1980s onward (along with the help of another sister, Sister Ursula Ording, who was one time Director of Springbank, and who passed in 2013) is trying to navigate such very clear incorporation of Native American, feminist spirituality, Celtic spirituality, and ecological insights into their vision, mission, and offerings. According to Sister Trina, having such worldviews actively taught in a Catholic diocese, let alone in the rural South, has led to very real tensions with other local churches in Kingstree, as well as with the diocese and its Parish Council.^{vii} Furthermore, it reflects a larger tension within Christianity, including Roman Catholicism, of oppressing nature-related forms of religiosity, past and present (Taylor, 2005).

Despite this longer tension within Catholicism of oppressing pagan/feminist/nature forms of religion/s, the structure and content of the sabbatical/public workshops at Springbank are directly motivated by a concise lineage of Western Catholic ecotheologians. This lineage begins with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), then flourishes especially with Father Thomas Berry (1914-2009), and for Springbank proper it has a direct lineage to Sister Marian MacGillis of Genesis Farm in Pennsylvania. Most of Springbank's emailed newsletters and schedules contain

a Thomas Berry quote,^{viii} while Sister Trina shared how MacGillis came to speak at Springbank in 1986 and at that time Sister Trina decided to devote the focus of Springbank to ecospirituality issues, as reflected in their mission statement. A sister on sabbatical shared how she too had heard MacGillis speak, at which time she was “awakened” to ecotheological issues. This connection with MacGillis is actively maintained, as Sister Trina participated in a transition training at MacGillis’ Genesis farm in the summer of 2012.^{ix} Sisters Marya, Theresa, and Trina’s understanding of consciousness is also influenced by Brian Swimme’s Universe Story, which is itself based in part on the work of Thomas Berry.

The influence of Berry and Swimme’s Universe Story is even visibly evident at Springbank, as there is a “Cosmic Walk” based upon the Universe Story that meanders through the pine forest on the eastern edge of the campus, complete with painted stones that highlight key events in the unfolding of the universe.^x Some of the stones highlight the rise of patriarchy and thus suppression of female agency and goddess worship, and also the genocide of Native Americans—two themes that are present in Springbank’s workshops, literature, and public presence. This is in part because Sister Trina has always endorsed feminine forms of spirituality, as well as has acted in solidarity with Native peoples, and Sister Theresa herself is part Native American, where she leads current workshops on making Native Drums and she also leads sweat lodges in one of two on-campus lodges.

This explicit lineage makes Springbank part of the leading edge of Catholic Sisters working on earth ministry issues, especially in North America, where many trace their theological inspiration to Berry and MacGillis, as well as Sallie McFague, although her name was not brought up as much. These findings are consistent with those offered by Sarah McFarland Taylor, who points out that many women religious that she researched were directly inspired by both Berry and

MacGillis (2007).^{xi} While Berry and MacGillis are leading voices in Catholic ecotheology (and Christian ecotheology, more broadly), they are nonetheless minority voices in the larger Catholic gestalt. This was a tension alluded to during discussions shared at twice-daily communal meals, where the sisters felt that internationally the Church was becoming much more conservative in its theology, especially under the guidance of Pope Benedict XVI.^{xii} May also feel that overall the Church is turning its back on the liberation theology that emerged out of Vatican II, especially in international parishes. Thus at Springbank there was an underlying current of frustration about the Church not taking environmental issues more seriously, while the latter is one of the inspirations for Springbank and especially Sister Trina: to provide a place where sisters and the public at large can discuss and attempt to embody ecotheological earth wisdom.^{xiii}

However, with the rise of Pope Francis, there is more hope with the sisters at Springbank that he will pursue environmental issues, although they are frustrated by his slow movement on issues of women's standing in the Catholic Church. So far, the Pope has recognized climate change is human induced, and recognizes that demographic pressures due to poor family planning is not necessarily a good thing (although his messages about this have been ambivalent).^{xiv} Such statements reinforce to the sisters at Springbank that they are doing needed work that, although not officially supported by the Catholic Church, nonetheless provides needed forms of ministry and teaching to not only Catholics and women religious, but the public at large.

Despite Pope Francis' active movement towards taking sustainability, economic inequalities, and climate change seriously, Sister Marya explained to me how Springbank nonetheless exists a little bit outside of the Church proper precisely because of its explicit focus on environmental issues. However, this focus does not mean they are apostates or are not faithful to the Church and to Christ. Rather, for Sister Marya, it is precisely because of its dissent from

mainstream Catholic environmental teachings that brings her back to Springbank every few years in order to lead earth-centered workshops. In her words, she talks about ecospirituality as a Catholic sister, especially at a place like Springbank, because it allows her to be “subversive.” Other sisters, as well as members of the public, expressed similar views while introducing themselves during the deep ecology workshops, giving thanks for the safe space of Springbank, where women religious and liberal South Carolinians, both, were welcome to explore earth-centered spiritual issues.

ECOSPIRITUALITY DURING EARTH TRANSITION

This section focuses entirely on research generated during the Spirituality in a Time of Earth Transition workshop, which was attended by three sisters on sabbatical; Sister Marya, the workshop leader; and Sisters Trina and Theresa, who live at and manage Springbank. Given the nature of this workshop, it was easy to raise questions about the possible complicity of religion, and especially Christianity, with the current state of the planet. The questions I asked the sisters in this regard were inspired by Lynn White, Jr.’s thesis (1967), where he specifically blamed religion, and especially Western Christianity, for the contemporary ecocrisis. Since White’s thesis is foundational for the study of religion and nature, I was curious to find out what those at Springbank felt about the role religion might have played in generating our current ecocrisis, and thus what role religion might play in ameliorating it. Sister Marya affirmed that religion has created dualisms, including those of body and soul, and also heaven and earth. Of the latter dualism, she exclaimed that earth was made to be second rate, and that both dualisms can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. The creation of dualisms in Christianity, especially the dualism between a transcendent heaven and a fallen earth, is one of the reasons White blames Western

Christianity for the ecocrisis, and it seems his analysis is supported by some of the Catholic sisters residing at Springbank and attending the workshop.

At another point of the workshop, Sister Marya placed a flag of the earth on the table where we had been sitting in a circle and shared what she called a “prayer of creation, a prayer as earthlings,” since in her understanding we are beings of earth. As she stated, “When we create prayers and gratitude and direct it to a reality beyond earth, it creates a consciousness that insignifies earth.” Yet, she pointed out this is “dangerous” territory for most Christians, so that such prayers should be “an exploration to be doing in your own mind.” She also pointed out that creation is not God, and this is where many Christians get uncomfortable—praying as earthlings is too often interpreted as worshipping the earth as God, when this is not the case for her.

Sister Marya also challenged those sisters present that it is their responsibility to share ecotheological insights with those people ready to deepen their faith and commitment to the Gospel. For Sister Marya, this is seen in Jesus’s “Great Commandment,” to love your neighbor as much as the self and the Lord with all your heart. Sister Marya shared how if the Universe Story is taken seriously, then everything is self, so that everything is a neighbor, whereby it becomes immoral and unthinkable to poison and destroy creation. As she said, “The whole of creation is self.” Such thoughts were echoed by Sister Barbara, one of those on sabbatical during this specific workshop, who shared that the sacred/profane distinction is, in her words, “the worst division we’ve been taught [via the Church]. That’s not the way it really is. Everything is sacred.” Other resources also exist within Catholic ecotheological circles that actively challenge such sacred/profane dualisms and binaries, so that such views are shared within Catholic discourses, of which Springbank is one participant and exemplar.^{xv} For example, when writing about climate change for the *Franciscan*, Mark Dowd notes that “We are all part of a web of creation. Every

time our lungs take in oxygen, we confirm the interdependency between ourselves and the God-created world. We do not observe nature from a distance: we are an integral part of that story” (2011: 2).

Sister Sue, another sister on sabbatical during the workshop, expressed similar sentiments. She felt the “presence of God in so many life forms and [appreciated the] opportunities to meet God at so many levels” at Springbank. Yet, she recognized that those called to Springbank are the minority in contemporary Catholicism, although she herself feels called to challenge the neglect of the earth in Catholicism, past and present. Despite her participation in the workshop and her desire to move Catholicism forward on environmental issues, she opined that, “You can’t just go in and take their [i.e. the average Catholic in North America] faith away, it’s all they’ve known. You have to do it with sensitivity.” She shared her own frustrations with trying to discuss environmental issues in her parish, so that her experience in pastoral work taught her to pick and choose who to invite into groups where sustainability and environmental issues are discussed. She also pointed out that religious communities have the ability to think along more progressive environmental lines and to invite people into a discussion because they are not directly connected to the institutional Church. However, her own work in two parishes writing a weekly column on caring for creation yielded only three people who were willing to join a group to discuss what creation care might actually resemble. This experience left her “sad to think that people didn’t care,” so she became discouraged.

However, Sister Barbara shared that: “I’ve discovered people are more ready than we think they are. They’re way ahead. It’s the higher up.” Pope Ratzinger himself expressed that pollution is a sin, but overall the trajectory of the Church at a global level under him was towards a more conservative theology. This, even though the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

published a *Faithful Stewards of God's Creation* book, which Sister Marya held up as being an “insider” tool that the sisters could use to help steer a conversation with other Catholics towards a more earth-friendly direction. Sister Marya also pointed out that Jesus dealt with the frustration of people not hearing his message. Drawing an analogy to the challenge of getting across a more “green” message, Sister Marya explained that “blessed are those with ears to hear.” For these sisters, their hope resides with lay people and a bottom-up shift in Church teachings about and relationship with creation.

Such earth-based ministry is emerging in other Catholic sisters and their respective work around the U.S., as well. For example, the project “Catholic Sisters for a Healthy Earth” released a workbook titled *Earth as Our Home*, where “Simple actions are suggested about how to live more sustainable and walk more gently on this Earth” (2014: 2). The goal for these sisters is to get people to think about their daily lifestyle choices, and how these fit into the larger home of earth, and in this publication they are not as explicit about earth-based spirituality as Springbank, but synergies nonetheless exist. This may be because they recognize what I was told in a private discussion by Sister Barbara, who cautioned me that the term “ecospirituality” scares away many Christians in the South, so that many sisters maintain an overall strategic caution in addressing these issues in other venues not as receptive as Springbank. Indeed, as Sister Sue alluded to, sisters choose Springbank for sabbatical precisely because of its vocal ecospirituality mission and vision, and the context of validation offered by MacGillis and Berry. Many sisters come to Springbank for their sabbaticals so that they can nurture their own Christ-centered relationship with creation, where the workshops and supportive environment help them to recharge their spirits in order to continue to minister on behalf of the earth; while others come to Springbank to learn more about how they can begin to bring environmental issues into their ongoing ministry and parish work.

After spending two days discussing in-depth what ecospirituality might look like in a time of earth transition, the consensus of the sisters was that, in Sister Sue's words, "We need a Vatican III on ecology." Sister Marya concurred, pointing out to her fellow sisters that it is up to them to embody openness and to take this message to churches, to "plant a seed about the sacredness of the earth in [a church] setting," as she explained.

Sister Marya closed the workshop by pointing out that, "We always have to reinterpret. We live in a new age and religion, government, [and] education haven't caught up. We can't expect religion to satisfy. We have to constantly keep re-interpreting and give ourselves over to that and what rings true to the earth and the universe." This closing statement expertly captures in a nutshell what we as scholars are seeing with the ongoing Ecological Reformation: a re-interpretation of religious traditions in light of contemporary evolutionary insights and findings from ecology and the environmental sciences (Tucker and Grim, 2014).

SPRINGBANK'S ECOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

These thoughts circle back around to Springbank itself, and the sisters who run it. While giving me a tour of the grounds on a chilly autumn morning in a golf cart, Sister Theresa expressed: "Enjoy the silence and beauty of Creation in you and being here." And later, "God is so much bigger than any box." For her, we need to offer constant prayers of healing and protection for the earth, and Springbank is a place where this prayer work can happen. Sister Theresa expressed that she's at Springbank because she senses that the divine is present in all things. That, as she expressed, "There's no separateness. There's the oneness of the earth." And since this type of ecospirituality makes sense for her, it infuses the type of spiritual relationship she has with God

and thus shapes the campus environment and workshops offered at Springbank, as she helps organize the calendar of events for the center.

Overall, the sisters who live at and who attend trainings at Springbank are actively attempting to change Catholicism, and thus Christianity, and are doing so through an engaged ecohermeneutics, which is a three-part process outlined by the Biblical scholar Norm Habel (2009). The first part consists of approaching texts and teachings with an eye of suspicion, recognizing that sacred texts are written from and traditionally read from an anthropocentric perspective, privileging human exceptionalism and seeing nature as an object to exploit. This is seen in the sister's recognition about the dualism inherent in Christianity, where earth is devalued. Many of the sisters also weave in a feminine hermeneutic, recognizing how women and the Divine Feminine have and continue to be devalued.

The second stage of an ecohermeneutic is identification and empathy, or a de-privileging of human characters and instead identifying as readers of a tradition with earth and members of the earth community. This was also seen throughout the weekend in the various rituals and prayers in which the sisters engaged and enacted. It was also seen during the workshops on deep ecology, where participants were invited to begin developing their own ecosophy so they could relate to the more-than-human world from a biocentric ontology; and in guided meditations under "Grandmother Tree." Other examples present at Springbank of this step are found in some of the workshops they offer, including an "All Beings Confluence," where sisters on sabbatical and paying participants from the public at large are invited to create an eight to twelve foot panel where participants paint a life form in its natural habitat. The description for this workshop reads, "We yearn to create a new human/earth relationship of reverence and reciprocity in our world. We desire to create that rightness in all the ways we related to the sacred whole."^{xvi} The same e-

newsletter advertising and describing the All Beings Confluence had as its epigraph a quote from Rachel Carson, which read “It is a wholesome and necessary thing for us to turn again to earth and in contemplation of her beauties know of wonder and humility.” This quote was chosen by either Sister Trina or Theresa, or possibly both in concert with one another, as they thought how they would advertise and communicate their message and Fall workshops with the public. Not only are these sisters supportive of insights from ecology and evolution, but they use insights from these fields to actively honor, recognize, and revere the voices of the natural world, thus meeting the criteria for Habel’s second stage of an ecohermeneutic.

The third step of an ecohermeneutic is retrieval, or discerning earth and members of the earth community as subjects with a voice. This is seen in Sister Marya’s and others call for seeing the earth as sacred, and for seeing our self as being a Divine self that is in communion with an unfolding universe, a la Berry, Swimme, and MacGillis (and seen in occasional workshops offered at Springbank on the Journey of the Universe). This step is present in the cultivated lands at Springbank, where a cosmic walk based on the stages of the Universe Story meanders through the woods; and where a medicine wheel, labyrinth, and prayer lodge are actively used for workshops and for meditation.^{xvii} This stage was also present in Springbank’s 2013 Easter Holy Week, where the theme was “Easter Hope in a time of ecological decline.”^{xviii} Sister Trina described the special Easter ritual the Sisters undertook, in concert with the monks of nearby Mepkin Abbey, in regards to ecological decline, as:

At this time of Earth crisis, we look with hope for the needed grace to embrace change in ourselves. Thomas Berry says, we cannot be healthy on a sick planet. We are earth. We are a microcosm of the whole. Every decision we make impacts everything else. Earth urges us to make conscious decisions for all life systems.^{xix}

Meanwhile, their February, 2013 e-newsletter begins with a quote from Ilia Delio's *The Emergent Christ*, which reads, "To contemplate God is to contemplate the beauty of the universe, the unique details of every living being: it is to love. Nothing in creation is accidental or excessive; nothing is worthless or trivial...Each and every thing, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, is of infinite value because it images God in its own unique being." These sentiments were shared in the lead off music video shared in their November, 2012 Thanksgiving e-newsletter. This mass email included an embedded music video by Peter Mayer, titled "Holy Now," which includes lyrics such as, "When I was a boy each week On Sunday we would go to church And pay attention to the priest As he would read the holy word...Today the only difference is that Everything is Holy Now...everything's a miracle...Wine, from water is not so small, But an even better magic trick Is that anything is here at all. So, the challenging thing becomes Not to look for miracles But finding where there isn't one." The video continues, extolling listeners to find beauty in all of God's creation, with a montage of nature images playing on the screen behind the song's lyrics. Taken together, these rituals conducted by and messages shared by the sisters at Springbank provide evidence that they are actively engaged in the third stage of generating an ecohermeneutics.

Sister Sue explained that this third stage, the discerning of earth and the more-than-human world as subjects with a voice, is consistent with her understanding of panentheism, and is not paganism—here again is the "ideal type" historical tension between worshipping the earth, and worshipping a transcendent God, as pointed out by Lynn White, Jr. For these sisters, the worship of creation includes worship of earth, but it is earth as God's body, where God both includes but transcends his creation, as seen in Ilia Delio's quote shared in the February e-newsletter.

PLACE, NATURE, AND CHRISTIANITY

In a larger context, there is a long history of tension in Abrahamic traditions between aniconic worship and iconic worship, and between idolatry and heretical practices of nature worship (York, 2010). This tension is profoundly present today, given the state of the planet. While some Christian ecotheologians like Matthew Fox, Sallie McFague, and Richard Cizik, speak of an embodied Christology, one that sees the earth and creation as sacred, these are still largely heterodox voices, seemingly quickly silenced, and still largely seen as peripheral by the majority of North American Christians, including Catholics. They might even be more emblematic of emerging dark green religiosities, or a rebirth of pantheism and panentheism, than be seen as orthodox (Taylor, 2010). Yet this belies that traditions morph and change over time, and the ecohermeneutical re-interpretation of Catholic and larger Christian teachings by these ecotheologians, and especially by the sisters who gather at Springbank, is indeed occurring within the historical and theological context of Christianity (and in the case of Springbank, Catholicism).

So while Bron Taylor's charge that the "greening of religion," and especially Christianity, is largely anecdotal and needs to be buttressed by rigorous social scientific research holds much truth, I caution an easy dismissal of places like Springbank and the work of those sisters with whom I interacted. While a minority voice, theirs is likely to become more vocal as we collectively head deeper into the Anthropocene, and it behooves us as scholars to study these voices and interpret them with the tools of our field, investigating especially the impact, if at all, they have when they interact with their respective parishes on environmental issues. In fact, since I began research for this article, such energy within North American Women Religious circles has been visibly growing, taking on more public forms. For example, during the annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, held in August of 2014, with over 750 participants, women religious

[p]anelists spoke who have been advocating for an end to mountaintop removal in Tennessee and Kentucky and advocating against the pipeline in Kentucky as well as hydrofracking in Ohio. Following their presentation, the LCWR members signed postcards to persons in power positions who have led efforts for clean energy, protecting fresh water, and addressing global climate change issues, expressing gratitude and pledging support for these efforts. Throughout the United States, congregations that are members of LCWR have been making significant efforts to use renewable energy sources as well as to implement many other sustainable practices on the properties they own. The conference passed a resolution to promote the national transition from fossil fuel energy sources to renewable energy sources as soon as possible. The members also passed a resolution to ask Pope Francis to formally repudiate the period of Christian history that used religion to justify political and personal violence against indigenous nations and peoples and their cultural, religious, and territorial identities.^{xx}

I observed many of these issues discussed at Springbank, as well, from discussions during the deep ecology workshops on sisters in Kentucky and Australia, both, and their active protest of fracking; to very clear concern about climate change in the sisters who run Springbank (they hope to install photovoltaic panels over their chapel so that this is seen as a “prophetic” installation); to support for oppressed cultures and forms of religiosities, including especially Native American and feminist spiritualities, which are actively celebrated at Springbank.

A place like Springbank is also an ideal-type exemplar, open to the public and operating under a clear mission statement, such that they likely present a harbinger of both the continued tensions within Christianity about ecospirituality, and at the same time represent a continued move deeper into the larger Ecological Reformation. This is a reformation that is likely to continue in the years ahead, given the rapidity of crossing climate related tipping points and thresholds, and such evidence is suggested by the actions undertaken by the leadership of Women Religious. The “ecospiritual turn” profoundly present at Springbank, and occurring in other “Green Sisters” circles, is a prime example of, in the words of Sister Marya, a reinterpretation of religion in a time of earth transition.

A GREEN KATAPHATIC ECOTHEOLOGY IN RURAL SOUTH CAROLINA

It is patently obvious that all religious cosmologies deal with making sense of place, and that all religious people operate under cosmologically rooted conceptions of the earth and of place. These cosmologies have been and will continue to be reinterpreted, with the pace of reinterpretation most likely to continue gaining speed as more humans the world over suffer the impacts of an atmosphere with 400 parts per million of CO₂ (and rising, with methane being added rapidly into the mix).

In terms of Christianity, this reinterpretation of cosmological conceptions of creation and place is one filled with tensions, especially in a cultural geographic place such as the South. As historian of religion and religious conceptions of place Belden Lane points out, “The need to abandon false images and to question our cultural constructions of place emerges...as a recurring motif in the history of Christian thought—today no less than in the past” (2001: 241). Lane explains how Christian spirituality has traditionally dealt with conceiving of place and creation via the religious imagination, where one imaginative approach is apophatic, a tradition that is “radically critical of all images, warning of their inability ever to contain the mystery of the holy” (ibid: 241). I would argue that this tradition is largely responsible for the devaluing of earth as a realm of meeting God. The other tradition is the kataphatic tradition, which Lane describes as “rejoic[ing] in discerning the presence of God in the singularity and ‘thisness’ of various places” (ibid: 241). The latter view is similarly expressed by the ecofeminist theologian Priscilla Eppinger, who argues that an incarnational *kenosis*-inspired view of Creation “emphasizes interconnectedness” such that “Taking incarnation seriously would...require reconstructing relationships between the human and non-human world” (2012: 55; 56).

It is clear from the way that Sister Trina (and Ursula, while she was alive) has marketed and developed Springbank, and from the workshops I attended and the public messages disseminated by Springbank's caretakers, that Springbank falls within the kataphatic tradition outlined by Lane. Springbank is adding to this kataphatic tradition by also attempting to reconstruct relationships with the non-human world. This is seen in future plans for the campus, which include hosting permaculture workshops, where the campus will be a learning classroom; building straw bale structures; and creating on campus organic gardens. Moreso, pace Lane, "In biblical usage, the words for 'place' (*maqom* in Hebrew and *topos*, especially *chora*, in Greek) seldom refer to an empty, indifferent location, abstractly conceived. They speak, instead, of a place where events of human and divine significance have occurred—a dwelling place, a place of meeting, a site for the gathering together of being...Far from being a neutral, inert container of experience, place is an integral aspect of existence" (ibid: 244). And what is more integral to existence than creating and maintaining healthy ecosystems, based upon "ecological reverence" (Barrett, 1996: 107)? What we see with the sisters of Springbank is that place, including especially the place of Springbank, but also the larger place of creation, becomes a site of meeting the glory of God's creation and Divine energy, channeled through an ecological reverence. Through daily encounters with place, and thus with God, these sisters are grafting a modern-day kataphatic ecohermeneutic to the larger human work of imbuing places with meaning. What stands out to me is that this work is occurring in the politically, environmentally, and religiously conservative South.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shared research undertaken at South Carolina's only Catholic-based ecospirituality retreat center, and one specifically run by women religious. My findings suggest

that there is a vibrant concern for creation found at Springbank, with this concern being present in both the sisters who run Springbank, but also in the sisters who visit Springbank on sabbatical, and with the paying public at large who attend Springbank's various earth-centered workshops. The earth and female-centered spirituality being cultivated and disseminated at Springbank fuse with a kataphatic understanding of the Divine, where both Christ and the Divine Feminine are seen, and for many, experienced, as incarnated in nature. This view is panentheistic in its cosmology, and is therefore possibly heretical, given the corporate and institutional history of the Catholic Church. Yet many of the sisters specifically graft their earth-centered spirituality onto existing Church doctrine, so that in their understanding, an at-times happy medium is created that allows them to be subversive, yet that honors their calling to serve Christ, the Church, and the planet.

Springbank is emblematic of the slow but steady shift occurring in religious communities the world over, where the Ecological Reformation is leading to both a shift in religious values and teachings, but also, especially, a shift in human lifestyles and practices. The latter is what matters, as how we choose to live on the planet and the ecofootprints generated by human lifestyles (Vitousek, 1986; Worldwatch, 2013) will have more and more bearing on what type of planet all life forms will inherit, whether that planet is sacred or fallen, holy or corrupt.

ⁱ On bridging the gap of values to practice in ethics, broadly, see Peterson (2009).

ⁱⁱ For recent books written for popular audiences that highlight these themes, see Starnes (2014) and Huckabee (2015), both who are leading voices in Fundamentalist and/or Conservative Christian circles, who claim there is a systematic war, waged by the liberal media and liberal Washington D.C. politics, on religious freedom and especially more conservative forms of U.S. Christianity. It should be noted that both books pay scant attention to environmental issues, with focus instead on traditional marriage, family values, and the liberal media.

ⁱⁱⁱ For an ethnographic account that attempts to move beyond "caricatures" of Southern evangelicalism, focusing especially on Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church, see Welch (2010).

^{iv} For research findings that suggest there are some evangelical Christians in the U.S. who are accepting human-induced climate change, and how they are grappling with this acceptance, see Wilkinson (2012). For a recent, comprehensive, quantitative analysis of the synergistic interactions between religion, politics, and views on anthropogenic climate change in the U.S., see Jones, et al (2014).

^v <http://www.springbankretreat.org/about.html> (accessed March 8th, 2013).

^{vi} All photos come from Springbank's website, www.springbankretreat.org (accessed March 2nd, 2015). For the seven sacred sites at Springbank, with brief description, including some pictured in the article, see <http://www.springbankretreat.org/Sacred-Sites.html> (accessed March 2nd, 2015).

^{vii} Sister Trina happily shares that the current Bishop, Bishop Guglielmone, installed in 2009, "loves everything we're doing. He's unusual compared to the hierarchy in this area." The Bishop has even attended the unveiling of an icon, blessed a St. Kateri tipi chapel that was recently constructed at Springbank, invites the sisters of Springbank to Charleston for services, and has even helped find avenues of funding to help Springbank with the upkeep of its campus. Springbank is also helped by a very close relationship with Mepkin Abbey, a Trappist monastery in the tradition of St. Benedict located an hour away in Moncks Corner, halfway between Springbank and Charleston (<http://mepkinabbey.org/wordpress/>). The Global Sisters Report of the National Catholic Reporter recently featured a summary of Springbank, written by Erin Ryan, which sheds light on their activities and how they are viewed: "Springbank Retreat: 'Healing Self, Healing Earth.'" <http://globalsistersreport.org/news/spirituality/springbank-retreat-healing-self-healing-earth-13676> (accessed March 9th, 2015).

^{ix} "Transition" trainings are based upon the transition movement that began in the UK, and which has spread outward around the world, where those in the movement are working on creating communities able to transition away from Peak Oil industrial lifeways.

^x To my knowledge, this is one of the only permanent Universe Story walks in all of South Carolina. For more on Swimme and the Universe Story, see his website: <http://www.storyoftheuniverse.org/> (accessed March 2nd, 2015).

^{xi} See especially pgs. 7-8.

^{xii} The majority of the ten Sisters present at the April Deep Ecology workshop shared that they had great hope and excitement about the new Pope, Francis, and they were hopeful that he would steer the Church back towards Vatican II era concerns about social justice.

^{xiii} On the environment specifically, Pope Francis gave a homily on Tuesday, March 19th, 2013, where he stated, "The vocation of being a 'protector', however, is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live." http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130319_homelia-inizio-pontificato_en.html (accessed September 5th, 2013).

^{xiv} On the Pope's conflicting messages in regards to population numbers, see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30890989> Pope--don't breed like rabbits and then http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-walker/the-pope-on-childless-coup_b_6674404.html respectively (accessed February 27th, 2015). For his views on climate change, see <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jan/15/pope-francis-says-climate-change-is-mostly-mans-fault> (accessed January 17th, 2015), and how conservative Catholics and Republicans, broadly, in the U.S. are responding to their perceptions that Francis is too liberal and critical of capitalism, see <http://theweek.com/articles/532784/republican-partys-war-with-pope-francishas-finally-started> (accessed January 17th, 2015). For an editorial on the Pope and sustainability from *Science*, see McNutt (2014).

^{xv} For a list of other "Green Sisters" eco-spirituality retreat centers that have similar views as those present at Springbank, see <http://www.sisterfarm.org/eco-spirituality-centers.html> (accessed February 17th, 2015).

^{xvi} Description from the September 2013 Springbank e-newsletter emailed to my personal email account.

^{xvii} The cosmic walk and prayer/sweat lodge are used when Springbank hosts Alcoholic Anonymous workshops, and a Twelve Step path is also emplaced into the woods found on campus.

^{xviii} Description from the April 2013 Springbank e-newsletter emailed to my personal email account.

^{xix} From Springbank's February 2013 email newsletter.

^{xx} <https://lcrw.org/media/news/lcrw-assembly-examines-key-challenges-and-opportunities> (accessed March 2nd, 2015). For a popular press article on "green sisters," see "Nuns With a New Creed: Environmentalism," by Angela Evancie, at <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/10/nuns-with-a-new-creed-environmentalism/280608/> (accessed March 9th, 2015).

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