

A world in which we're all evolving

Michele Saracino | Feb. 16, 2012

Authors challenge us to see ourselves in solidarity with creation

THE DEATH OF LIFE: CAN CHRISTIANS BE PRO-LIFE AND INDIFFERENT TO THE EXTINCTION OF SPECIES?

By Seán McDonagh

Published by Columba Press, \$18.95

My 6-year-old son has a deep interest -- an obsession practically -- with sea life, so much so that his grandmother once half-joked that the only person worthy of his love is a mermaid. Practically since he could speak, he has been telling me that if we humans -- "the top predator," he calls us -- do not do something to change our ways, we will destroy marine life as we know it forever.

It is not as if I didn't know we're in trouble. What these four books do is help us face that trouble from different angles -- and help me keep one step ahead of a 6-year-old.

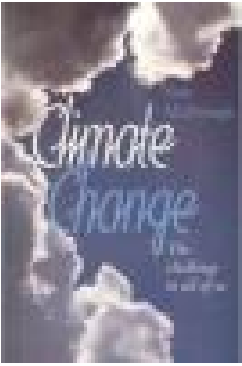
Yet something changed in me when I read Columban Fr. Seán McDonagh's *The Death of Life*. It was not just that I'm convinced that Catholic social justice must include environmental degradation as a "life issue," but that I have no choice but to create a space for these questions in my theology. Questions posed by such facts as 27,000 species being lost each year, reminding myself we are in the midst of the "sixth mass-extinction event" of world history, a "spasm" caused by one single species -- human beings.

I cannot go on with business as usual. I am converted.



McDonagh's conversion to this ecological mindset unfolded in the

Philippines when he lived with the T'boli people. They worked together to protect the rainforests from human predation by excessive logging. This missionary experience fueled his study of the ways humans cause extinction by destroying and polluting habitats, and introducing alien species into a stable environment. For McDonagh, Christians in general and theology in particular need to be more attentive to science and nature. Even though there are myriad resources in the tradition that embrace the goodness and stewardship of creation, a Christology that emphasizes Christ's divinity repels any ecologically sensitive theology because it subordinates the physical to the spiritual.



CLIMATE CHANGE: THE CHALLENGE TO ALL OF US

By Seán McDonagh

Published by Columba Press, \$23.95

As he blends science and theology, McDonagh invites readers to "live lightly on Earth" as a way of Christian discipleship. These theological concerns carry over to his book *Climate Change*. He laments the church's inconsistent engagement with global warming, particularly the lack of critique of global warming as a "life" issue. Again with scientific acuity, McDonagh demonstrates that similar to the current extinction spasm, climate change is a problem with many devastating effects, the likes of which we're already experiencing: violent weather, disappearing marine life as ocean temperatures drop, and increased disease, not just because of melting polar ice caps but because of desertification too. Not least there's the complex relationship between global warming and extinction. What are we doing to counter the negative impact of global warming on all of God's creatures? We all need to change our ways.

On the ecclesial level, McDonagh directs us to the World Council of Churches' significant publications on climate change. Catholic church leaders and the laity have taken steps to address the ecological crisis through the Catholic Climate Covenant.

Yet after reading both *The Death of Life* and *Climate Change*, it is fair to say that we all need to do more, and quickly. Ecological concerns must be woven throughout Catholic thought and ethics. Further, after recently reading Charles K. Wilber's *Catholics Spending and Acting Justly*, I was impressed by his discussion of the effects of energy conservation on the market economy.



THE SINGING HEART OF THE WORLD: CREATION, EVOLUTION AND FAITH

By John Feehan

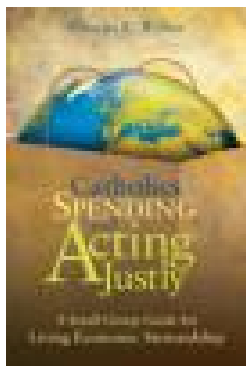
Published by Columba Press, \$26.95

Still digesting McDonagh's writings, I wonder how these green concerns could be woven throughout every social justice principle, from questions of human dignity to the dignity of work and to solidarity. Perhaps John Feehan crystallizes this point in his poetic book *The Singing Heart of the World* when he poignantly claims that we need to think of the "animal as subject." This gets to the heart of the dualism that drives our theology of anthropology and creation -- that materiality is not as important as spirituality, that a soul is the exclusive privilege of human beings, and that we are the center of the world. Until this frame shifts focus, we are stuck

with this ecological mess. In the words of Feehan, this type of thinking only exhibits a ?failure of intelligence,? which results in a failure to be human.

Convinced that faith does not compromise reason nor reason compromise faith, he surveys key points in history and theology, critiquing both. For Feehan, part of the problem with science has been its capitulation to and focus only on making money. Part of the Catholic failure here is not making more of an informed and educated commitment to evolutionary theory. With the appropriate changes in scientific and theological attitudes, we might be able to reimagine our embodied being as attuned to nature and geography in a way that makes us feel part of the natural world, rather than over and against it.

We might begin to believe that ?creation is the absolute revelation, the very embodiment of divinity,? and in becoming conscious of this reality take on responsibility for our connectedness. We might evolve in community as one would in a ?family.?



CATHOLICS SPENDING AND ACTING JUSTLY: A SMALL-GROUP GUIDE FOR

LIVING ECONOMIC STEWARDSHIP

By Charles K. Wilber

Published by Ave Maria Press, \$5.95

Both McDonagh and Feehan refer to St. Francis and animals as part of the Catholic imagination. Through Feehan?s sense of deeper consciousness, we can envision a world in which we indeed all are evolving and, perhaps most interestingly, humans are evolving in their religious beliefs to begin to see themselves in solidarity with animals in a way that honors God and God?s creation. ?Francis of Assisi could talk of Brother Wolf,? Feehan writes. ?But we now know it is not a metaphor. We are brother and sister, elephant and wolf and man and woman, oak and dandelion, frog and dragonfly. To think we are more is to diminish God, to imagine they are less is to diminish ourselves.?

I believe this is what my son experiences when he is in the presence of a smooth-hound shark. Unfortunately, so much of his growing up depends on him moving away from this conscious and evolved state of being human.

Feehan?s blending of the history of science with theology, philosophy, his own poetry and the vision of the great conservationists of history, including John Muir, makes me want to evolve into this sense of connectedness with creation -- to hone virtues that allow me to encounter all creatures as family -- to develop what he calls ?acclaim.?' A difficult road indeed, but with McDonagh, Feehan and my son as guides, I am happy to begin to the journey. Begin with me by reading these four books -- if you haven?t already.

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