



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

Theological Studies Faculty Works

Theological Studies

---

Spring 2003

## **The Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern by Shierry Weber Nicholson (Review)**

Douglas E. Christie

Loyola Marymount University, [DEchristie@lmu.edu](mailto:DEchristie@lmu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### **Digital Commons @ LMU & LLS Citation**

Christie, Douglas E., "The Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern by Shierry Weber Nicholson (Review)" (2003). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 48.

[https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/48](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/48)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theological Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

Finally, Gaillardetz takes up the specific challenge of parenting children and how this shapes our spiritual journey within the marital commitment. In some ways this chapter does not seem to fit as well, perhaps because it comes at the end of the text, when for most married couples, children occupy a rather central (and early) challenge to marital spirituality and development. Toward the end of the chapter there is mention of the domestic church, but it is really underdeveloped whereas it could have easily comprised a chapter of its own.

With the exception of both the tone and content of the concluding section of the sexuality discussion, I found this book to be a refreshingly contemporary approach to marital spirituality, the complexity and depth of marital commitments, and the challenge of children. I would recommend it for parish groups and reading groups in spirituality as well as pastoral ministry students who are searching for some insight into married life. I would have like to have seen the notion of married life and love as a public witness of God's love developed more fully. Gaillardetz missed an excellent opportunity to discuss the social role that must emerge from the individual conversion at the heart of married life and love. Later in the epilogue when he mentions domestic church, a similar opportunity to extend that reality into concrete service to society is missed. How might a couple take the salvific process of living in a relationship of self-gift—this conversion each to other—and extend it to society, so that the church's teaching on the option for the poor and social justice, for example, is lived out by more than the single and the celibate?

THOMAS M. KELLY  
Creighton University

*The Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern.* By Shierry Weber Nicholson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. x + 215 pp. \$27.00.

Every day on my way to work, I am confronted by the sight of an enormous construction project—the Playa Vista development—rising before my eyes. It sits about two miles from the Pacific Ocean atop what was once a beautiful and wild place, the Ballona Wetlands. There is a chronic need for housing in southern California and this development aims to address at least some of that need. At what cost, however? The intricate web of wetlands that used to run up and down the California coast has all but disappeared. The egrets and herons and terns and kites and other birds that thrived in the brackish waters of the Ballona Wetlands retain a precarious foothold in the tiny portion of the wetlands that remains. But their habitat has been reduced to a poor and thin remnant of what it once was. Their future in this place is uncertain.

What is happening in this place is all too common. Around the world, pristine wild places are giving way to the steady march of human projects—housing, farming, mining, recreation. Often it is the poor, driven by desperate economic deprivation, who encroach upon wild places, a reality that must be taken seriously in any discussion of these matters. But just as often, wild places disappear amidst healthy economic conditions, falling to the inexorable engine of economic progress.

With every new loss comes the growing sense that there may be no end to this, that the only end imaginable may be the end of all things—the “end of the world.”

It is not easy to know how to respond to such a cataclysmic prospect, whether personally or politically. How are we to describe what exactly is being lost in our current onslaught upon the natural world—in the natural world and in us? Often we cannot even bring ourselves to speak of it. It is too painful. But silence in the face of such enormous loss is akin to silence in the aftermath of personal trauma—it can only breed further illness. Still, the question remains: how can we learn to speak about this growing catastrophe? How can we bring to language the “unspoken dimensions” of the crisis that confronts us? Not simply in order to hear ourselves speak, but as part of a process through which we might begin to discover the inner resources to resist the destruction, the “end of the world?”

It is the great virtue of Shierry Webber NicholSEN’s book that she puts her finger exactly on the pulse of these questions. What is more, she identifies them as profoundly spiritual questions, questions requiring a deep and sustained investment of our whole selves. It should be noted that NicholSEN by no means reduces “spiritual” to the merely personal or individual. Spiritual questions for her are always set within a radically inclusive context that encompasses persons, social and political institutions, living beings in the natural world, and the cosmos as a whole. Indeed, it is the subtle and creative juxtaposition of the particular and the whole that gives her work its moral force and depth. She probes with unnerving perception and clarity the “inner reality” of our spiritual lives lived amidst abundant beauty and massive destruction. But her eye is always on something more complex and wild: the whole of reality—our own fragile selves, but also the numinous world that underlies and sustains everything. It is this encompassing and capacious vision, her sense that we are capable of arriving at a feeling for the world that is worthy of it and that can help us to care for it, that makes this book so unusual and so valuable.

“My intention,” she notes in the introduction, is to “bring together our sense of connection with the nonhuman environment—its beauty, its mystery, its provision of a sheltering home for us—with the psychological forces that allow the destruction to continue” (1). The last part of this statement—her mention of the “psychological forces” with which we must reckon—provides an important insight into her distinctive method. She is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist in private practice and teaches environmental philosophy and psychology in the Program on Environment and Community in at Antioch University in Seattle, Washington. It is no surprise then to see that she draws heavily upon the work of psychoanalytic thinkers such as D.W. Winnicott, Donald Melzer and Wilfred Bion to get at the underlying psychological dislocation that both arises from and contributes to the destruction of the natural world. But she is equally adept at drawing upon the fields of environmental philosophy and ecopsychology (e.g. Arne Naess, Susan Griffin, Paul Shepard, James Hillman, David Abram, Neils Evernden, and Thomas Berry), aesthetic theory (Walter Benjamin, Paul Cezanne, Christopher Alexander, Lewis Hyde, Kathleen Raine, Paul Klee) and ideas from Buddhist and Sufi traditions (Gary Snyder, Dogen Zenji, Henri Corbin). If this sounds like a heady mixture of ideas, it is. But her use of them is not at all superficial. On almost every page of the book, the reader is challenged by what the author refers to as a “polyphonic effect”—the back and forth, reciprocal play of ideas designed to

evoke the complexity of the subject matter. It is not only the often rapid movement between writers in disparate fields that creates this polyphonic effect. It is also the author's choice to sound, again and again, key themes and motifs. The effect upon the reader is not unlike the ancient Christian practices of *lectio divina* or "rumination" (chewing deeply upon a text or idea). On the other hand, this method also emulates in a remarkable way the psychoanalytic process, especially the process of "sounding the depths" of key themes and issues over and over until, gradually, a kind of clarity and healing emerges.

I am not sure I have ever read a book that uses this device to such good effect. What the author actually does is fairly simple: at the head of almost every chapter and subsection, one finds one or two epigraphs. Then, during the discussion itself, these epigraphs are sounded again—sometimes once, but often more than once. The effect is at first disconcerting. You find yourself thinking: "Yes, she already cited that text. In fact, she cited that exact text, twice already!" But then something interesting begins to happen (at least it did for me): you slowly find yourself settling into a different rhythm of reading, a kind of musical rhythm, in which key notes are sounded again and again and you gradually learn to listen for them and respond to them. And you realize that you are reading less for the argument (though it is strong and deep when taken as a whole) and more for the experience of coming to feel and understand in some small measure our common condition of alienation and grief (or, alternately, the experience of wonder in the face of beauty).

Nicholsen seems well aware of what she is doing. In the introduction, she refers to her choice to "proceed by evoking aspects of experience—primarily emotional and perceptual experience—in the reader's mind so that they can be reflected upon in their complexity" (2). This "evocation of experience" is one of the things that marks this book as distinctive and important. To be able to simultaneously evoke deep experience and analyze and interpret the meaning of such experience is a rare feat. I can think of few writers in the field of spirituality who have achieved as clear and eloquent a synthesis of form and substance as Nicholsen has in this book. For the reader with the patience and the courage to follow her down this path, to engage in an act of "contemplative reading," the rewards will be great. For by circling round and round her subject in the way that she does, probing the key questions at ever deeper levels, Nicholsen manages to achieve something truly rare: she helps to open up a space where the unspoken dimensions of the environmental crisis can be voiced.

She begins her exploration in the hardest place, what she calls the "many silences." She cites a poignant observation by Walter Benjamin—"Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience" (11)—as an indication of the kind of silence that afflicts many in the face of massive environmental degradation. We experience this silence as part of a trauma, she says. It is silence borne of pain at the prospect of losing what we love, of our sense of vulnerability, of our deep need to protect ourselves, argues Nicholsen. It is necessary but problematic. To remain in such fearful silence is akin to what Nicholsen describes as living with the "corrosive effect of shameful secrets." But there are other silences, such as the silence borne of awe in the face of a natural world—a necessary response corresponding to a silence we sometimes sense in nature. But, as Nicholsen points out: "This silence of nature is more than an absence of human

language. It is an overarching sense of both containment and potential, of vitality ever emerging and not yet grasped.” Attention to this silence can become an integral part of our religious experience, claims NicholSEN: “We descend—really, we deepen—into a profound attention from which something can come to meet us” (20). “Entering the silence” in this way is part of what she calls a “deep receptivity to the nonhuman world” and can be experienced “as identification, as merging with other life.” Such receptivity and identification is the opposite of the fear-induced silence that she identifies as both the source and expression of our current alienation from the natural world. To retrieve this more creative, responsive silence is crucial, she says, to retrieving our deepest spiritual capacity. It is also crucial to the work of overcoming the fear and alienation that lay at the root of so much environmental degradation.

These ideas give some sense of how NicholSEN proceeds, integrating psychological and environmental-philosophical discourse to probe deep spiritual terrain. As the book proceeds, she grapples with a succession of difficult and important questions. In chapter two she asks how we can discover the true and abiding sources of our love for the world, how we can cultivate a sustainable *concern*—understood as “the effort to make oneself worthy of what one loves”—for the world. In chapter three, she explores the relationship between our capacity for perception and our capacity for reciprocity and intimacy with the living world. Chapter four involves a careful rumination on the aesthetic dimensions of our response to nature—specifically the role of beauty and imagination in evoking in us a sense of “I-thou” relationship with the world. In chapter five, she confronts directly and honestly what she calls the “unified sense of threat to our world,” or what Michael Hill calls “the geography of apocalypse . . . a real and vivid territory running alongside or beneath the day-to-dayness of our lives” (131). Is this, she asks, something like trauma? And will we ever find a way of overcoming the “severe and pervasive apathy” that afflicts us unless we face up to it? The author does not end her book on this bleak apocalyptic note. Rather, she concludes by asking how we might rediscover, within ourselves and our world, the sources of hope necessary for imagining and living into a real future.

NicholSEN notes toward the beginning of her work that “the book requires the reader to tolerate a certain degree of disturbance” (3). She is referring here primarily to the unusual juxtaposition of sources and ideas she asks the reader to absorb. But I think her warning can be taken to refer just as much to the sense of disturbance the reader may feel through the book’s evocation “of the emotional impact of environmental deterioration” (4). Who, after all, really wants to face up to the full extent of this reality? Who has the inner resources for doing so? Still, it may well be that this is part of the *askesis* of living through the present moment in our history: that we must decide whether we are prepared to face up to it and if so, how we will respond. NicholSEN’s book, while bracing and disturbing throughout, may well prove to be the kind of companion that can help us muster the courage to face up to the challenge that lays before us.

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE  
Loyola Marymount University