

## Biodiversity and Spirit

*Looking for hallowed ground?  
Earth is it.*

Since the days of Darwin, biology and religion have not easily been connected. Admiration for the biodiversity of life has changed that in recent years. *Homo sapiens* is both responsible for and, at times, religious about this fertile planet. So strong is the connection that it may even be called spiritual. No other species can claim as much.

Ernst Mayr, among the most eminent living biologists, rejects religious orthodoxy but finds the creativity in natural history undeniable. In *The Growth of Biological Thought* he writes, "Virtually all biologists are religious, in the deeper sense of this word, even though it may be a religion without revelation. ... The unknown and maybe unknowable instills in us a sense of humility and awe."

We detect something sublime, something that takes us to the limits of our understanding, and mysteriously beyond. Mayr's thoughtful biologist is moved to respect nature. "And if one is a truly thinking biologist," he explains in his work "How Biology Differs from the Physical Sciences," "one has a feeling of responsibility for nature, as reflected by much of the conservation movement."

Viewing Earthrise from the moon, astronaut Edgar Mitchell was entranced. "Suddenly from behind the rim of the moon, in long, slow-motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth ... home." In Kevin Kelley's *The Home Planet*, Mitchell explains, "My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity."

The emotion here reveals some romanticism, even some rhetoric. But few can confront the view of Earth from space without a moment of truth—not, at least, in their pensive moods. The home biosphere evokes a crisis in the human spirit. Who are we? Where are we? The crisis emerges in light of the hard-nosed facts about this prolific Earth and whether one chooses to go deeper, trying to detect God under it all.



Consider the complexity and biodiversity. Despite our ability to intelligently reflect on Earth's wonderland qualities, we—the planet's most complex product—are left stuttering in awe. No doubt this is a precious place, a pearl in a sea of black mystery. No doubt we have unprecedented responsibilities, particularly as we put this prolific planet in jeopardy.

Earth is mere dirt, but witness what dirt can do with suitable conditions, water and solar illumination. The anthropocentric will say it has no value except as human resource. But we do not value Earth objectively until we appreciate this marvelous natural history that has revealed Earth as biosphere, the only planet known to have an ecology. The only planet known, etymologically, to have "the logic of a home." Life here is a gift, a heritage that is ours.

Life persists here because it is provided for in the planet's ecological system. The life epic is lived on in the midst of its perpetual perishing, arriving again and struggling to new achievements in vitality and biodiversity.

Still, biology produces many doubts. I doubt whether, without a respect for life, one can take biology seriously given the prolific fecundity that surrounds us as human spirits on this planet. I doubt whether the line between respect and reverence for life is one that can always be recognized.

If anything on Earth is sacred, it is this ability to generate that characterizes our home planet. If any where, here is the brooding Spirit of God. And if such promise does not elevate our spirits, we are not yet *Homo sapiens*. The secular then—this empirical epoch studied by bioscience after all. To the contrary: It urges a spiritual quest. If any holy ground exists, any land of promise, Earth is it. 

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