Preface

WHEN I was a bookish twelve-year-old (rather than a bookish middle-aged creature), my family moved to four acres of woods in Virginia. The new locale was not a rural area, but the acres of thick forest were a radical change from the tidy suburban development I had been accustomed to. I spent hours wandering the woods, exploring the creeks, trying to climb trees and walk on slippery logs. I learned to feel comfortable there, enjoying the seclusion (I thought—now I suspect my parents could always see me from the house) and the birdsongs. One afternoon, noticing a small hole in the streambank, I knelt and put my eye close to the mud to look inside. What I saw, to my great astonishment, was another eye, looking out at me. I was flabbergasted, and stood up so fast that I fell back into the water. (I don't know if seeing me had as strong an effect on the snake—probably not.) Without the words to describe it, I was faced (literally) with the realization that mine was not the only subjectivity in the woods. I was as much explored and observed as I was explorer and observer. The universe is not solely an object for humans to study, but a grand multiplicity of subjects, each perceiving and constructing its own understanding of the world.

Decades later, this experience—and my love of animals, plants, and wilderness—came into play as I discovered Christianity's rich visions of the relationship between Creator and creatures. But these visions did not seem visible to most church communities. For several years, I believed that education was the answer; that if faithful people were simply informed of God's love of and plan for the entire creation, they would amend their destructive practices. Local and diocesan committees sent hundreds of informational packets to parish priests, encouraging them to initiate "earth-friendly" study groups, sermons, and ministries. Over time

it became clear that more information did not lead to transformation. To paraphrase Paul, human sin is rarely susceptible to cognitive cures.

As I studied further, it seemed that treating Christian-earth relationships in terms of discipleship or virtue might generate results that were both more productive and more faithful than either secular environmentalism or Christian education could produce. The result of this thinking became (in geologic time) a PhD dissertation and, eventually, this book.

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