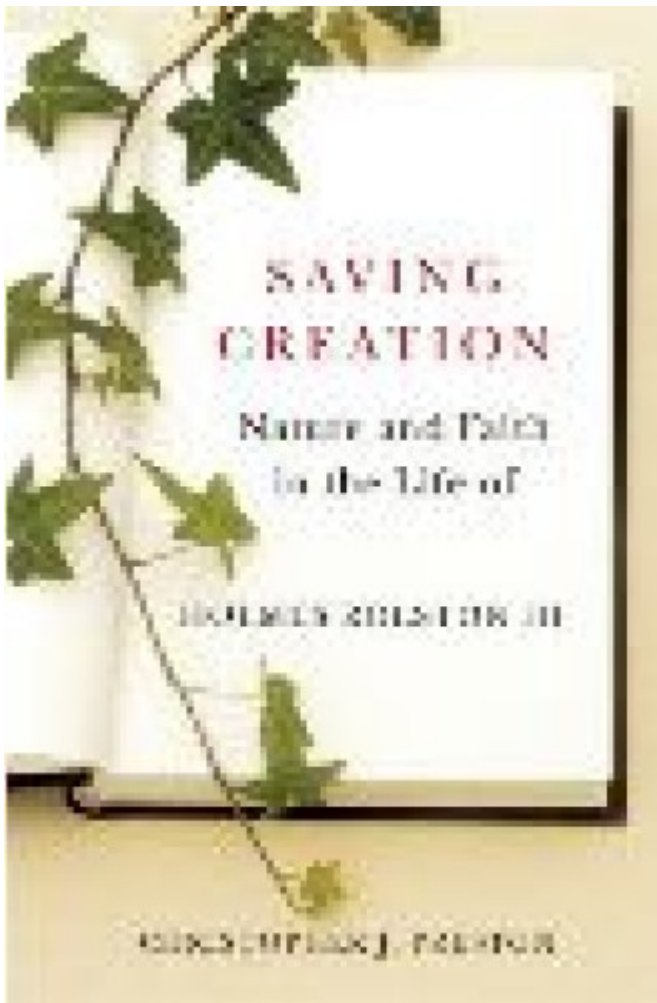


# **Saving Creation: Nature and Faith in the Life of Holmes Rolston III**

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [January 26, 2010](#) issue

## **In Review**



## **Saving Creation: Nature and Faith in the Life of Holmes Rolston III**

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The tombstone, already in place though happily not yet in use, reads, "Philosopher Gone Wild." *Philosopher* refers to the lifelong critical reflection of a man who found philosophy a way to mediate between his grounding in theology and his commitment to science. *Wild* refers to the most elemental condition of the fruitful earth before human culture was imposed upon it. The phrase *Gone Wild* is a play on words that evokes a subject who is so unrestrained with his passion for untamed creation that more sober citizens might think him "gone." The tombstone will someday mark the grave of Holmes Rolston III. In *Saving Creation*, Christopher Preston (of the University of Montana) offers a winsome, straightforward account of Rolston's life, bringing him the recognition and full appreciation that are appropriate for this remarkable character and his unassuaged passion for the subject of honored, protected creation.

As a longtime faculty member at Colorado State University, Rolston has had a remarkable career as a researcher, educator and advocate, making full use of his local environment, exploring and learning from the natural riches and variegated landscape all around him. Because he found philosophy to be the bridge between theology and science, he did not have an easy time of it in the academy. His colleagues in several academic disciplines were suspicious of his work because it did not fit any of their conventional slots. That, of course, was the daring brilliance of Rolston—that he refused conventional categories and in the end carried out and legitimated a whole new field of environmental ethics, for which he has become the godparent and leading advocate.

As a faculty member, Rolston covered all the usual bases of faculty responsibility, but his passion and energy were directed to research and, more important, to advocacy. He needed to articulate an ethics of nature that scientists could respect and take seriously, so he steered clear of religious foundation and formulation. He was able to establish moral grounding in the reality of "information transfer," which establishes continuity among the generations in a species, and it was that grounding that permitted him to make a compelling argument concerning the claims and rights of all species.

In 1975 Rolston published an attention-getting article on the possibility of an ecological ethic, and his work blossomed from there. He urged that nature has intrinsic value in and of itself and does not depend on human use or human valorization for its worth. Thus the "planet is replete with natural value at every

level.” In a highly controversial opinion, he contended, with reference to Yellowstone, that nature should not be excessively managed but that it should “run its own course.”

This commitment to intrinsic value led him to advocate that protection for the wilderness be given priority over any human agenda—even if such protection meant strenuous resistance to human intrusion. He refused political correctness as he insisted on the moral significance of nature: “Wilderness is not a state of mind; it is what existed before there were states of mind.” He earned the label “ecofascist” when he argued that “one ought not always to feed people first, but rather one ought sometimes to save nature.” This bold advocacy evoked enormously positive affirmation as well as major criticism, and it led to an invitation to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures for 1997–1998 and to Rolston’s winning the Templeton Prize in 2003. More important than such recognition, his advocacy has changed the focus of perception and of the policy debate, so that much of what he urged has now become accepted as a commonplace baseline for future policy and practice.

As always in good biography, the pages on the subject’s early years are both interesting and defining. Rolston was born in 1933 into a southern Presbyterian family in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. He learned his moral passion from his parents (his father was a Presbyterian minister) and got his start in environmental biology with help from his grandfather. He made his way on the ancient southern Presbyterian path to Davidson College near Charlotte, North Carolina, and Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, then traveled to Edinburgh for graduate study, where he found himself ill at ease with the “theology of science” offered there by Tom Torrance.

Rolston served as pastor in two Presbyterian parish churches. The first position did not work out at all; the second gave him ample room to walk the hills and eventually to gather his energy and courage to break the mold of his southern Presbyterianism and to go in new directions. He moved toward natural theology, which entailed an important departure from his educational pedigree. After he received a master’s degree in philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh, he was on his way to his life’s work of discernment and advocacy.

Preston’s story of Rolston’s life concludes with a splendid reflection on how Rolston has managed, in a bold and imaginative way, to bring coherence to his Christian nurture and his passion for nature. While he paid some attention to the “argument

from design," he was too alert to the continuing inventiveness and innovation in natural processes to settle for a deist God who simply provides design. Rather he focused on the "bent toward life" that is evident in natural processes as an exhibit of God's continuing grace toward creation, so that he came to see God's generous generativity in nature as a "cascading serendipity." He concluded that it was necessary to "detect something 'extra' lurking within the serendipitous processes" that looked like "the mask worn by God."

With appreciation for the diversity, complexity and generativity that were all evident to him from his careful long-term observation, Rolston turned back to his religious roots for a way to understand what he observed: "Some force is present that sucks order in superseding steps out of disorder." He judged this force to be the God he had known in his Calvinist tradition, whom he now termed "the atmosphere of possibilities."

Finally, as all theology must, Rolston came to the issue of theodicy, for his family, like every family, had known inexplicable suffering. In a most majestic interpretive maneuver, Rolston showed that in nature there is an endless process of dying and new birth, of relinquishment and fresh gift—a process that exhibited for him the grace of God. That reality is an enactment of crucifixion and resurrection, of nature consistently suffering through to something higher:

For longer than we can remember flowers have been flung up to argue against the forces of violence and death, because that is what they do in and of themselves, and thus they serve as so ready a sign for any who encounter them in a pensive mood, wearied of the winter, frightened by the storm, saddened by death.

Preston adds, "The pilgrimage is more than a habit. It is an affirmation."

Rolston's interpretive work bears a personal stamp. In his grounded imagination he has a remarkable capacity to coin phrases, informed by good science, that make connections in a poetic way that moves across the disciplines. *Saving Creation* is a rich appreciation of a most distinctive contribution to common work, a remarkable attestation to how a daring interpreter can modify perception and policy. Along the way the reader learns a great deal about how the ecological crisis has come about, with its summons beyond the convenient. Preston makes clear, moreover, how Rolston's Calvinism permits him (and us) to see nature in moral perspective. So far as I know, the term *providence* is not used here, but it is not far away from the facts

on the ground. All that is required is a capacity to make informed connections in the data; Rolston does that magnificently.