



SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY

The New Revolution in Consciousness

By LES SPONSEL

Earth Day on April 22, 1970, marked a new threshold in the level of information, awareness, concern, and action about environmental problems and issues. Numerous and diverse new fields of basic and applied environmental research and education emerged—environmental ethics, history, law, philosophy, politics, science, and studies. In the U.S. environmental laws like the Endangered Species Act and monitoring institutions like the Environmental Protection Agency developed. International initiatives have included the U.N. Environmental Programme and many thousands of NGOs working at local and global levels such as Conservation International and World Wildlife Fund. Today the media cover a wide variety of environmental matters on a daily basis, and there are high profile television programs like *Nature* on the Public Broadcasting Service. In short, in recent decades a multitude of progressive environmental initiatives have emerged (Hawken 2007).

In spite of such positive initiatives the environmental crisis has continued to worsen, as revealed in the U.N. Millennium Ecosystem Assessment by 1,360 experts between 2001–2005, and a multitude of other sources including annual reports by the Worldwatch Institute. Increasingly, man-made climate change is recognized as a reality well under way

with far-reaching ramifications necessitating serious major responses, as documented most comprehensively by the five reports since 1988 of the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change involving thousands of scientific and other authorities across the world. The only big unknowns are how bad global climate change is going to get and how successful humankind will be in responding (McKibben 2010). Even the possibility of the extinction of the human species is being taken seriously (Guterl 2012, Hartman 1999, Leslie 1996).

Certainly these secular approaches to the continuing environmental crisis have been necessary and important. However, just as certainly they have proven insufficient. Most secular approaches treat only the symptoms of the environmental crisis, not its underlying causes. Many well-informed thinkers consider the root causes to be essentially moral and ethical (Moore and Nelson 2010). They believe that our contemporary environmental problems and crises ultimately result from the worldview and associated values, attitudes, practices and impacts of industrialism, materialism, consumerism, and capitalism, especially when they are fueled by rapacious greed. In particular, this worldview operates on the fallacy that unlimited growth is possible on a limited base. That base is not only non-renewable natural resources, but



also the capacity of Earth's biogeochemical systems to absorb pollution and other stresses (Catton 1982). Many progressive thinkers believe that no less than a revolution of consciousness is required to finally turn things around for the better. Only a most profound rethinking and transformation of culture—encompassing worldview, values, attitudes, behavior, and institutions—holds any real promise for creating a more sustainable, green, just, and harmonious relationship between the human species and nature.

Spiritual ecology is growing exponentially as a response to this dire need for the survival, welfare, and flourishing of Earth, including humankind. As a generic category spiritual ecology encompasses a vast, diverse, complex, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interfaces of religions and spiritualities on the one hand, and on the other ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms. Other labels are far narrower, referring only to some aspect of spiritual ecology, such as ecomysticism, ecotheology, or religious environmentalism.

Spiritual ecology has stimulated three kinds of unprecedented and innovative collaboration: among and within religions, between religion and science, and among the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, as exemplified by the Forum on Religion and Ecology. Such collaboration is unusual, these sectors often having been mutually antagonistic in the past (Carroll and Warner 1998, Grim and Tucker 2014, McGrath 2002).

While spiritual ecology explores the great diversity of the interrelationships among religions, spiritualities, environments, ecologies, and environmentalisms in a relativistic,

pluralistic, ecumenical, and interfaith manner, it is important to note that there are also underlying commonalities. K. Lauren de Boer (2007:12-13), who edited the Quaker periodical *EarthLight: A Magazine of Spiritual Ecology* for more than a decade, concisely identifies these commonalities: "More than a theory, spiritual ecology describes a way of being in the world...It draws both from knowledge of the ecology of the planet and from deeper sensitivities to the spiritual dimension of the Earth. As such, it forms the basis for an ethical code of conduct. It brings us out of the trance of our human-centered wonder-world, expanding our circle of concern to include other species. We begin to see a relationship between our spiritual condition and the planetary ecological crisis." (For further elaboration on commonalities see Sponsel 2012:170-171).

The spiritual component of spiritual ecology may be experienced in nature by an individual alone or with others, and with or without some religious organization. It may involve mysticism, rituals, and sacred sites and landscapes. The spirituality may reside in the individual and/or in other beings and/or forces in nature, depending on the individual's beliefs and experience. Even atheists may be spiritual ecologists, suggesting that something in nature itself can generate spirituality (Crosby 2002).

The original spiritual ecologists are indigenous peoples with their beliefs and corresponding practices regarding spiritual beings and forces in nature. While the 350 million indigenous persons in the world comprise only 5% of the human population, they inhabit 20% of the world's land mass living in 70 countries (Maybury-Lewis 2002:7-8). Their intimate



environmental experience, accumulated over millennia, generated profound knowledge and wisdom that can provide invaluable lessons for the rest of humanity (Holthaus 2008). Indigenous sacred places are mostly in nature, and often they protect higher concentrations of biological diversity than secular places.

Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami in the Brazilian Amazon, describes how he regularly communicates with the spirits from the hills and mountains of the forest through shamanic rituals. All beings in the forest have spiritual counterparts in his perspective. The spirits facilitate hunting success and can cure illness. For him and other Yanomami, while the forest is a biophysical reality, it is a spiritual reality as well, and the latter is pervasive and more important. The Yanomami people, forest, and spirits are mutually interdependent. When they are threatened it is ultimately because outsiders are not spiritual ecologists (Kopenawa and Albert 2013); outsiders who do not understand or see themselves party to the delicate interconnectedness of nature.

Indigenes are not the only people who have a sense of the sacred in nature and corresponding reverence, seeing themselves implicated within this sacred system. Thomas Berry (2006:17), a most influential Catholic priest and scholar, asserts that: "...the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects." Among other things, this reflects his lifelong memory of a mystical experience that he had at the age of 11 when he encountered a meadow covered in white lilies with insects and birds singing. In that moment, he began to realize that nature has a spiritual as well as material dimension (Raymond 2010:9).

The spiritual is the least researched and understood component of spiritual ecology, although it is often one of the most important catalysts for environmental activism (Sponsel 2012, Spring and Manousos 2007, Taylor 2010). In Western society pioneers of spiritual ecology include Saint Francis of Assisi in the Middle Ages; in America in the 19th century Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond and John Muir at Yosemite; in the 20th century Rachel Carson with her books on the sea and in 1962 *Silent Spring*; and Al Gore in his early book *Earth in Balance*. Many environmentalists are ultimately spiritual ecologists, although this is rarely explicit. They have had experiences in nature that may be recognized as spiritual or mystical. Such experiences are often transformative, and motivate their environmentalism. Clearly this was the case with John Muir whose legacy includes founding the Sierra Club and campaigning to preserve the National Parks in the U.S. (Worster 2008). His prolific impact on natural conservation in the U.S. was inspired by his time living off the land in Yosemite National Park, in a cabin he built himself, and the long walks and botanical and geological studies he conducted there.

Spiritual ecology is both behind and in front of the development of deep ecology and ecopsychology. Deep ecology, a social movement pioneered by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess since the 1970s, seeks the ultimate causes and solutions for the environmental crisis by questioning all aspects of life, instead of only attending to the superficial symptoms of the crisis. The principles of deep ecology include the ecocentric affirmation that all life is interconnected and interdependent with inherent value; diversity contributes to the well-being of

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all life, and humans have no right to reduce it, except to meet their vital needs; effective policies must reduce human population growth and environmental impact; quality is more important than quantity in human lifestyles; and individuals who agree with such principles have an obligation to help implement the necessary profound changes in the dominating anthropocentric and utilitarian worldview and associated values, attitudes, and practices (Dregson and Devall 2008:111-114). Naess' thinking was progressively grounded since his childhood as he cultivated a deep feeling of attachment to nature through periodic extended residence in a cabin high in the mountains of Norway with their herds of reindeer. Not unlike John Muir, Naess felt a deep connection and belonging to nature, and Mt. Hallingskarvet in particular where his cabin, Tvergastein, is located and where he did much of his creative thinking and writing (Dregson and Devall 2008:8-9).

Several extraordinary scholars have been developing the intellectual scope, aims, and substance of spiritual ecology since the 1990s, reflecting and informing the growing concern in society at the loss of our direct, spiritual, emotional and physical relationship to nature. Steven C. Rockefeller was the primary organizer behind the historic interfaith conference at Middlebury College called "Spirit and Nature" and the resulting book by the same title (Rockefeller and Elder 1992). A subsequent film about the conference hosted by Bill Moyers on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) reached a wide audience throughout the U.S.

Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim co-organized a series of more than two dozen international and interdisciplinary conferences, many at Harvard University and most with a focus on a different religion and ecology. They served as general editors for a series of substantial edited volumes of revised papers and additional contributions from the conferences published by Harvard University Press and created the website of the Forum on Religion and Ecology. They also established an interdisciplinary M.A. program on Religion and Ecology among the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, School of Divinity, and Department of Religious Studies at Yale University, and were among those instrumental in the establishment of the journal *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, and Religion* (Grim and Tucker 2014).

Bron Taylor (2005) is Editor-in-Chief of the historic benchmark *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*; founder and first president of the International Society for the Study

of Religion, Nature and Culture; and editor of its *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*. He developed and heads the Religion and Nature section in the graduate program in the Department of Religion at the University of Florida. Roger S. Gottlieb (2006a, b) published major surveys of religion and ecology.

Other pioneers have made more specialized contributions, among them Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1997) in the study of Islam and ecology; Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (2013) of The Golden Sufi Center; Ibrahim Abdul-Matin (2010) on Islamic environmentalism; Stephanie Kaza (2008) on Buddhist environmental ethics; and Satish Kumar (2007) who heads the progressive Schumacher College and the periodical *Resurgence*. Thanks to the above and many more today there is a very substantial literature on spiritual ecology. It includes basic textbooks by Gottlieb 2006a, Grim and Tucker 2014, Kinsley 1995, Sponsel 2012, and Taylor 2010, and rich anthologies by Bingham 2009, Cain 2002, Gottlieb 2006b, Mosley 2008, and Vaughan-Lee 2013, and many more (Sponsel 2014).

The emotional and physical consequences of our spiritual alienation from the earth are explored in the field of ecopsychology. Urbanization and industrialization are key influences in distancing us from our ancestral relationship to the land. Consequently, healing requires regularly connecting with nature in meaningful ways (Buzzell and Chalquist 2009, Metzner 1999). For decades Joanna Macy, a Buddhist and systems philosopher and environmental activist, has conducted workshops to help people cope emotionally with their concern about the degradation of nature and to empower them to pursue effective environmental activism (Macy and Johnstone 2012).

From the foregoing it should be clear that spiritual ecology does not advocate any particular religion. Those who are religious or spiritual are encouraged to examine their own beliefs and values to ascertain how they relate to nature. For example, Interfaith Power and Light is a national organization in the U.S. engaged in religious environmentalism. It promotes the sustainable use of renewable energy through increasing efficiency and conservation to reduce the ecological footprint (environmental impact) of its facilities and members. This is a communal response to global climate change initiated by Episcopalian Minister Sally Bingham (2009) of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Although it was started as recently as 1998, already there are affiliates in at

least 40 states with more than 14,000 centers and a membership of around five million people.

Some environmentalists have been accused of being alarmists for their predictions of global catastrophe, but the scientific case for climate change has continued to spell a need for urgent action. However there is an opportunity embedded within this call for us to re-examine and adapt the way we live: it could be the catalyst that generates a revolution in consciousness with consequent changes in lifestyles, economies, politics, societies, cultures, and religions for the better. Increased happiness, better equality, and healthier communities are all potential gains within our grasp. If these changes are undertaken voluntarily pursuing reliable information and sustainable green practices, then the short- and long-term costs will be less expensive and painful for everyone. Otherwise, nature will simply force change with far higher costs and suffering as part of some new equilibrium for our home planet (Lovelock 2010).

Major obstacles confront spiritual ecology. It challenges the interests of the powerful establishment and status quo. This includes sectors of the economy, government, military, religion, science, and academia. Spiritual ecology is antithetical to those who myopically pursue scientism or Marxism. Factions and conflicts can infect any religion, religious school, or sect. Religious conservatives and extremists may dismiss spiritual ecology as incompatible, or a reversion to Paganism. However, probably the greatest obstacle is the discrepancy between the ideals and actions of religious adherents, as in any other aspect of individuals and society (Gottlieb 2006a, Sponsel 2012, Taylor 2010).

In conclusion, spiritual ecology is a quiet revolution in the sense that it is nonviolent, gradual, without any single leader or centralization, and relatively little known (cf. Hawken 2007), despite the increase in interest and both academic and practical work on the subject in recent decades. It is a revolution in the sense that it calls for no less than a fundamental re-thinking, re-feeling, and re-visioning of personal lifestyles and society to realize in practice that Earth is a communion of subjects instead of merely a collection of objects.

Ultimately, the most important choice we face today is between either “ecosanity” or “ecocide.” Hopefully spiritual ecology can help turn things around for the better before a critical threshold or tipping point is reached.

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