

# **Spiritual Ecology in Brief**



## **WHAT?**

Spiritual ecology may be defined as an arena at the interfaces of religions and spiritualities on the one hand, and on the other environments, ecologies, and environmentalisms. All of these terms are plural because spiritual ecology is a vast, complex, diverse, and dynamic field of related phenomena. Spiritual ecology is a generic or umbrella term. Other labels are much narrower, referring to some aspect of spiritual ecology, such as ecomysticism, ecotheology, or religious environmentalism.

Spiritual ecology does not advocate any single religion, instead those who are religious or spiritual are encouraged to examine their own beliefs and values to see how they relate to nature.

## **WHO? WHEN? WHERE?**

The original spiritual ecologists are the indigenous societies of the world who understand nature to be animated by spiritual forces and beings. For example, you can find this described for Native Hawaiians in Scott Cunningham's book *Hawaiian Religion and Magic*.

In Western society, pioneers in spiritual ecology include St. Francis of Assisi in the Middle Ages; in America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond and John Muir of Yosemite; and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Rachel Carson with her books on the sea and in 1962 *Silent Spring*, and even Al Gore in his early book *Earth in Balance* which includes a chapter on religion and environment. (The Appendix in my book identifies around a hundred such pioneers, and several are discussed in chapters sampling the intellectual history and other aspects of this subject).

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 motivate them to be environmentalists.

Clearly this was the case with John Muir whose legacy includes the National Parks and the Sierra Club.

## **HOW?**

Individuals and organizations engage in spiritual ecology in three ways:

1. intellectual (scientific and academic);
2. emotional (spiritual); and
3. practical (environmentalism).

The same individual or organization may be engaged in one, two, or all three of these components of spiritual ecology.

In the USA a national organization involved in religious environmentalism is Interfaith Power and Light. It focuses on promoting the sustainable use of renewable energy through efficiency and conservation to reduce the ecological footprint (environmental impact) of individuals and communities. It was started as a response to global climate change by Episcopalian Minister Sally Bingham of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Although it was started as recently as 1998, already there are affiliates of Interfaith Power and Light in at least 40 states with more than 14,000 churches, synagogues, temples, and other religious centers. (See <http://interfaithpowerandlight.org>).

## **WHY? SO WHAT?**

The movie Avatar, although science fiction, reflects contemporary reality. The Terrans are a society in environmental disharmony searching beyond their homeland for natural resources, and in the process, degrading other societies and their habitats. The Na'vi are an indigenous society of sorts in environmental harmony with an intimate spiritual relationship with their environment.

These two societies reflect the fundamental difference between a materialistic and a spiritual worldview and their associated values, attitudes,

institutions, and behaviors. Basically, the Terrans view nature only in terms of its instrumental value, the Na'vi focus on nature's intrinsic value.

These two fundamentally different worldviews are mirrored in a simple but profound statement by a Catholic priest and scholar, Thomas Berry, in his book *Evening Thoughts*:

“The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”

Our contemporary environmental problems and crises, from the local to the global levels, ultimately result from the worldview of industrialism, materialism, consumerism, and capitalism, especially when they are fed by rapacious greed. In particular, they pivot on the fallacy that unlimited growth is possible on a limited base. That base is not only non-renewable resources, but also the capacity of planet Earth's systems to absorb pollution and other stresses.

Spiritual ecology tries to awaken people to such issues and to help them to find their own pathway toward a more sustainable, green, and just future.

Spiritual ecology is a quiet revolution in the sense that it is nonviolent and not yet well-recognized. It is a revolution in the sense that it calls for no less than a fundamental re-thinking, re-feeling, and re-visioning of society, including individual lifestyles, to realize in practice that Earth is a communion of subjects, not merely a collection of objects.

Ultimately this is the most important choice we face today--- between ecosanity on the one hand, and on the other, ecocide. Ecocide would be suicidal for the human species.

Since Earth Day on April 22, 1970, there have been many secular developments to avert ecocide. While certainly they have made substantial progress, just as certainly they have proven insufficient. Environmental problems persist, new ones emerge, and many are getting worse, global climate change being the biggest challenge of all.

Hopefully spiritual ecology can help turn things around for the better. It may be the last hope for humanity and the planet. However, it could be decades or

more into the future before the practical results of this quiet revolution become evident on a global scale.

Spiritual ecology promises hope. For example, science and religion, which often have been in conflict for centuries since the Enlightenment, find common ground and purpose in addressing the challenges of environmental problems. Religions, which often have been in conflict, also find common ground and purpose in environmental problems. *Interfaith Power and Light* is a case in point in both of these respects.

This is what my book and the website for the book are all about: <http://www.spiritualecology.info>. There is also a wealth of information on the website of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at <http://fore.research.yale.edu>.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, I would like to paraphrase an insight by another pioneer in spiritual ecology, a Jesuit priest, philosopher, and geologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:

Humans are not a being having a spiritual experience, instead they are a spirit having a human experience.

We need to explore the ecological implications of the insights of such pioneers in spiritual ecology as Berry and Teilhard.

The photos taken in November, 19, 2012, by the author in Muir Woods in this file may help contemplate these matters.





































