

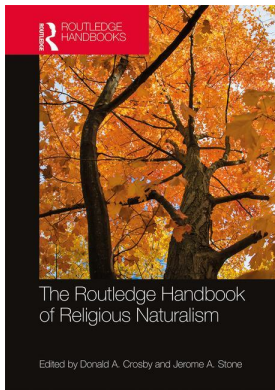
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12

SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

Exploring their interrelationships

Leslie E. Sponsel

Earth Day

On April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day was celebrated in the U.S. It was a national teach-in, brainchild of Gaylord Nelson, a Senator from Wisconsin. Some 20 million people assembled throughout the country in streets, parks, and auditoriums, and especially on the campuses of thousands of colleges and universities. Participants demonstrated against the degradation of nature and in favor of sustainability and a healthy environment free from pollution. A variety of many different organizations were involved that had been fighting against separate issues, such as oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, toxic waste dumps, pesticides, loss of wilderness, and wildlife species extinction. Since then celebrations have continued annually. They contributed to the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species federal government acts in the U.S.

Within two decades, Earth Day grew internationally to be embraced by people in 141 countries. Now more than a billion individuals participate, about one in every seven humans on the planet. Earth Day engages concerted action to change human environmental behavior to become greener and to generate appropriate improvements in government environmental policies from the local to the national levels (Christofferson 2004: 302–312).

Since 1970, a multitude of diverse secular approaches have been pursued with increasing vigor, such as environmental stewardship and management, sustainability, and recycling. These and many others are surely most worthy pursuits with numerous significant achievements (Myers and Kent 2005). Secular approaches are absolutely necessary, but most unfortunately, they have not proven sufficient to turn things around for the better as a whole. More often than not they treat specific superficial symptoms, rather than the ultimate causes of environmental problems. Furthermore, they are inherently anthropocentric with the associated arrogance including speciesism (Jensen 2016). Despite such secular efforts, environmental problems persist, some are getting worse, and new ones continue to emerge. Far more is required beyond secular approaches alone. Perhaps religion and spirituality can help significantly advance environmentalism. That is the conclusion and pursuit since the 1990s of many secular environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, World Conservation Union (IUCN), Worldwatch Institute, and Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) (Ayres 1999; Gardner 2006; Speth 2008; Sponsel 2012).

Spiritual ecology

In contrast to most secular approaches, spiritual ecology cultivates environmental humility; ecocentrism; the inherent value of beings, things, and forces in nature; and even nature itself as sacred and spiritual, thereby requiring reverence as well as respect and care, attributes overlapping with deep ecology and dark green religion (cf. Taylor 2010). Nature is not viewed merely as a warehouse of resources to rapaciously exploit for profit and greed, or as a public sewer to carelessly dump into waste and pollution. From the ecocentric perspective of spiritual ecology, nature is an awesome sanctuary to cultivate spiritual development, ultimately something infinitely more valuable than any economic development (e.g., Berry 2006).

From an academic perspective, spiritual ecology focuses on the interfaces of religions and spiritualities with environments, ecologies, and environmentalisms. Each of these qualifiers is plural because spiritual ecology examines a vast, complex, diverse, and dynamic arena of inter-related phenomena (Sponsel 2012, 2014). As an umbrella category, spiritual ecology embraces other narrower approaches, such as dark green religion, deep ecology, earth spirituality, earth mysticism, ecomysticism, ecopsychology, ecospirituality, ecotheology, green religion, green spirituality, nature mysticism, nature religion, nature spirituality, religion and ecology, religion and nature, religious ecology, religious environmentalism, religious naturalism, and sacred ecology.

Many of these diverse approaches overlap and interact synergistically through reinforcing and amplifying one another. Collectively they are part of spiritual ecology as a quiet, diffuse, and nonviolent revolution that is worldwide and gaining momentum and influence (e.g., Hawkin 2007). Some refer to this as the Great Turning (Macy and Johnstone 2012: 26–27). Thus, spiritual ecology is analogous to a vast river like the Amazon with its thousands of tributaries that feed into movement downstream as the main river increases in size and power. This quiet revolution could also be revealed and documented by searching Google for the wealth of information on various approaches mentioned above, many reflecting environmental activism on the ground beyond cyberspace.

The term spiritual ecology is chosen to be as inclusive as practical. This is in contrast to the term religious ecology preferred by John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker (2014) as they concentrate on so-called world religions, and Bron Taylor (2010) on dark green religion and related phenomena. (A search of Amazon.com and Google would reveal other authors who use the term spiritual ecology.)

The qualifier spiritual is also used, instead of religious, to be more inclusive. While most adherents to some religion may be spiritual, many individuals are spiritual without identifying with any particular religion (Harris 2014; Saint-Laurent 2000). A survey was conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute of UCLA of 14,527 new students from 136 colleges and universities in the U.S. during 2003–10. The majority were spiritual, but not necessarily religious. A survey by the Pew Research Center on “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” found that since their last project of its kind in 2007, the number of religiously unaffiliated adults rose by 19 million. Now there are around 56 million of them, a group more numerous than either Catholics or mainline Protestantism in the U.S. These two surveys demonstrate one reason why it is most important to consider spirituality as well as religion, otherwise an enormous amount of potentially relevant phenomena are ignored or neglected (cf., Gottlieb 2013; Sponsel 2012).

Humans are spiritual animals (Beauregard and O’Leary 2007; Newberg 2010). Spirituality is an elemental and often pivotal manifestation of human nature; even atheists, agnostics, non-theists, and secular humanists may be spiritual (e.g., Comte-Sponville 2008). Religiosity and spirituality resurfaced after decades of suppression in China and the U.S.S.R. Although many societies have experienced secularization, individuals still pursue spirituality including

through creating alternative religions (e.g., Johnson and Ord 2012). Some kind of spirituality may develop prior to any religious knowledge because it appears to be inherent in children (Hart 2003). There are even claims that some animals may be spiritual (e.g., Goodall 2005).

Individuals and organizations may engage in spiritual ecology in one or more of three ways: intellectual (scientific and academic), emotional (spiritual and ritualistic), and practical (environmentalism including activism). These three are interrelated and often overlap in many ways and degrees.

The intellectual component of spiritual ecology grew exponentially since the 1990s. It has been advanced by numerous international, interfaith, and/or interdisciplinary conferences, publications, and other initiatives. For example, from 1996 to 1998, Tucker and Grim were the primary organizers of a series of conferences at Harvard University, each on a different world religion in relation to ecology, yielding a series of ten edited volumes with Harvard University Press. These initiatives generated in turn the Forum on Religion and Ecology (FORE) with its website and monthly newsletter, the latter now with more than 12,000 subscribers (Grim and Tucker 2014). (Today there are parallels to FORE in Australia, Canada, and Europe.) Also, Grim and Tucker were contributors to the development of the journal *Worldviews: Global Religion, Culture and Ecology*. As another example, in 2007, Taylor organized the inaugural meeting of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture at the University of Florida. Also he launched the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (Taylor 2005).

By now academic spiritual ecology has accumulated a history, pioneer contributors, common identity and concerns, foundational literature including the aforementioned periodicals, organizations, conferences, and websites as well as courses, graduate degree programs, and the first generations of students (Bauman et al. 2011; Gottlieb 2006a,b; Grim and Tucker 2014; Jenkins et al. 2016; Taylor 2005, 2010; Sponsel 2012, 2014). By various names, graduate studies related to spiritual ecology are available in more than two dozen institutions, such as the California Institute of Integral Studies, Drew University, University of Florida, Graduate Theological Union, Vanderbilt University, and Yale University. The American Academy of Religion has involved a religion and ecology interest group since 1991 which organizes sessions at the annual conventions.

Religions can provide unique and indispensable resources, values, motivation, venues, guidance, and rituals for transformation toward more life-sustaining and life-enhancing lifestyles, communities, and societies (Gardner 2006). In their recent textbook Grim and Tucker (2014: 86–87) describe three interpretive methods for research on religious ecology. Retrieval identifies ecologically relevant aspects of a religion, such as its ethics and rituals. Reevaluation engages aspects that are adaptive to cultivate more ecologically sensitive attitudes and practices by adherents of a religion. Reconstruction indicates how ecological principles and practices may be creatively applied to a religion in order to help deal with contemporary environmental concerns. Many purists and conservatives might object that the second and third methods could change a religion, but this neglects the fact that over millennia religions changed in response to new conditions in order to remain relevant to new generations of followers.

Turning to the emotional component of spiritual ecology, some individuals and groups perform cathartic rituals of mourning and healing for recovery from their grief over environmental degradation. For example, the Council of All Beings developed by John Seed and others focuses on enhancing empathy for other species by identifying with them through role playing (Seed et al. 2007). Such rituals may empower environmental activists, as the writings, workshops, and website of Joanna Macy demonstrate (Macy and Johnstone 2012). Rituals in spiritual ecology have been neglected by researchers, but they are an important means of confronting an era of increasing environmental anxiety, suffering, and grief.

Some traditional religious rituals are becoming more environmentally sensitive and responsible too. For instance, religious pilgrimages engage more than 200 million people annually. Recognizing this, in 2011, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) initiated the Green Pilgrimage Network to encourage such activities to be more environmentally friendly. Accordingly, dozens of pilgrim cities, such as Assisi in Italy, are involved in long-term planning. One aim is for the pilgrim's experience to generate a greener lifestyle afterward.

Many environmentalists are ultimately spiritual ecologists, although usually this is not admitted explicitly, especially if they identify themselves as scientists (Essen 2010; Takacs 1996). Nevertheless, many environmentalists have had experiences in nature that they may recognize not merely as extraordinary, but as religious, spiritual, or mystical. Such experiences are among the contributing factors motivating them to pursue environmentalism. Recent studies have explored the religious connections of conservationists and other environmentalists, such as in the development of and/or experience in national parks and wilderness (Berry 2015; Mitchell 2016; Stoll 2015).

The activism component of spiritual ecology may be illustrated by the initiatives of three contemporary leaders. Biologist Wangari Maathai (2004, 2010) started the Green Belt Movement in Kenya in 1977. Since then more than 51 million trees have been planted in Kenya. By 1986, her project had spread to 170 countries with the planting of some 12 billion trees as a project of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). Bartholomew I, known as the Green Patriarch, leads more than 300 million Orthodox Christians. Since 1997, he has facilitated a succession of international, interdisciplinary, and interfaith symposia aboard ships sailing major water bodies of the world to publicize and remediate pollution and related environmental problems (Chryssavgis 2011). San Francisco Episcopalian Minister Sally C. Bingham (2009) launched Interfaith Power and Light. This organization promotes energy efficiency and conservation among other practical efforts in response to the challenges of global climate change, such as installation of solar panels on religious buildings. Since 2000, this project has expanded to all 50 states of the U.S. in more than 18,000 religious centers collectively engaging six million people. Each of these three individuals, like Nelson, proves that the ideas and actions of just one person can stimulate far reaching positive ramifications and consequences. As anthropologist Margaret Mead famously said, never doubt that one individual can change the world. These three individuals also illustrate some of the power, potential, and promise of spiritual ecology (cf., Ellingson 2016; Hawkin 2007; Hope and Young 2000; Sponsel 2012).

Sacred places in nature are one of the most concrete manifestations of spiritual ecology. Sacred places are specific sites, areas, and/or landscapes possessing one or more attributes that distinguish them as somehow extraordinary, usually in a religious, spiritual, or mystical sense. In them individuals may sense variously awe, mystery, power, attraction, oneness, healing, revelation, ecstasy, epiphany, and/or transformation. Whether or not an individual believes in spiritual forces and/or beings in nature, many are profoundly impacted emotionally through experiencing sacred places (Chalquist 2007; Goodenough 1998: 173; Gray 2007; Swan 1991).

Secular organizations also recognize many different sacred places in nature. For example, Sierra Club founder John Muir and others developed the system of national parks as sacred places in nature in the U.S. (Worster 2008). In turn, many other countries were inspired to establish such protected areas (Mitchell 2016). For over a decade now, ARC, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) or World Conservation Union, and other organizations have been exploring the relevance of sacred places in nature for biodiversity conservation (e.g., Edwards and Palmer 1997; Verschuuren et al. 2010).

Such environmental actions reflect a simple but elemental, profound, and pivotal admonition by the Catholic priest and scholar Thomas Berry (2006:17): "The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects." This is the essence of spiritual ecology. If this admonition were pursued seriously in practice, then it would help challenge the rampant and rapacious capitalism, materialism, consumerism, and associated aspects of globalization that have become like a cancer infecting the planet (e.g., Meadows et al. 2004). Nature would be recognized to be spiritual as well as material, and consequently it would be approached with far more respect, reverence, and care. Probably then human environmental impact would be reduced significantly, and in many areas nature would heal itself (e.g., Weisman 2008). Spiritual ecology strives to awaken people to such matters, and to help them find their own pathway toward a greener relationship with the environment. Thereby spiritual ecology could help facilitate a transformation toward a new Ecological Age or Ecocene.

As a quiet revolution, spiritual ecology is diverse, diffuse, nonviolent, and still not generally known. It is also revolutionary in the sense that, as Berry's admonition implies, it calls for no less than a radical re-thinking, re-feeling, and re-visioning of individual lifestyles as well as communities and societies as a whole in relation to nature, a fundamental shift in consciousness and corresponding behavior (e.g., Bourne 2008; Hawkin 2007; Korten 2006). In the process, the societies and cultures of the descendants of the original indigenous peoples can serve as one source for heuristic adaptive models and inspiration. The fact that many such societies endured for centuries, some even over millennia, proves that they were sustainable ecologically, economically, and socially (IUCN 1997; Pfeiffer 2013; Sponsel 2012: 21–30).

There is some hope that this revolution may help turn things around. However, spiritual ecology can be considered radical and subversive because it challenges the power and momentum of the hegemonic and rigid status quo of many social, economic, political, religious, scientific, and academic institutions and their associated worldviews, values, attitudes, customs, and interests (Gottlieb 2006a: 215–233; Grim and Tucker 2014: 13–18; Sponsel 2012: xviii–xix; Taylor 2005: 217–220). For instance, many religious conservatives and fundamentalists are leery of spiritual ecology, fearing that it might lead to a reversion to nature worship or Paganism (cf., Harvey 2013; Higginbotham and Higginbotham 2002). These critics may give expression to ignorance, arrogance, and intolerance as well as anthropocentrism. Yet perhaps the most serious obstacle of all is the discrepancy between positive religious ideals and corresponding individual actions (e.g., Alley 2002; Wexler 2016). Such obstacles must be reduced, if not entirely resolved, if spiritual ecology is to make more substantial progress as a practical action movement beyond academia.

One means of surmounting such obstacles is to counter alienation from nature by encouraging individuals and groups to reconnect emotionally with its awesome beauty, wonders, powers, and mysteries (Bekoff 2014; Coleman 2006; Lionberger 2007). Many children in cities suffer from a nature-deficit disorder, which also needs to be remedied (Louv 2008, 2011). There is accumulating evidence from medical, psychological, and other scientific research demonstrating that nature can help restore and maintain the health of individuals, communities, and societies (Essen 2010; Selhub and Logan 2014). Ecopsychology is one field devoted to that effort, and it overlaps with spiritual ecology (Chalquist 2007).

Spiritual ecology is quite remarkable in generating collaboration in two arenas that have previously been in tension and conflict for centuries. First, it stimulates and facilitates ecumenical and interfaith engagement and collaboration, in keeping with the compelling common concern with environmental deterioration. For instance, one of the most historic events of interfaith collaboration is the "Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics" authored by Pope John Paul

II and Bartholomew I in 2002, the respective leaders of some 1.2 billion Roman Catholics and 300 million Eastern Orthodox Church members. They affirm:

The problem is not simply economic and technical; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production.

However, there is the question of how many followers are influenced significantly by such statements, a matter meriting research (see Chryssavgis 2011 and Lorbiecki 2014).

A second unprecedented development is that science and religion are increasingly finding common ground in the persistent and worsening environmental crises of the planet. For example, in January 1990, an international declaration was issued: “Preserving and Cherishing the Earth: An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion.” This historic appeal was signed by 32 distinguished scientists, among them astronomer Carl Sagan, botanist Peter Raven, chemist Paul J. Crutzen, climatologist Stephen H. Schneider, geologist Stephen Jay Gould, and physicist Freeman J. Dyson. One of the points that the signers assert is:

As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred. At the same time, a much wider and deeper understanding of science and technology is needed. If we do not understand the problem, it is unlikely we will be able to fix it. Thus, there is a vital role for religion and science.

(Sagan et al. 1990)

It is a mistake to believe that science and religion are inevitably antithetical or antipathetic, or that scientists are necessarily atheists, agnostics, or nontheists (e.g., Clayton and Schaal 2007; Clayton and Simpson 2006; Frankenberry 2008; Jaeger 2012).

The bottom line is this—if not pursued voluntarily in an informed and enlightened manner, profound transformations may well be forced on humankind by the circumstances of global ecological disasters such as climate change, and that at enormously greater expense involving human suffering as well as economic and social costs. Ultimately, the choice is between either ecocide or ecosanity. If this seems alarmist, apocalyptic, and the like, just consider the consensus in international scientific sources, such as the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* of the U.N. Environmental Programme (UNEP), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), WWF’s *Living Planet Report*, and Worldwatch Institute’s annual *State of the World* reports. Furthermore, consider that the ecological footprint (environmental impact) of humans since WWII is actually visible in the geological record, leading to the formal recognition of a new era called the Anthropocene (Schmidtz 2016; Schwagerl 2014). Time may be running out before a threshold or tipping-point is reached, catalyzing worldwide ecocatastrophe.

It is not only foolish to frame such matters as environment versus economy; it is suicidal for the human species. If some people think that the environment is not important, then they should experiment with seeing how long they can stop breathing air. Moreover, pathological levels of air pollution in China, India, and elsewhere should be another wake-up call. Any population, economy, or society can only be as healthy as its environment.

Long-term concerns must be prioritized over short-term ones. Sustainability is far more vital than economic gain. A case in point is the island of Zanzibar off the east coast of Africa where non-traditional and unsustainable dynamite fishing in reefs has developed. Secular conservation approaches by the government and WWF over four years were unsuccessful in halting the dynamiting. Finally, WWF collaborated with the ARC, Fazlun Khalid of the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Science, and local Muslim leaders in creating workbooks in Swahili about ecologically relevant points in the Qur'an. These were used in workshops with fishermen, and the dynamiting stopped immediately. In this case the solution was bottom-up through the local religion, instead of top down from outside secular agents (ARC 2016).

To secular initiatives spiritual ecology offers an additional approach; perhaps it may finally help turn things around much for the better. Maybe it can be an antidote to the existential dilemmas of the Anthropocene. Humans and nature are dynamic and both can be resilient (Weisman 2008). It may not yet be too late to replace maladaptive systems with adaptive ones, to find a better direction for humanity and the planet to change from the Anthropocene to the Ecocene. Religious naturalism has a vital role to play here as well as spiritual ecology in general (cf., Dalai Lama XIV 2011; De Botton 2012).

Religious naturalism

Spiritual ecology has grown and progressed to the extent that comparisons are being made among religions to identify underlying common denominators or parallels in their relevance for ecology. David Kinsley (1995: 227–232) identifies ten parallels among existing religions:

- 1 Many religions consider all of reality, or some of its components, to be an organic whole or a living being.
- 2 There is an emphasis on cultivating rapport with the local environment through developing knowledge about it and practicing reverence for it through ritual celebrations.
- 3 The human and nonhuman realms are directly interrelated, often recognizing some kind of kinship, and in certain cases, with animals viewed as other forms of persons or humans.
- 4 The appropriate relationship between humans and nature should be reciprocal; humans do not merely recognize interdependence, but also promote mutually beneficial interactions with nature.
- 5 Ultimately, the dichotomy between humans and their environment is nonexistent; humans are embedded in nature, integral part of the larger whole or cosmos.
- 6 This non-dualistic view reflects the ultimate elemental unity of all existence; nature and spirit are inseparable, there is only one reality which can be sensed and experienced.
- 7 This underlying unity is moral as well as physical; humans and nonhumans participate in a shared moral system; environmental issues are first and foremost ethical concerns; and nature has intrinsic as well as extrinsic values.
- 8 Humans should act with restraint in nature by avoiding the anthropocentric arrogance of excessive, wasteful, and destructive use of the land and other resources; and in other ways they should exercise proper behavior toward plants, animals, and other aspects of nature as sacred.
- 9 Harmony and balance between humans and the rest of nature must be maintained and promoted and if it is upset then restored.
- 10 Frequently the motivation, commitment, and intensity of environmental concerns are religious or spiritual.

[See Pederson (1998) for another list of parallels. That list is also reprinted in Grim and Tucker 2014: 12.]

These parallels resonate in various ways and degrees with the so-called world religions, Animism, Paganism, Pantheism, and religious naturalism. In the latter case, for example, Donald A. Crosby (2013: 139–140) mentions that humans are an integral part of the biotic community; have special responsibilities toward nature; and should act with reverence toward other beings and contribute to their welfare. He refers to “numinous nature” (50, 126–127) and the “sacredness of nature” (128, 130). (For related views see Goodenough 1998: 167–174 and Rue 2011: 114–116.)

Kinsley addresses Animism and several world religions, the former a belief in spiritual forces and beings in nature, the latter usually theistic, except for Buddhism in principle (Batchelor 1997). Crosby (2013: 103–104, 139) also notes that similar beliefs about nature are shared by religious naturalism and some other religions. However, there are also incompatibilities among religions, and while spiritual ecology has had other priorities, eventually these will have to be scrutinized if relevant to ecology.

Convergences in thinking about religions in relation to ecology are remarkable because they come from otherwise divergent sources. Moreover, convergences are promising for facing challenges of deleterious human environmental impacts and creating more friendly environmental relations. As religious naturalist Ursula Goodenough (1998: xv) remarks: “Without a common religious orientation, we basically don’t know where to begin, nor do we know what to say or how to listen, nor are we motivated to respond.” The Earth Charter Initiative (2017) is an important step in this direction too.

Another commonality between spiritual ecology and religious naturalism is the informed and critical realization that many environmental problems and crises from the local to the global levels are increasingly grave and urgent. They require a radical transformation of lifestyles and societies to avert ecocide (e.g., Rue 2011: 123–125). Jerome A. Stone (2008: 229) says it this way: “How humans can fashion a sustainable and just life for all creatures on our fragile Earth is our most pressing issue. The religious resources of naturalism provide orientation, healing, and motivation for some of us.”

There are, however, significant differences between religious naturalism and other religious outlooks (e.g., Goodenough 1998: 171). Adherents of religious naturalism assert that nature alone is ultimate and sufficient for religious purpose, meaning, values, emotion, reverence, inspiration, and actions (e.g., Rue 2011: 100). Thus, most do not believe in any supernatural phenomena, transcendent and/or immanent (Crosby 2013: 2, 125, 127). Religious naturalists are usually atheists, agnostics, or non-theists, although some are theists as in variants of Pantheism (Harrison 2004; Stone 2008: 15, 227).

Some religious naturalists not only do not believe in anything supernatural, but are quick to rigorously reject the beliefs of those who do as nothing more than irrational faith and superstition. However, such confrontational atheism is extraordinarily arrogant, insensitive, disrespectful, negative, hostile, simplistic, and biased in summarily dismissing as delusional the more than 80 percent of humans who believe in some kind of supernatural phenomena, and in ignoring anything positive about religion (cf., Dawkins 2006; Haught 2008; Rue 2011: 116–122). Huston Smith, the preeminent scholar of comparative religion, asserted in the PBS series *Wisdom of Faith* in 1996: “If we take the world’s enduring religions at their best, we discover the distilled wisdom of the human race.”

Would the world be a better place if it became totally secularized with all religions extinct except for religious naturalism? What would be lost? Some might answer nothing, while others would point to great works of religious literature, music, art, and architecture

as well as practical initiatives in caring for the suffering such as in religious charities, hospitals, orphanages, and homeless shelters (cf., Bowker 2015; Carneiro 2009; Harris 2014; Haught 2006; Smith 2000). Would anything replace religions? Some might answer that science would replace religion, government provide all social services, and nature alone would replace any belief in the supernatural (e.g., Rue 2011: 122–125). However, as mentioned previously, all of the advances in science, technology, and other secular aspects of society have failed to substantially halt environmental degradation. Furthermore, a comparison of Tibet before and since the devastating invasion and occupation by the Chinese is a prime example of the potential for secularization to generate ecocide (Sponsel 2012: 161–168). (Also, see Buckley 2014; Lafitte 2013.)

Instead of secularization and scientism, some authors are variously calling for the re-enchantment of nature (e.g., Berman 1981; Gibson 2009; McGrath 2002). On the other hand, Loyal Rue (2011: 123–128) predicts that eventually religious naturalism may prevail globally and supplant other religions because of the growing scientific power of evolutionary cosmogenesis combined with the impending worldwide environmental catastrophe and consequent disintegration of economies, societies, and politics.

Religious naturalism is grounded firmly in science, including its cosmology, evolution, and ecology (Crosby 2013: 1–18, cf., Swimme and Tucker 2011). There are religions that variously embrace science too. For instance, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet repeatedly states that aspects of Buddhism not in harmony with science must be reconsidered and perhaps even rejected. On the other hand, some religious persuasions, such as extreme Christian fundamentalists, may reject much if not all science. The devil is in the details with such comparisons among the numerous diverse approaches considered by spiritual ecology. Even within religious naturalism there are many varieties and some incompatibilities (Rue 2011: 100, 122–123, 136; Stone 2008).

Spiritual ecology is more inclusive, eclectic, pluralistic, and relativistic than any other approach. It does not focus on or advocate any particular religious or spiritual tradition or practice. Ideally spiritual ecology promotes scientific and academic research about the environmental relevance of all religions and spiritualities (Sponsel 2012, 2014). In general, a researcher's own religion or lack thereof, and the validity of any religion or aspects of it, are irrelevant for neutral, objective, and empirical scientific and academic research in spiritual ecology, following anthropology's methodological principle of cultural relativism. However, the environmental consequences of religions, for better or worse, or whether adaptive or maladaptive, certainly are relevant, and any negative consequences deserve focused attention (Sponsel 2017; Wexler 2016; White 1967). Most of all, those who are religious or spiritual are encouraged to examine their own worldview, beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, and institutions to determine how they can relate to nature in a far more sustainable, green, just, and peaceful manner.

While in principle spiritual ecology fully embraces science, it advocates and pursues the tremendous potential of religions and spiritualities to be a positive force in relating their adherents to nature in far healthier ways, a force where secular approaches have proven insufficient. As already noted, some of the foremost leaders in spiritual ecology affirm that the environmental crisis is ultimately a spiritual and moral crisis (cf. George 2009). In contrast, ideally science is amoral and apolitical, preserving neutrality for the sake of objectivity. However, some argue that scientific facts may have moral and political implications, and that these may lead to appropriate action. Thus, Carolyn Merchant (2005: 136–137) writes:

The main purpose of spiritual ecology is to effect a transformation of values that in turn leads to action to heal the planet. Whatever religion or form of spirituality one

practices, it is possible to find a connection to the earth and to the political work that needs to be done to change the present way of managing resources.

Conclusion

Secular approaches to environmentalism have made significant advances and are certainly crucial. However, just as certainly they have proven insufficient in fundamentally transforming lifestyles and societies to become far more environmentally friendly overall. They tend to treat particular superficial symptoms, rather than the underlying causes. The environmental crisis is a result of unrestrained urbanization, industrialization, capitalism, materialism, and consumerism. Unlimited growth on a limited base is impossible. Alienation from nature is also an important contributing factor. Moreover, ultimately the environmental crisis is a spiritual and moral crisis. Perhaps spiritual ecology can help generate the needed transformations to restore ecosanity. Through inclusivity, it embraces diverse approaches like religious naturalism. These approaches can be synergetic in positive ways. Diversity is an integral part of spiritual ecology as it is in evolution, adaptation, and adaptability. The biggest worry, however, is whether spiritual ecology as a revolutionary movement can surmount hegemonic obstacles and do so soon enough with sufficient power to avert global ecocatastrophe.

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