



Ecospirituality

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The concept of ecospirituality immediately suggests that there is a kinship between ecology and spirituality, that there is a spiritual dimension to ecology and that spirituality is indissociable from ecological concerns. Let us first take care to distinguish the spiritual from the religious. It is possible to pursue spirituality inside organized religion or out of any religious context, and even without having any faith in God. As it is founded on a personal inner experience, it is difficult to define it univocally, but it is generally associated with a quest for interiority, for self-knowledge, transcendence, wisdom, the sacred. Neither is there any simple definition of ecology, a notion which entered the mainstream in the 1970s in the wake of the first big natural disasters, but which in fact covers many different areas of interest (scientific ecology, political ecology, industrial ecology, etc.) which do not all take the same view of the preservation of nature. Spirituality and ecology seem to belong to two separate fields, since spirituality is linked to religious tradition, philosophical questionings or the quest for meaning, while ecology can be defined as a scientific discipline or a political movement (in a broad sense) fighting for the protection of the environment. Yet, since the 1980s, in North America, Europe and elsewhere, ecology and spirituality have been visibly drawing closer to each other through fertile intellectual exchanges (in religious circles, including new religious movements, as well as in academic circles) and through various social practices on local or global, individual or collective scales. This chapter aims at better understanding the values and actions of the proponents of ecospirituality, as well as the reasons, implications and limits of drawing such a connection.

The emergence and main ideas of ecospirituality

Ecospirituality emerged as an organized discourse around the 1980s in the context of a crisis of the environmental movement as well as of the great world religions. But it had been in the making for a long time, and its origins can be traced back at least to the 17th century and Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy (which assimilated nature and the divine), to the second half of the 17th century and Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, and to the 19th century, more especially to the works of American thinker Henry David Thoreau (Thoreau, 1854) and American philologist George Perkins Marsh (Marsh, 1864). In the early 20th century, it was foreshadowed by some pioneering figures like Mahatma Gandhi, who popularized non-violence in India, or, in the German-speaking area, Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy and the father of biodynamic agriculture (Pfeiffer, 2006 [1938]) and Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, who emphasized the links between nature and the psyche (see the chapter by Dennis Merrit in this book). In 1945, *Principles and Precepts of the Return to the Obvious* (*Éloge de la vie simple*) was published by French-speaking Italian poet Lanza del Vasto, a disciple of Gandhi who advocated a simple and vegetarian life based on agricultural work; in 1948, in France, he founded the Communities of the Ark, modelled on Gandhian ashrams, which flourished throughout the 1960s. At the same time, the French Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin promoted a synthesis between faith and evolution, by revealing the spiritual dimension of cosmic evolution in such popular books as *The Phenomenon of Man* (*Le phénomène humain*, 1955).

The guiding principles of ecospirituality, though, were established in the 1970s, coming from a wide range of theoretical perspectives: scientific ecology, and the Gaia hypothesis propounded in the 1970s by James Lovelock, a British specialist in atmospheric sciences;

philosophy, with the ‘deep ecology’ put forward by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (Naess, 1976) and the ‘ethics for the technological age’ promoted by German philosopher Hans Jonas (Jonas, 1979) – to name only these two thinkers; and finally, political ecology, a vast cultural movement fuelled by many diverse influences (feminism, third-worldism, de-growth, pacifism, non-violence, etc.). All these ideas appeared at the same time as New Age, a movement encompassing very diverse spiritual practices and religious beliefs and favouring an eclectic approach to spirituality in the USA and in Europe. In the 1980s, the ecospiritual movement gained momentum in activist, intellectual, spiritual and religious circles. Before describing the ecologization of religion (in a broad sense) and the spiritualization of ecology – two complementary processes – I will first try, beyond the diversity of all these approaches, to outline their shared fundamental principles.

The proponents of ecospirituality do indeed come from very diverse backgrounds, but even if their approaches and motivations (scientific research, activism or intellectual debate) can be very different, they nevertheless share quite a number of essential values which stand in opposition to those of modern Western societies. They believe that Western societies are founded on materialism, the quest for economic profitability and technological progress, and that they are mostly responsible for today’s environmental crisis. They generally take a critical view of the Enlightenment and instrumental rationality, which they consider as the cause of the disconnection between nature and culture in Western societies. They advocate another, qualitative, global, symbolic and intuitive form of knowledge, founded on a spiritual awakening. They insist on the absolute necessity of gaining environmental awareness in response to the North/South divide, unsustainable resources, and increasingly frequent and violent disasters which have struck the Earth since the end of the 20th century. According to them, the solution to the environmental crisis cannot be found within the framework of ‘shallow ecology’, which limits itself to managing the environment, but necessitates a radical shift, a profound inner change. When humankind understands that it is not separated from but part of nature, and that its fate is linked to that of the biosphere or the cosmos (in the words of some environmentalists), to that of Creation or the Great Living One (to use religious or spiritual terms), it will invent a new way of inhabiting the Earth, its home, its *oikos*, which it will learn to respect in the deepest sense.

Whether they belong to a specific spiritual tradition or environmental sensibility, the advocates of ecospirituality call for a resacralization of our relations to nature and consider the earth as a living organism (Lovelock, 1995 [1988]). This intimate conviction, which most often springs from a real-life, personal, sometimes traumatic experience, entails respect for nature, especially for the sacred sites, but also the pursuit of practical wisdom and an ethical commitment to the protection of the environment and of the planet as a whole. This existential commitment includes a spiritual and therapeutic dimension, which could be referred to as ‘inner ecology’, since healing oneself and healing the planet are considered as indissociable from one another – the links with ecopsychology are obvious; and it requires contemplation, but also practical and efficient thinking. Let us now dwell in more detail on the different characters and groups involved, beginning with those that can be associated one way or another with religion.

The ecologization of religion

At the heart of religious spirituality there lies the desire to connect (from the Latin *religare*, to connect, to bind, a possible root for the word ‘religion’) with God, the divine, a transcendent reality, the Other; ecospirituality posits that this also implies reconnecting with oneself and one’s deep nature, with the surrounding people and nature, and finally with the cosmos as a whole. Since the 1980s, institutionalized religions, especially the three monotheistic religions,

have increasingly embraced ecology. Christianity has tried to counter the accusations of those who claim it has demonized nature and wanted to subjugate it: some thinkers (White, 1967) have indeed propounded the view that the roots of the current ecological crisis lie in Judeo-Christian tradition and its misinterpretation of Creation: 'Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it' (*Genesis* I, 28).

In his message for the 2008 World Day of Peace, Pope Benedict XVI reasserted Christians' attachment to Creation and its preservation. Inside Christian churches, many theologians, be they Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox, are pushing for a more radical revolution of minds to counter the negative vision of nature promoted by the Old Testament; others interpret the incriminated verse of the Bible as a divine promise rather than a commandment; still others emphasize the sacredness of the cosmos or look back to Saint Francis of Assisi, well known for his love of nature (especially animals and plants) which he considered as the work of God (Boff, 2015). It is no coincidence that the town of Assisi has been hosting interreligious meetings between Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism since 1986, or that it was the location chosen by the World Wildlife Fund, the leading environmental organization, in 1986, for its 25th anniversary, to organize a debate between the representatives of the five great world religions about the religious foundations for the preservation of nature. The intense scrutiny of biblical texts encouraged by ecospirituality has thus been coupled with practical actions, related to environmental activism. This is particularly clear in the American movement of 'ecotheology', represented among others by Catholic priest Thomas Berry (1914–2009) (Berry, 1988), activist Tom Hayden (Hayden, 1996) and ecumenical Protestant bishop Peter Kreidler, who co-founded the non-lucrative environmental organization Earth Service Inc. in 1990 and 1996 the National Religious Partnership for the Environment.

According to Swiss sociologist and journalist Michel Maxime Egger, who is working for Swiss NGO Alliance Sud, the ecological crisis 'questions the very meaning of life and calls for man to act as a person, a being in quest of inner unity and of communion with God, others and the whole creation' (Egger, 2012: 22). Michel Egger finds in the panentheistic¹ beliefs of Eastern Christianity the spiritual path enabling humankind to go beyond Christian anthropocentrism and to rediscover God in the Creation. This spiritual journey will lead humans to overcome their selfish desires and to change their way of life, henceforward preferring quality to quantity, simplicity, sharing and cooperation to competition, unbridled consumption and power. Similar calls for renewal, inner transformation and the redirection of human desires are being made by theologians and members of religious communities of the other great religions (Scheid, 2016).

The 'greening' of religion is also spurred on by Western esoteric movements. According to French historian of religions Antoine Faivre, one of the defining characteristics of Western esotericism is the belief in 'living Nature'. Esoterically oriented ecospirituality probably has philosophical roots in theosophy and pre-Romantic and Romantic philosophies of nature: 'From Paracelsus to Jakob Böhme [...], the aim was less to resign oneself to the state of man-creature than to extoll the creative mission of fallen but eternal *anthropos*; less to evoke a remote and immutable divinity than to acquire personal knowledge of a God that pervades Nature, that is linked to it, that acts through it in myriad ways' (Faivre, 1996: 25).

Naturphilosophen endeavoured to bridge the gap separating God from nature or humanity by underlining the identity between nature and the mind: they considered nature as 'a living network of correspondences that need to be deciphered' (Faivre, 1996: 16–17) with the help of meditation, of an attentive, respectful and self-conscious immersion in the great Book of Nature.

Esotericism has integrated the whole of nature, visible and invisible, into its spiritual praxis and has developed very concrete practices such as divination (astrology, fortune-telling, etc.), alchemy, magic in its various guises. These different branches of Western occultism all try to

grasp the hidden, occult aspects of nature, through the detection of correspondences and cosmic and divine analogies. According to Austrian esotericist Rudolf Steiner, the apprehension of nature thus rests on a true 'science of the occult' able to reveal correspondences between plants, the human body, the planets and so on. Anthroposophy is best known today for its practical applications in the field of biodynamic agriculture (Demeter certification). Theorized by Steiner in 1924, biodynamics relies on a qualitative and global approach to nature (Pfeiffer, 2006 [1938]). Biodynamic practitioners replace chemical pesticides with organic preparations (made from nettles, ferns, etc.) and pay particular attention to the cycles of the moon and the planets (as gardening calendars show).

Inside the new religious movements which have been forming a loose mystical-esoteric and New Age network since the end of the 1960s, discussions are centred around criticism of Christianity's approach to nature and the need to incorporate the insights of Eastern doctrines, in which nature and culture are not separated one from the other. The upsurge of interest in Eastern religions and practices – Buddhism, yoga and Hinduism, Taoism, feng shui, Chinese medicine, shiatsu – springs from their vision of the human as a whole, body, mind and soul. The New Age movement can be referred to as a form of 'ecologic religion', founded not on the idea of a transcendent God, exterior to nature, but on nature itself seen as a creative principle. It is a 'nature religion' or a 'mystique of nature' calling for a *unio mystica* with the divine, understood as universal cosmic energy. This syncretic and holistic religion, founded on a form of immanent transcendence, has not only been fed by Eastern doctrines but also by earth religions and ancient, especially matriarchal, mythologies, such as the cult of Earth-goddess Gaia.

The craze for pagan cults can be linked to the fascination inspired by native peoples' relation to nature, since in the West they are largely believed to have been able to preserve a symbiotic relation to nature (Barbadoro & Nattero, 2004). The Ecospirituality Foundation was thus founded in 2000 as a non-lucrative organization 'to promote and spread the principles of ecospirituality [...] the realisation of a relationship of harmony between an individual and the environment on the basis of personal inner experience'. The Foundation 'stands for the defence of civil rights and the protection of the various cultural heritages of native, or natural peoples and ethnic minorities around the world, in so far as they may be able to make a contribution to the experiential and spiritual heritage of the whole of Humanity²'. One of the first actions of the Foundation, led in cooperation with the United Nations Human Rights Commission, concerned Mount Graham, the sacred mountain of the Apaches. In this context, the religions of native peoples, like shamanism or animism – which generally feature pantheistic beliefs and worship of the Earth – are attracting increasing interest among New Age circles and giving rise to new types of 'earth religions' such as neo-druidism or neoshamanism.

The spiritualization of ecology

In parallel to the move toward a 'greener' religion, ecology has become increasingly 'spiritual' since the 1980s. Environmentalists are now increasingly challenging the binary opposition nature/culture, and fighting against the conception of nature as an object/a resource and against prevalent anthropocentric views. Nature is thus endowed with an intrinsic value, and with rights, becoming a subject in itself. As they are inviting humans to reconnect with their non-human environment and to inhabit the earth in a spirit of communion rather than opposition, it seems that quite a number of intellectuals and environmental activists are now opening ecology to a spiritual dimension.

The Gaia hypothesis, which proposes that the earth is a living being, a vast self-regulated, dynamic natural system, including the biosphere which makes life possible, testifies to the

influence of earth religions, as is made clear by the reference to Gaia, the goddess of the earth in Greek mythology. Several scholars have pointed out the religious purport of this theory. According to some, James Lovelock's conception of nature (which has been criticized on the scientific level) expresses a desire for mystical reunion with Mother Earth (Primavesi, 2003). For others, the Gaia theories are close to paganism, one of its defining features being the belief in pantheism, i. e. the idea of communion with nature, and the conception of the earth as a spiritual entity (Ruse, 2013).

Ecospirituality also permeates the academic field of environmental ethics, which was born in the United States at the beginning of the 1970s and is nowadays well established (Rozzi *et al.*, 2015). Since it grants intrinsic or moral value to nature, some have wondered whether it does not contribute to sacralizing it. Environmental ethics is in any case searching for a form of wisdom, of ecosophy, and as a lived ethics, it raises for each person the question of their intimate relationship to the world. It would thus probably be incomplete without a spiritual dimension. According to American philosopher Holmes Rolston, the sight of the Earth from space delivers an ethical imperative and can be assimilated to an epiphanic experience, an awe-inspiring revelation of a superior creative power, enveloping us and assigning to us a specific position in Creation. This revelation 'triggers a movement of inner conversion whereby, in Saint Paul's words, we "put off the old man" (the figure of a master and owner) and "put on the new man" (a protector and guardian of Creation)' (Afeissa, 2009: 19).

As distinct from environmental ethics, the 'deep ecology' promoted by Norwegian Arne Naess is a holistic and biocentric ecosophy, which developed at the end of the 1970s, and was particularly influenced by Spinozian ethics and Gandhi's principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*): it posits that all species are endowed with an equal right to live and that the existence of each species is an end in itself: 'The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.' Deep ecology has been studied in relation to world religions (Landis Barnhill & Gottlieb, 2001) and has even been assimilated to religion because it is founded on 'the cult of life' and 'comes to consider the biosphere as a quasi-divine entity, infinitely more elevated than any individual reality, human or nonhuman' (Ferry, 1995: 79). It has been considered as a Gnosis, celebrating 'self-realization' and imbued with esoteric references to the sacred (Lamb Lash, 2006), and even described as a form of ecopaganism founded on the sacralization of nature (Ferraro, 2000).

Nature should also become a subject, and even a legal subject, according to French philosopher Michel Serres, who considers that a universal declaration of the rights of nature is needed (Serres, 1992). The earth needs the wisdom of man, and in the face of the collective threat of death, it is urgent for man to sign a tacit contract with all inert things and living beings (in short, with nature), based on the model of the social contract, and declare them legal subjects. Then only will it be possible to dispense justice to nature. Indeed, the earth, bounded and vulnerable, constitutes a common horizon for all human beings: it is what unites them. This search for an unprecedented symbiotic relationship between men and the planet Earth does indeed smack of spirituality.

Ten years later, a French philosopher of science, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, observes that we are unable to think the disaster to come and exposes the belief in optimal risk management as a delusion. Basing his ideas both on French philosopher René Girard's mimetic theory and on German philosopher Hans Jonas's ethics of responsibility, which states that only ascetic principles of life may enable humans to ward off the environmental disasters made possible by technology (Jonas, 1979), Jean-Pierre Dupuy deems it necessary for human societies to anticipate future disasters and to set limits to their behaviour coming from beyond themselves by exerting their capacity for 'self-transcendence'. The sacred – although it is repressed by

our modern societies – is thus a necessary, unquestionable reference, since it lies beyond the social realm (Dupuy, 2013).

Spiritual issues do not only concern intellectual circles, but also field activists: many environmentalists thus imbue their militant practices with a spiritual dimension. For instance, Algerian-born French philosopher Pierre Rabhi has engaged in biodynamic agriculture in Ardèche since the 1960s before becoming involved with the de-growth movement and creating in 2007 Colibris, an association encouraging people to change their lifestyle in various ways (food, habitation, travel, etc.) by promoting spiritual values such as ‘happy sobriety’ (Rabhi, 2010), sharing and mutual help. These values are also fundamental to Incredible Edible, a citizen movement coming from the North of England that has now reached a global scale and aims at ‘transforming towns into giant kitchen gardens’ and making them ‘self-sufficient in food’, particularly through neighbourhood initiatives³. Let us finally mention José Bové, a French politician, agricultural unionist, and alter-globalization activist, whose main references are Gandhi, Lanza del Vasto, Martin Luther King and Henry David Thoreau, all key representatives of the principles of non-violence and voluntary simplicity (Comte-Sponville *et al.*, 2006 [2002]: 67–71).

Critical views on ecospirituality

We will finally dwell on the criticisms that such attempts at drawing together ecology and spirituality have attracted. Although the Catholic Church is convinced of the endless interdependence between humanity and nature, it has always rejected biocentrism. According to Pope John Paul II, ‘placing human well-being at the centre of concern for the environment is actually the surest way of safeguarding creation; this in fact stimulates the responsibility of the individual with regard to natural resources and their judicious use’ (message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1999). Ten years later, Pope Benedict XVI advocates ‘the adoption of a model of development based on the centrality of the human person, on the promotion and sharing of the common good, on responsibility, on a realization of our need for a changed life-style, and on prudence, the virtue which tells us what needs to be done today in view of what might happen tomorrow’; according to him, technology ‘*is a response to God’s command to till and keep the land (cf. Gen 2:15)*’ (message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2010). This is far removed indeed from deep ecology, which has always been critical of the Catholic Church’s anthropocentric views. Rationalists profoundly distrust deep ecology and ecospirituality. They point out that both dangerously move away from the spirit of the Enlightenment and scientific objectivity, and risk sinking back into religious obscurantism, and its attendant feelings of guilt and fear. Due to its rejection of Western instrumental modernity, ecology has often been considered as the heir of Romanticism rather than of the Enlightenment, and its inextricable links with politics, religion and esotericism have been underlined. Its romantic ideas of communion with origins – what rationalists have called ‘the illusion of a return to the state of nature’, a fantasy derived from Rousseau – and the image of a virgin and pure nature – for instance, the representations of the forest as a beautiful harmonious community that can be found in Germanic mythology or in the works of German romantic poets like Joseph von Eichendorff (1788–1857) – have been shown to have been hijacked by nationalist, reactionary, if not racist, ideologies (Lekan, 2004).

The deep regional and local roots of rural communities, the importance of conservative values extolling family, blood and soil, the belief in the naturality of social order, have raised suspicion because of their possible drift into xenophobia and communalism in times of identitarian closure. More generally, ecospirituality has been attacked for sliding into ecofascism and far-right ideologies. French philosopher Luc Ferry assimilated modern

ecological thought, and more particularly deep ecology, to an anti-humanist doctrine ‘guided by a hatred of modernity’ (Ferry, 1995: 89), which he compared to Romanticism and to the Nazi conception of nature:

the same obsession with putting an end to humanism is being asserted in at times schizophrenic fashion, to the point that one can say that some of deep ecology’s roots lie in Nazism [...] the philosophical underpinnings of Nazi legislation often overlap with those developed by deep ecology [...]: in both cases, we are dealing with a same *romantic and/or sentimental* representation of the relationship between nature and culture, combined with a shared revalorization of the *primitive* state against that of (alleged) civilization (Ferry, 1995: 90–93).

The sectarian drift of this ‘ecologic-religious mysticism’ has also been denounced. Starting in the 1970s, several more or less sectarian groups⁴ have been constituted within the New Age movement, offering their members to engage in a wide array of practices, such as working the earth, participating in the cult of Gaia, communicating with the spirits of plants, learning Feng Shui or neoshamanic rites, and so on. These groups have been amply criticized for their ideological mix of esotericism, occultism and ecology. Since the 1990s, criticism has come from left-leaning environmental activists like Jutta Dittfurth⁵ – who cofounded the German party *Die Grünen* – and from intellectuals who consider that such esoteric biases lead the way to ‘ecofascism’ (Biehl & Staudenmaier, 1995) and try to demonstrate their closeness to racist and conservative ideologies.

Conclusion

The concept of ecospirituality thus refers to a wide range of discourses, whose common interest is in showing that the current ecological crisis is an essentially spiritual crisis of values, so that answers to it should not be merely technological or material but should be sought on a spiritual level, through the foundation of an ‘inner ecology’ and an enlightened reflection about the meaning of life, the Other, the sacred. Whatever the forms taken by this ‘greener spirituality’ – ecologic Christianity, ecopagan religions, or the simple need to reconnect to one’s self, the others, nature and the cosmos (and by this ‘spiritual ecology’), the Gaia theories, the commitment to a natural contract or deep ecology – all share the same environmental awareness founded on the sacralization of the relationships between humanity and nature and the belief in a cosmic link uniting them. Although this approach has attracted criticism among religious communities – who blame it for favouring nature over man – as well as among scientific circles – who accuse it of antihumanism, irrationalism and obscurantism and fear its possible ideological, totalitarian or sectarian drift – it is today increasingly popular, probably owing to our need, in times of globalization, secularization, environmental threats and the eclipse of social utopias, to re-enchant the world.

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¹ Pantheism is a semi-gnostic belief system, holding that the universe is part of God and emanates from the Creator. Michel Egger points to 'the subtle line separating pantheism (this tree *is* God) from orthodox pantheism (God is *in* this tree)' (Egger, 2012: 115).

² Available at: www.eco-spirituality.org (Accessed 23/04/2016).

³ Available at: www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk (Accessed 23/04/2016).

⁴ Let us mention two groups standing at opposite poles: Ecoovie is an ecologic sect and cooperative, founded in 1978 by 'Piel', a Canadian who is known to unashamedly exploit his followers. On the other hand, the Findhorn Foundation is a perfectly respectable community, inspired by anthroposophy, which was created in Scotland by Peter and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy MacLean, officially registered as an association in 1972 and recognized as an NGO in 1997. The Foundation presents itself on its website as 'a spiritual community, ecovillage and an international centre for holistic education, helping to unfold a new human consciousness and create a positive and sustainable future' (<http://www.findhorn.org>).

⁵ Jutta Ditfurth levels the charge of 'ecofascism' at anthroposophy and at various other communities promoting an alternative lifestyle based on the preservation of the environment, such as the Zentrum für experimentelle Gesellschaftsordnung (Centre for an Experimental Social Order) founded in 1991 by German psychologist Dieter Duhm.