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Creation spirituality and God

Chris Clarke

For many years, and a few times quite recently, I've heard a criticism of what some think Creation Spirituality is, or a suggestion about how we might conduct things better. The gist of these might be expressed as 'what about God?' Of course, the word 'God' means many different things, and if it means a bloke in the sky then we can happily do without that, thank you. But most of those making this criticism are making a deeper point. I'm thinking of one man who is firmly committed to environmental action, and is also following a spiritual path directed towards a greater, more mysterious reality than we can grasp intellectually, a reality that is not only revealed in nature, but also found in the silence of meditation. From reading reports of activities at Matthew Fox's University of creation spirituality he had got the impression that Creation Spirituality was only about the reality of nature; or even that it was a spirituality concerning only trees and animals. We would probably all agree that this is not so – but looking at activities and discussions in GreenSpirit it is maybe not so clear just what is that vital dimension of the sacred that makes Creation Spirituality more than the expression of reverence for the various beings of the natural world.

Matthew Fox introduced the name 'creation centred spirituality' for an authentic strand within the Judeo-Christian tradition, and his account in *Original Blessing* is phrased in the context of the creative dynamic of a God who is continuously creating through the physical world. This God enfolds the world, so that all

created being are nurtured by God's presence, and God shares the creative process with us and with all beings so that we join with God as co-creators. But increasingly many people who join GreenSpirit find difficulty with the traditional Christian language for this experience. 'God' has for so long been associated with a remote male power figure that the very word has become uncomfortable; 'Goddess', on the other hand,



seems too specific and gendered for those who think in terms of a power welling from within who is beyond all concepts; 'Spirit' is acceptable, but rather vague. Often I find myself, when praying in a GreenSpirit ritual, struggling with circumlocutions about 'ultimate reality however we may name him/her/it', or else chickening out and omitting the prayer altogether, thus strengthening the impression that we do not recognise the dimension of the sacred.

For many, perhaps most of us, there may be no problem. But for those who like myself experience tensions around this idea, I'd like to describe my own position, in order to stimulate discussion.

In a GreenSpirit gathering, my dominant experience is that of our connectivity. We find ourselves embedded in a world where we are intimately engaged with each other, with other-than-human animals that speak to us of deeper ways of being, engaged and participating in the folds of the landscape and in the constantly rolling sea. As I expand my awareness to take in more and more extensive circles of connection, or as I become absorbed in the mystery of intricacy wrapped in the veins and cells of a living leaf, I am sometimes aware of an infinite sustaining power that knits me into this dynamic whole. And when I try to be more silent inside, I sometimes glimpse a reflection of this same power guiding my own thoughts and actions. When our GreenSpirit group comes together in a ritual space to discern our path in the world, I look for the support of the group, in community, to align myself with this guiding presence. Only in alignment have I

the freedom to act in ways that run with the flow of the universe. Without this I am no more than an isolated individual, helpless before the destructive actions of governments and corporations. This experience gives meaning to the Christian tradition that I have become familiar with for much of my life: I recognise in this Jesus' words about the Father who cares even for the smallest sparrows, I recognise the words traditionally ascribed to the mother of Je-

sus about 'casting down the mighty from their seats and exalting the humble and meek'.

In the Christian and Sufi traditions, however, God is more than a focus of alignment or power: 'God is Love, Lover and Beloved' (*Isbq Al-lab, mabbud, lillab*). This doesn't help me at the conceptual level since 'God' and 'Love' are equally mysterious. But it makes sense for me at the spiritual level – the level of the long-term experiential/ontological foundations of life. Looking at my deepest longings, at the moments when I seem to dance with the whole of creation, at the place that gives meaning to my existence, I see an extension of my human loving and being loved.

The difficulty here, however, is that of the contested issue within our movement as to whether or not the object of love has as an aspect of being *other than oneself*. One corre-

spondent, for example, has written

I have noticed that when conversation or writings start talking about Divine this and that, with a subliminal or explicit notion of otherness, I cringe almost physically. It is such a strong reaction – the image which comes to me is what a snail does when you touch it, or a hedgehog. It feels so alien to me this idea of a Divine Other, and very scary ...

In *The Spirit of Intimacy*, however, Sobonfu Somé writes that 'Women and men live their own mysteries, and neither gender will ever fully grasp the other.' I feel very strongly that in human love an acknowledgement that the beloved is other than me is absolutely essential. Without it there is not love, but a narcissistic relation to a projection from within myself. For me it is the same if I am going to talk of God: there has to be an element of the other – as well, of course, as the ele-

ment of total immediacy, of God being 'Closer than the air we breathe' as the Sufis say.

I would like us to engage in dialogue in order to make GreenSpirit a place where those who wish to do so can use words about the divine with comfort, and without making others 'cringe almost physically.' If we do this, then I think that our practice will more easily enter the sacred dimension that our critics call for. We will not only be looking *at* the beings around us, not just *at* each other, but will be looking *through* nature into the whole of which it is a part, looking *within* each other in love to receive gifts of support from our inner natures, which are divine.

Illustration: Hildegard of Bingen. Liber Scivias. The universe, with the earth at the centre illuminated by stars and planets, refreshed by wind and enclised in fire.



Resource Pack/Website Update

There has been an excellent and very encouraging response to the request for help with the GreenSpirit Resource Pack.

The following volunteers are dreaming with us and have agreed to act as authors/editors of sections:

Chris Clarke — Systems theory, complexity and the interconnected universe.

Don Hills — Rituals

Ian Mowll — How to start a Local Group.

Donna Ladkin — Native American Spirituality.

Jean Hardy — Economics

Michael Colebrook — Romanticism

At the AGM at Poulstone Court several people promised to contribute:

Chris Holmes — The Body

Gill Clover — Feminine Wisdom

Anne Yarwood, Laura Deacon and Pat Craig all promised to do 'something'.

Many major topics remain on the shopping list (see GreenSpirit, summer 2000). It would be good to add, Spirit & the Sacred and Lifestyle to the list.

If you think you might be able to contribute in any way please contact me.

Shorter articles, ideas, contributions of all kinds, articles from other journals or the press, drawings, cartoons, games etc will be welcome. The pack wants to be fun as well as informative!

So, in the coming months, think GreenSpirit, think Resource Pack, with head, heart and hands. The longer evenings are here, so are some wet and windy weekends, time to give it a go and amaze yourself (and me!).

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We must *be* the change we wish to see in the world

M.K. Gandhi