

INTRODUCTION

Some words stay still on the page when you write them. Or if you think them they sit in your mind, like placid babies, exactly where you put them. Words like ‘giraffe’ or ‘lighthouse’ that describe physical things are almost always well-behaved, and even quite a few of the words we use to describe vaguer and more conceptual ideas like ‘cooking,’ ‘gardening’ or ‘psychiatry’ are equally docile.

But there are some words that as soon as you begin to write or think them immediately wriggle and squirm and positively refuse to be pinned down. The word ‘love’ is a typical example. Everybody knows what it means and yet nobody has ever been able to give it one satisfactorily solid, comprehensive definition. As soon as you try to, it slips away like a will o’ the wisp, impossible to grasp. Another such word is ‘spirituality.’ What actually is it? We all think we know and yet we can’t quite explain. Not fully anyway.

For some people spirituality is synonymous with religion. Yet there are millions of people who say they are ‘spiritual but not religious.’ What does that actually *mean*? Once again, we all know what it means, but how to explain it?

For me, the easiest and simplest way to define spirituality is to describe it as a dimension of our lives. It is a dimension that is every bit as real and vital and significant to us as our physicality or our psychology. Yet it is a dimension that defies exact verbal or scientific analysis because, like a bird or a butterfly, you can feel the fluttering of its wings and enjoy its presence in your life but you cannot dissect it without killing it.

So let me start out with a warning. This is not a textbook. It is not an academic thesis or a philosophical treatise. My aim is not to dissect and analyse the topic the way a scientist or a lab technician would. It is not to present a set of facts to be learned. Think of it, rather, as a smorgasbord.

I realized years ago that when people were curious about my vegetarian diet the best way to answer them was not to respond with nutritional facts or persuasive arguments but to invite them to dinner. So my role here is more chef than teacher. I want to give you the flavour of green spirituality.

The nun Wu Jincang asked the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, “I have studied the Mahaparinirvana sutra for many years, yet there are many areas I do not quite understand. Please enlighten me.”

The patriarch responded, “I am illiterate. Please read out the characters to me and perhaps I will be able to explain the meaning.”

Said the nun, “You cannot even recognize the characters. How are you able then to understand the meaning?”

“Truth has nothing to do with words. Truth can be likened to the bright moon in the sky. Words, in this case, can be likened to a finger. The finger can point to the moon’s location. However, the finger is not the moon. To look at the moon, it is necessary to gaze beyond the finger, right?”

I have often heard poetry described like this, i.e. as a finger pointing to the moon. Following the direction of the finger means not dwelling too much on the precise meanings of the words themselves but reading between the lines, feeling the emotions that come through them. It means experiencing the words not with your intellect but with your heart and soul.

This book contains the pointing fingers of many different people. And my hope is that at least some of these people’s descriptions of what green spirituality is and what it means to them personally will strike resonant chords within you.

So I am not going to spend any more time describing what spirituality is or isn’t but I do need, before we start, to explain how I see the relationship of green spirituality to spirituality in general.

You will notice, if you look at any list of the world’s various religions and spiritual paths, that ‘green spirituality’ per se is almost never included in the list. That is not because vast numbers of people don’t follow some form of it. It is the opposite. It is because they *do*.

If you are classifying followers of all the world’s religions and spiritual belief systems into a set of categories you cannot have a category for green spirituality, for the simple reason that there are millions of people in *all* the categories whose spirituality is green. In addition to the many millions of people who profess no adherence to any religion or who follow no specific spiritual path and yet whose beliefs and practices are actually very green, there are members of all traditions and persuasions whose deepest beliefs and daily actions fall under the heading of green spirituality. So there are green Hindus, green Buddhists, green Christians, green Jews, green agnostics, green atheists... and so on. And they are all on a spectrum from very light green to very dark green, depending on how deeply they identify themselves as being an integral part of the planet which in turn is an integral part of an ever-evolving universe and also the degree to which they ‘walk their talk.’ For example, a true Christian will walk his or her talk by following the principles of peace, love, social justice and compassion towards others that were preached and modelled by Jesus Christ. Likewise, someone whose spirituality is dark green will love the Earth, feel at home in the universe, experience reverence for all Creation, advocate both social *and ecological* justice, have compassion for *all* living things, respect the wisdom and integrity of Nature (including its natural structures such as rocks and rivers) and believe in the intrinsic value of all life forms. Plus, such a person will almost certainly live a simple, sustainable, peaceful life with a very low eco-footprint.

Thus, as well as green spirituality not being a category, we cannot even call it a meta-category. Once again, we are talking about a dimension. And that is why you won’t find it on the lists of belief systems.

On many of the lists you will find Paganism, because that is a category. In many lists—such as in the latest UK census—it is counted as a religion. However, ‘Pagan’ is another slippery word and one that even practising pagans often find it hard to define, since its origins are so ancient and so varied, including umpteen forms of animism (a belief in Nature spirits), polytheism (a belief in many gods), pantheism (a belief that the divine dwells within everything, including humans, i.e. immanent spirituality), panentheism (a belief that the divine is both within us and beyond us, i.e. transcendent spirituality) plus shamanism and various Nature-based belief systems of indigenous peoples, past and present.

One of the reasons that we cannot simply put all forms of green spirituality in the Paganism category is that nowadays it is understood by most people either as an umbrella term for such things as Druidism, Wicca and Celtic revivalist spiritual practices or as a way of denoting opposition to the Abrahamic religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

The spirituality of all Pagans is, by definition, green, since it is totally Earth-based. But not all Pagans walk the green talk and not everyone whose spirituality is based on a deep love of—and identification with—the Earth and its ecosystems wants to be classified as a Pagan, even if s/he has no other religious affiliations, since that generally implies a connection with one or another of the neo-paganist groups that have sprung up since the 19th Century. Overall, there are far more Buddhists, Christians and others with green spiritual beliefs and dark green lifestyles than there are self-professed Pagans. Plus there are several forms of Eastern spirituality, for example Shinto and Taoism, which are totally green yet have no connection whatsoever with the Paganism of the West.

So you can see now, I hope, why ‘green spirituality,’ although it is probably one of the most prevalent forms of spirituality that exists, is also one of the most invisible, since there is no easy way to include it in a census. A census is a two-dimensional thing but we live in many more dimensions than two. Leading thinkers of our times, such as Ken Wilber, have shown how a ‘theory of everything’ would need to include at least eight dimensions, for with any fewer than that we would only ever see a partial view of anything. But for our purposes here, all we need to remember is that:

- spirituality is a dimension of our existence
- we experience it subjectively, as individuals, especially at certain times and in certain settings
- we can also *think about it* subjectively, as individuals. And describe ourselves in terms of it
- we can share it experientially with others, as in rituals
- we can analyse and describe it objectively, as I am attempting to do here.

My intention, in editing this book, is thus not only to analyse and describe but also to:

- convey some of the flavour of green spirituality by having a few people recount their subjective, individual experiences in their own words
- stimulate you to examine your own beliefs and think objectively about how green or otherwise they are
- encourage you to share the green, spiritual dimension of your life with like-minded people, and
- inspire you, on behalf of our beautiful but beleaguered planet to turn your own beliefs and practices a darker shade of green.

So let’s look first at beliefs.

Origins

Green spirituality—a spirituality centred on this planet Earth, which is the only home we humans and our ancestors have ever known—is without a doubt the oldest form of spirituality in existence. And it has taken many, many forms. It probably began, as our species first evolved a capability for self-reflexive consciousness, with a wondering, a pondering, and the search for a story that would make sense of existence. Almost certainly, those first stories would have been based very much on what those early humans could see around them.

Besides the ground on which they stood, ancient peoples have also incorporated the sun, the moon and other celestial bodies into their spiritual stories and creation myths, along with many of Earth’s wild creatures, its mountains, lakes, rivers and forests, finding sacred meaning in many aspects of Nature. ‘Who or what are we?’ ‘Where did we come from?’ and ‘Why are we here?’ are ancient, universal questions and there are as many answers as there are—and have been—human cultures.

Although the various religious traditions all have their own versions of the creation story, we in the Western world had never had one central story that almost all of us could fully subscribe to until, in our modern times, science began to reveal our planet’s true history and its gradual transformation from a ball of flame into a blue, white and gold jewel in the solar system, redolent with life. Geologist Thomas Berry and cosmologist Brian Swimme have retold this story beautifully in their book *The Universe Story*, bringing us all the way from what they term “The primordial flaring forth” up to the new, green phase of history we are now entering, which they call the Ecozoic Era.

We are living right on the cusp of this momentous change. There has never been a more exciting and creative time to be alive.

Of course the more we learn, the more we realize we don’t know. There are many mysteries still to solve about the true nature of the universe, mysteries we may never get to the bottom of. At least, however, we now have some satisfying answers to the first two questions—what we are and where we came from—and we are starting to suggest some tentative answers to the third: why are we here? If indeed humans do have a task, a role, a part to play in the great unfolding of evolution, what is it to be?

Many of us today look back at earlier answers to this question and feel a huge regret that, in the Western world at least, both science and religion conspired to give us a false sense of our own importance. This widespread assumption that *Homo sapiens* is in some way ‘superior’ to all other life forms, has led to a selfish disregard for the rest of creation. It has caused us to plunder our planet’s finite resources and to create such disequilibrium that we have even caused changes in our climate. Our modern values have become anthropocentric (‘man’-based) instead of ecocentric.

It may not feel like it sometimes, but there are many signs that the tide is beginning to turn. Finally—and maybe only in the nick of time—we are starting to wake up. The dramatic loss of species like bees, for example, is forcing us to realize that if we are talking ‘importance’ there are many creatures who play a much more vital and important part in our ecosystems than we do. Earthworms are another example. And most forms of bacteria. We could never do what they do and they are far more ‘important’ to the planet’s healthy functioning than we are. We depend on them, whereas they scarcely depend on us at all. We may, in fact, be the only form of life that is totally expendable since none of the other life forms actually *need* us, and even the ones well-adapted to our presence such as rats, cockroaches, body lice and gut bacteria would soon find new places to live and work.

What a humbling thought! We probably need a dose of humility, as a counter to the hubris we have shown up to now. But after all, we are a young species and youngsters are naturally narcissistic. The task of growing out of our narcissistic phase is a developmental one. So let’s not waste time blaming our ancestors or ourselves and instead let’s move on, into the Ecozoic Era.

But how? Again we ask “Why are we here? Do humans even *have* a role in the great scheme of things and in the process of evolution?” Maybe we do. And in the next part Niamh Brennan will give you some of her thoughts on what that role might be.

~ Marian Van Eyk McCain

