



BOOK EXTRACT

Extract from
Rivers of Green Wisdom:
Exploring Christian and Yogic Earth-Centred Spirituality
Fourth title in the low-cost GreenSpirit Book Series
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Embracing our Earth Mother and Responding to Her Call (abridged)

... **T**he Gospel of Thomas tells us that Jesus taught about discovering the kingdom of heaven both within and all around us. Former Archbishop William Temple noticed how, “Jesus taught men [and women] to see the operation of God in the regular and the normal – in the rising of the sun and the falling of the rain and the growth of the plant”. As with all great teachings, there is a need to reflect on what they imply in order to discover their deeper meaning. Though it takes little imagination to see how Jesus’s wisdom can be expanded and considered just as relevant for today’s world and problems as they were for his own historical years on Earth, which many green conscious and other progressive Christians have done of course. For Gaia is calling us to come together through interspiritual, interfaith and deep ecumenical work in order to bring about healthy changes and establish both sustainable and mutually beneficial harmony with her.

For some this is seen as a looking back process, about learning from the mistakes of the past and relearning things that we have forgotten. On one side of the coin, there is great wisdom to this approach. Indigenous cultures and early spiritual traditions seem to have much to teach us about ways in which we can get back in touch and be at one with the natural world. I once heard about someone finding ancient grains of corn that were found in a two thousand year old Egyptian tomb. When the corn was planted, it miraculously grew. Although the early Egyptian culture has long-since disappeared and we now have modern methods of turning corn into edible food, the grains themselves were still living and could easily be cultivated and used with contemporary knowledge and understanding for the nourishment of people today. I mention this, as it illustrates why many people find some of the great wisdom and mystical traditions of the past to be so enriching, as the insights, teachings and practices of different ages can still be deeply beneficial and profound forces in people’s ongoing spiritual growth. Such forces have helped people bring about healthy changes within their lives and within the world. For many, they are integral seeds for cultivating wholesome unity with life.

On the other side of the coin, I have a friend who is predominantly drawn to contemporary knowledge, scientific understanding and more modern spiritual perspectives, and does not see why we need to waste our time exploring teachings from other ages. He has a valid point and obviously everyone is entitled to decide for themselves from where they find their inspiration and understanding of life and spirituality. I personally find much wisdom in the Buddha’s approach to such arguments and prefer walking a middle path between two extremes. I feel that we need not completely dismiss wisdom that has gone before, nor ignore what contemporary knowledge and inspiration has to reveal. For to dismiss completely the wisdom, spiritual insights and practices of any age is to overlook the creativity of the divine continuously revealing itself in different ways.

Yet I would not wish to encourage a rose-tinted glasses view of all that has gone before. Nor do I wish to claim that all religions, mystical and spiritual paths are *predominantly* green in their beliefs or that it is always easy to find prophetic Nature-centred teachings within them. There are sane reasons for keeping a safe distance from anyone seeking to undermine contemporary inspiration and wisdom because of a belief in ancient scripture having all the answers. For we are living in different times and facing problems early cultures and teachers could not have imagined. The fact that humankind can wipe out much of Earth’s inhabitants with nuclear weapons, or can have a devastating effect on Nature’s biodiversity and ecological balance because of irresponsible farming methods, the plundering of natural resources, polluting the air and discarding harmful wastes, were not things that either Jesus or early Yoga adepts faced in their Earthly lifetimes. We do not look at the world in the same way our grandparents did when they were our age. Scientifically, culturally, sociologically, politically, psychologically and ethically we have changed and have new, fresh and many relevant perspectives about life and spirituality.

But within our growing and changes of perception we have lost important social bonds that once supported and gave us a wholesome sense of purpose, belonging and community. This is certainly true for many outside the boundaries of *healthy* religious or spiritual movements (I deliberately use the word ‘healthy’ here as there are communities that obviously aren’t and aim to control and separate people from others and from the collective responsibilities we share for each other and all species). Many are now on their own if things do not work out. Partly because of mass urbanisation and beliefs in mass produced material goods having magical powers to bring us lasting happiness, many have lost authentic connections with Gaia and the sacred elements of life that early cultures and traditions once recognised.

We need to realise that what is fed into our unconscious minds will affect our conscious awareness and actions. It is because of past conditioning that we see ourselves as physically disconnected to exterior life and have limited our compassionate natures to only a certain few we consider as being close to us. Our conditioned senses have created the appearance of being singular and distinctly separate from other people, species, objects and phenomena around us. Yet not only do mystics of the Christian and Yogic traditions tell us that this is a wrong perception, but also quantum physicists have discovered this to be true. On a sub-atomic level there is no clear boundary between different forms of life, objects and phenomenon. Similarly the research of Rupert Sheldrake into morphogenetic fields and resonance also shows an interconnected intelligence in Nature, of which we are all integral parts. These findings do not imply that all of what we experience is an illusion in the physical world, but that we are being tricked by misperceptions and are not seeing things as they really are – as an interconnected and sacred whole.

Prophetic Wisdom

There is an urgent cry for us to wake up and re-establish kinship with both our fellow humans and the natural world, with our global sister and brother species, such as many of the endangered and magnificent creatures walking and living on the African plains and living in the world’s ancient rain forests. Prophetic voices of our age such as Thomas Berry have called for recognition of a single Earth community, a single community of life. Berry emphasised ‘the great work’ that lies ahead. But great changes will only happen when people band together and get fully behind ideas. We only have to look at how the equal rights movement in America led to reforms in legislation. The seemingly impossible can be achieved when we have the vision and driving force of prophets such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. It is a difference between falling apart into hopelessness or finding empowerment through uniting and working together.

Berry termed the new era of spirituality needed for our times ‘the Ecozoic era’: an era where humans live in reciprocal relationships with Earth and the Earth community. This is subtly different to stewardship, as it puts us on a more equal footing with the rest of Nature, instead of seeing humans as the peak of creation. Berry felt that we had lost our links with Earth because we no longer share myths and stories our early ancestors had that helped them find close bonds with the natural world. Yet in the light of contemporary science, most ancient stories and myths have lost their power and relevance to the age in which we now live. Our understanding of how stars, galaxies and organic life came into being no longer matches a lot of their contents (though in some Yogic teachings, everything is seen to emerge from a cosmic form of *bindu*, a source point and centre of energy, which is perhaps comparable to the Big Bang theory).

Because of this, what is now seen as a New Earth/Universe Story (what scientist now know about the unfolding of the universe from the Big Bang to the formation and diversity of life on Earth) was recognised by Berry and the evolutionary cosmologist Brian Swimme to be needed for humankind to reconnect with its roots and the age old quest for discovering meaning and purpose, why we are here, where we are going and the unique and essential roles we and other species have in a spiritual universe. But unlike ancient creation myths – as Joel Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams point out in their informative book *View from the Centre of the Universe* – the New Story would have to be a contemporary factual and flexible account that is not solely bound to just one tradition. It needs to be a part of an ongoing search for truth, based on new insights and discoveries which will help us to build harmonious communities where everyone feels valued, is able to use their abilities, and express their creativity in fertile and supportive environments.

On the whole, contemporary western societies have lost something essential by no longer possessing shared beliefs and teachings and not realising that those beliefs and teachings can aid us in awakening to significant relationships with Earth. When we have nothing to bring us together or to help us find a deep sense of belonging, we often clog-up our lives with material products we do not need and immerse ourselves in pursuits that lead us away from an authentic spirituality that can profoundly enrich us.

The very first flaring forth of creation, Ellen Bernstein tells us in *The Green Bible*, was seen by early rabbis as the first revelation of God in the universe. Before any God of scripture or God of humans, there has been a God of Nature. For God has been working in and through Nature for longer than any human-centred spiritual or religious tradition. Matthew Fox has popularly highlighted teachings that honour Nature and our spiritual and creative being as *original blessing*, which has strong roots in many traditions that affirm our original goodness – the blessing of life and the spiritual gifts we all possess and have the potential for. As previously referred to in this book, the poetic first chapter of Genesis, which was possibly written as early as the tenth century BCE, informs us that, “God saw everything that [she/] he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (1:31).

If we consider how various people, cultures and communities have different beliefs and things they value, such as money, power or being compassionate to *all* beings, we see how these will influence individuals, groups and nations differently. For this reason it is crucial to look at our values and other influences in our societies and communities. Becoming more actively loving, which has associations with the heart chakra, *anahata*, in Indian traditions, is central in the universal wisdom of Jesus and different schools of Yoga. Christianity and Yoga have essential teachings about love, non-harm and suffering, how we need to respond to another’s pain with compassion.

Any harm deliberately brought against another will hurt us in return because we ourselves have brought selfishness and violence instead of benevolent qualities into the world of which we are a part. The Apostle Paul wrote about awareness of ‘the mind of Christ’ (1 Corinthians 2:16 and Philippians 2:5), which is about awakening to the same inclusive, loving and caring consciousness as Jesus, and wrote about gaining and being ‘nothing’ if we do not have love (1 Corinthians 13:2-3). Jesus’s teachings invariably focus on a life centred in the immanent presence of the divine and freedom from impractical rules and customs that restrict displays of forgiveness, generosity, hospitality, kindness and peace-making actions...

...If we embrace the whole – including Earthly life, the more than human life, and transformative and compassionate actions – in order to untangle ourselves from unhealthy patterns of desire for things we do not need, or from rejecting wholesome ways of living because they force us to reassess how we view the rights of other people and species, we will arrive at a more centred, nourishing and spiritual place. In the midst of such awakenings we tap into the power of authentic being and instead of obscuring who we truly are, face and work through denied levels and difficult stages and find ways of opening to purer qualities of heart that embrace the welfare of others. Allowing all things and existence to enter into and touch our individual lives deeply, inspires us into wholesome activities and actions, such as giving our time and help freely and unconditionally when external life calls for our assistance.

Healthy Christian and Yogic practices are about being awake to this potential, and the abilities and possibilities that are available to us in every moment, which can lead us to being spontaneously creative and participate skilfully in life as it unfolds. For within everyone there is the creative divine impulse. And when we create, we take part in and celebrate the creativity that exists within the universe – we become co-creators. This active form of spirituality is intrinsically bound-up with wholeness and compassion. We should not confuse it with egotistical ideas or psychologically unhealthy states of creativity, but realise that it is bound-up with that which can naturally flow from us as a result of wholesome connections with all. It plugs us in to the dance of divine creation – although that connection has always been there, we may not have been aware of it until now – in the quest for cosmic harmony and balance. Through this we are led to a deeper sense of what is *truly sacred*...