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Can there be a spiritual response to the climate crisis?

Pass the Ecology of Dualism—A Decolonial Response

Can there be a spiritual response to the climate crisis? Simply stated, yes, no and everything in-between. Freya Matthews (1995) speaks to the ecological self, individualism and relationalism, identifying that we cannot be truly individualistic, because to be an individual, this is still in relation to others. If all are in relation to one another, then could this argument be applied to the spiritual—that everyone and everything is spiritual, regardless if they are identified or labelled ‘spiritual,’ as all are in relation to the other, directly or indirectly? This aligns with Buddhism and nature-based spiritualities, where there is no separation of spirituality and the everyday from an ecological perspective

When you move pass the dualism, the division of nature and society and see the interconnectedness of the human and more-than-human, you realize how many environmental responses are spiritual—from academic research to environmental conservation efforts, decolonization practices, policy changes, and indigenous and sacred activism. I would argue there are spiritual responses to the climate crisis and moving forward there needs to be a collaboration between the spiritual and technological, moving past the dualism. The spiritual response may be what is needed to change the collective behaviours by shifting the belief system that contributes to the dualisms and splits we see throughout our ‘civilized’ society.

So what is spirituality? Spirituality has various definitions and associations from a subsect of religion, religiosity, personal religion, to indigenous and traditional religions, new age religions, nature-based spiritualities, and everything in-between. James Lovelock’s (2000) *Gaia hypothesis*, “suggests that the Earth itself is a single living system, composed of multiple inter-related parts (including the chemical and mineral composition of the Earth, as well as all organic life forms) which work together to maintain a stable global system (Hunter, 2019: 18-19). Within many indigenous and nature-based spiritualities, there is no separation or dualism between the spiritual and the everyday. The everyday is the spiritual reflected in stewardship of the land and waters while respecting all beings as sacred, in harmonious relationship.

Through the lens of the Gaia hypothesis, the Earth is continuously returning to a state of homeostasis to a place of harmony. This is evident in emergent and re-emergent ecologies that present in ‘contaminated’ and ‘damaged’ ecologies. But before we can look at solutions, we must understand the root of the ecological crisis.

The Root of the Ecological Crisis

The ecological crisis has been linked to the human-nature disconnect—perpetuated by religion, imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, racism, genocide, war, industry, agriculture, science and technology. The origin of this disconnect has been argued and debated, identified to stem from Abrahamic, monotheistic religion (Fisher, 2019; Moore, 2016; White, 1967), but also linked to Greek philosophy, situating the human as superior to nature and all beings. But could this *hyperseparation*, the extreme efforts to differentiate from nature (Plumwood, 2002) be rooted in capitalism and colonialism?

The Anthropocene marks a geological time in which humans have impacted the geological landscape of the Earth. The start of the Anthropocene is debated from the beginning of agriculture to the Industrial Revolution and many landing on mid-twentieth century, yet Davis and Todd (2017) propose the ‘great acceleration’ coincided with the colonization of the Americas. This timing aligns with what Max Weber (1904) calls the ‘disenchantment’ of the world, when the Protestant Reformation encouraged capitalism and colonialism in the name of God—further perpetuating separateness from nature and viewing nature as something to exploit and monetize.

Jason Moore (2016) speaks to the *world-ecology*, identifying not the global/world ecology of the world/planet, but of a systemic destruction that confronts the society-nature dualism. Moore (2018) identified that Nature, Society and European were defined as we know today starting in 1550 into the century preceding. This century was defined by violence and genocide with colonization, the African slave trade, witch trials, and regulation of female bodies, deforestation, and rise of cane sugar plantations. “The concept of Civil Society emerged with capitalism as a way to draw a symbolic dividing line between the reality of European property-owning classes and that of the rest of the world, now designated as a State of Nature,” (Fisher, 2019: 148). Moore (2016) speaks to the classification of Nature to include humans considered as resources, as something to be exploited and/or eradicated:

Capitalism was built on excluding most humans from Humanity—indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, nearly all women, and even many white-skinned men (Slavs, Jews, the Irish). From the perspective of the imperial administrators, merchants, planters, and conquistadores, these humans were not Human at all. They were regarded as part of Nature, along with the trees and soils and rivers—and treated accordingly. (79)

Fisher's (2019) analysis of Moore and the Society-Nature Dualism identifies that:

Social injustice in the modern capitalist era has everything to do with the equation of much of humanity with Nature, regarded as a realm to be exploited and appropriated in the process of accumulating capital... thus a necessary ideological step toward opening the door for the capitalist mode of production and for the colonialism that Moore (and others) view as entirely continuous with capitalism, regarded not just as an economic system but as a world-civilization that defines modern times. (148)

Understanding this worldview of Nature extends to the people and cultures that are associated with land, 'wildness', and resources to be exploited. This separation and dualism identifies the capitalist/colonialist mindset, underscoring the intersections of environmental and social justice issues. Environmental advocacy responses need to address not only the more-than-human, but the social injustices of the human that perpetuate post-colonial/modern-day colonialism oppression.

Moore (2016) suggests that *Capitalocene* may be a more accurate, decolonial term as compared to the *Anthropocene*, where anthropos depicts *all* humans as responsible for the degradation of the Earth. Davis and Todd (2017) identify with Indigenous scholars, arguing:

[T]hat the Anthropocene is not a new event, but is rather the continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have been at work for the last five hundred years. Further, the Anthropocene continues a logic of the universal which is structured to sever the relations between mind, body, and land. In dating the Anthropocene from the time of colonialization, the historical and ideological links between the events would become obvious, providing a basis for the possibility of decolonization within this framework. (761-762)

Whether called something different, and/or identifying the start of the Anthropocene as the start of colonialism, both attempt to decolonize the framework, to better inform the roots of the ecological crisis and the resulting policies and practices. I argue that decolonization practices are a spiritual response to the climate crisis, as they identify and attempt to address the root of violence and oppression towards Nature; *nature* encompassing both the human and more-than-human that have historically endured systemic violence, exploitation, and oppression.

The Spiritual Ecosystem

If we look at the spiritual ecologies, exploring the relationships within the spiritual ecosystem and all the varying players—religious, spiritual, atheist, naturalist, scientists, activist, academics, grass roots organizations, social justice movements, environmental movements, the more-than-human, and all the in-between; all the NATURE, we see an ecosystem that:

[I]s a complex system of interactions between living organisms (plants, animals, microbes, fungi and more) and the ‘non-living’ environment (water, minerals, gasses, sunlight, and so on)... includ[ing] the exchange of energy and nutrients [...] ecosystems are all about *relationships*—relationships between organisms, as well as relationships between organisms and the non-living environment. (Hunter, 2019: 17).

Eugene Odum (1966) speaks to the concept of succession in ecosystems:

Succession refers to the processes by which living organisms colonise and transform environmental niches to suit their own needs, as well as the needs of successive species [...] The organisms that make up an ecosystem are, therefore, active in transforming local environmental conditions to suit their own needs, as well as the needs of other species, (Hunter, 2019: 17).

White (1967) identified that science and technology are rooted in Christian doctrine around nature, identifying that science and technology cannot be the solutions for the ecological crisis, but argued:

We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject [...] that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man [...] Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.”. (White, 1962: 1207).

Identifying that the root and solution of the ecological crisis need to be religious, or spiritual in nature. I would argue that science and technology also contributed to the human-nature *hyperseparation*, therefore science and technology cannot be the only solutions either. We need an ecological model, incorporating the spiritual and the technological, the ‘Western’ worldview with indigenous ecological knowledge to address the complexities of the crisis. Human behaviours (maybe not all) are the cause of the ecological crisis, therefore humans need to be active in ‘transforming’ the environment to meet the needs of all humans, and the more-than-human supporting co-operation between species.

From Deep Ecology to Dark Green Religion

The Deep Ecology movement reiterates that the root of the environmental crisis is due to human relationship to the Earth and all her Beings, asking for a transformation in our behaviors and relationships with the earth mother (Naess, 1973). But how? Can adopting a nature-based spirituality/worldview that encourages relationship with the more-than-human, recognizing these persons as kin be the solution to the climate crisis? Grof (2012) stated:

I believe that deep inner transformation of humanity on a large scale might be necessary for the survival of our species and feel deep respect for those individuals who have recognized that the first step in saving the planet has to be changing ourselves,” (8).

So, in changing ourselves, we change our relationships and behaviours? But, how? White (1967) identified that:

What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion,” (1205).

Living in a largely anthropocentric worldview has led to the current ecological crisis. But, spirituality may offer a solution, “[...] spirituality is the potential to be much more deeply aware of ourselves and our intimate relationship with everything that is not ourselves,” (Hay & Nye, 2006: 22). Spirituality allows us to see beyond the Anthropos, looking at the complexities and entanglements of the diverse ecosystems and ecologies that exist on this planet.

Taylor (2010) introduced *dark green religion* as an integration of science and religion:

[A] science-and-emotion-rooted spirituality of belonging and connection to nature, fused with an understanding of the tiny place humans occupy in the cosmos, and combined with kinship feelings toward non-human organisms—perceptions that are often derived from a Darwinian understanding that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related (Taylor 2015: 286).

Within this context, Taylor (2015) speaks to the integration of ecological independence, identifying, “all of these ideas contribute to a sensibility in which life on Earth is considered sacred, and worthy of reverence and protection,” (286).

Sacred Activism

Environmental movements spanning from the early twentieth century Muir conservationism to environmental and social justice movements, to the recent integration of

indigenous activism such as Standing Rock and the Dakota Access Pipeline, “have been extensively characterized as a spiritual turn to nature [...] and their roots trace to religious foundations [...] categorized and characterized as a SBNR phenomenon, as an implicit religion, and as a natural religion,” (Deal & O’Grady, 2020: 316). Taylor (2005) identified that environmental movement participants largely identify as *Spiritual But Not Religious* (SBNR). Deal and O’Grady (2020) sought to understand what ‘sacred’ in relation to nature meant to environmental justice activists, leading to following twelve environmental justice activists, identifying as SBNR, and who were arrested while trying to protect the ‘sacredness’ of nature. Their findings suggest that while environmental justice activism “resembles a SBNR phenomenon and satisfies criteria of an implicit religion, it most closely aligns with a contemporary nature religion whose substantive essence is an immanent sense of nature as sacred,” (317). Their findings identified that environmental justice activism “represent[s] a transformative, but under-recognized, contemporary nature religion [...] recogniz[ing] these commitments as expressions of a fully-fledged twenty-first century earth-based religion,” (330). Research highlighted four themes amongst participants: reconstructing self and nature, re-envisioning social and moral life, living with vulnerability, and practices of spiritual and cultural work. Participants referred to feeling more connected to nature, shared in spiritual and communal practices with “transcendent ideals of living harmoniously within a sacred earth,” (325). Participants identified struggling with coping as related to navigating their ideals and way of living in harmony with nature. “Altogether, the themes comprised a new form of existence,” (356), recognizing social-justice environmental activism as a new/emerging nature-based religion.

Indigenous Activism

Indigenous activism has emerged, bringing the sacred into activism as related to environmental and social-justice issues. These efforts have led to the recognition of land and water as sacred, granted personhood by governing bodies, and offering the return of rights and stewardship to the indigenous and traditional peoples throughout the globe. The international rights-of-nature movement:

[A]ims to address the way western legal systems treat nature as property, making the living world invisible to the law. It uses western legal constructs, such as personhood and rights-based approaches, to shift the status of nature from

property to a subject in law in an effort to protect the natural world, (Gleeson-White, 2018).

Dr. Michelle Maloney, co-founder of the Australian Earth Laws Alliance 2012, believes rights-of-nature approaches are the bridge to a “Earth-centered way of being,” (Gleeson-White, 2018). While there are initial wins, many of these efforts are often met with violence and opposition from Big-Energy companies and the capitalistic-oligarchs, as in the Standing Rock-DAPL protests. Indigenous activists are being supported by activists of settler-descent. Indigenous leaders are being asked to share their wisdom and perspectives in global conferences, such as the COP26. Some would say these are huge strides and others feel this was for show, that there is little to no action/improvement in terms of policies and practices. These are just the first steps in the hopes to shift behaviours and values of the global collective.

Emergent Ecologies, Environmental-Social Justice, and the More-Than-Human

Damaged ecologies are entangled with multispecies assemblages, and the sociocultural and political constructs and policies, rooted in colonial hierarchies and otherness. Humans and urban spaces are not exempt from nature and the environment, as all spaces are nature with differing landscapes, ecosystems, cultures, and entanglements. These assemblages are often invisible, intricate, and exist because of and despite the damage.

Many conservation approaches are rooted in colonial paradigms of purity and preservation, informed by Westernism and capitalism; needing to decolonize by honouring the intimacies of multispecies entanglements, varying cultural viewpoints, and implementing holistic approaches to address the enmeshment of sociocultural injustices. Rather than romanticizing the past, new approaches recognize the ‘damage’ from humans has forever changed the planetary landscape, needing to accept the emerging and re-emerging ecologies, while also finding ways to change practices of degradation and exploitation of lands, waters, and multispecies. In finding an in-between space of human and more-than-human coexistence, decolonizing is unravelling beliefs and policies of otherness and hierarchies amongst and between species. Exploring how people are living with and what emerges from the ‘damaged’ ecologies, may provide insight to this in-between space of coexistence, fostering new approaches to conservation, social and environmental justice.

The more-than-human continues to demonstrate resilience. We are observing emergent ecologies forming out of destruction, pollution, and human impact. Anna Tsing (2012:95) speaks to the emergent ecologies, arising from what she calls *contaminated diversity*:

Collaborative adaptation to human disturbed ecosystems. It emerges as the detritus of environmental destruction, imperial conquest, profit making, racism, and authoritarian rule—as well as creative becoming. It is not always pretty. But it is who we are and what we have as available working partners for a liveable earth.

In her book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing (2015) speaks to three types of nature, identifying ‘first nature’ as “ecological relations,” that include human relations, ‘second nature’ as “capitalist transformations of the environment,” and ‘third nature’ as “what manages to live despite capitalism,” (viii). Understanding that nature includes the chemicals, waste, and destruction as well as what emerges, survives—from the Matsutake mushrooms that emerged from the fallout of atomic bombs in Japan, to continued human and economic exploitations as mushrooms became a commodity and way of sustaining human and immigrant livelihoods.

“Chemosociality involves altered, attenuated, or augmented relationships that emerge with chemical exposure,” (Kirksey 2020: 23). The ecosystems within human and animals’ bodies are having to adapt to the toxicity of their environments, finding new ways of existing and coexisting. Within the contamination, they adapt or die, both within and across species, a means to work across difference for survival (Tsing, 2015). “The diversity that allows us to enter collaborations emerges from histories of extermination, imperialism, and all the rest. Contamination makes diversity,” (Tsing, 2015: 29). From the contamination of toxins, emerging ecologies of resistance are birthed through advocacy, rebuilding, and in the persistence of everyday life.

The invisible violence of chemicals and the resulting health implication are entangled in social inequalities rooted in colonialism and racism. Decolonizing language and practices require not only addressing the past, but also changing the language and practices of the present and future. Vanessa Agard-Jones (2016) speaks to chemical kinship, and how marginalized populations disproportionately experience chemical toxicity. In her exploration of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) chemicals and environmental justice in Lake Ontario communities, Michelle Murphy (2017) speaks to how black and indigenous communities are disproportionately impacted and who’s bodies historically have been othered. Rather than

referencing bodies as ‘damaged’, she proposes the term *alterlife*, which “embraces impure and damaged forms of life... living within and against the worlds technoscience helped make... is resurgent life, which asserts and continues nonetheless,” (Murphy, 2017: 500).

“For better and worse—synthetic chemistry has altered the very composition of the earth,” (Weston, 2017: 17), the genes of multispecies and bodies of the human and non-humans, forcing those to live with the ‘damage’, finding ways to minimize and control ‘what gets in’, while finding ways to exist and coexist in the toxic ecologies perpetuated by capitalism and industrialization. Chemicals are now our kin. Every body on the planet contains PCBs (Murphy, 2017). Chemical kinship requires exploring not only the entanglements of porosity, permeability, and penetration but also the persistence and resistance within the confines and boundaries of toxicity, and the *alterlife* that emerges.

‘Damaged’ ecologies can be emerging ecologies and are not justifications to environmental degradation and social inequalities. Through resistance, communities and multispecies persevere. Referencing Isabelle Stengers philosophy of ‘reciprocal capture’, Rose writes, “New modes of existence emerge... a process of encounter and transformation, not absorption, in which different ways of being and doing find interesting things to do together” (2017: G51). Earthworms act in reciprocal capture. Through composting, “they integrate the interests of others as they bring ecosystems together,” (Kirksey 2015, 217). Considered non-native in some areas, earthworms contribute a vital role in creating soil that is nourishing, supportive of reforestation and earth regenerative projects such as those of Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve (Kirksey, 2015). We could learn from the earthworms and the integration of others’ interests, human and the ‘more-than-human’. A more-than-human approach identifies humans as inseparable from their environments, intimately entangled in one another (van Dooren et al., 2016). Multispecies rely on one another to survive, trying to adapt to the ever-changing environments. The all-or-nothing thinking of colonialism and capitalism brings injustice and devastation. For the sake of survival, humanity needs to find a space, in-between where we are now, where we have been, and where we are going that aligns with sustainability and justice of multispecies—creatively collaborating in the diversity that has emerged from contamination.

Conclusion

Can we have a sustainable, harmonious response to the current ecological crisis without spirituality? Is spirituality the missing link in changing their relationships with the Earth and her

beings, therefore changing behaviours? A decolonized, spiritual worldview would look to the more-than-human responses to the ecological crisis. To change our mindset from dualism and separation, into a place of cooperation and harmony... celebrating and respecting difference, trusting that everything has a place and purpose. Romanticizing the past, a return to before the destruction is not an option, we need cooperation between spirituality and science/technology to address the immediacy of the ecological crisis. The only hope is to move forward, pass the nature-society dualism. From the lens of Buddhist activism, Javanaud (2020) states:

Although halting climate change will require inter-governmental co-operation and immediate action, we should not underestimate the necessity of grassroots movements for achieving lasting change in our attitudes and behaviours. If meditation can awaken us to the fact of ecological inter-connectedness and to the ultimate drivers of climate change [...] it can also help us reconnect with nature and expand our circle of moral concern to include plants, animals, and the wider environment. [...] If we are to halt climate change then scientific and technological advances are essential [...] climate change is, first and foremost, an ethical problem [...] No matter how far we progress in our understanding of climate change, responding to it will necessarily involve value judgements. (381-382).

Regardless of the spiritual label, there needs to be a dramatic shift in our values and behaviours as individuals, communities, nations, and the global collective to restore harmony to the natural world. This is a wake-up call to ‘resituate the human’ (Rose, 2005), moving beyond the anthropocentric, and adopting an indigenous philosophical ecology that centres around the many connections in nature, including the human. Reiterating the interconnectedness of all beings, and that human-nature-spirit and the more-than-human are all connected and interconnected.

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