SACRED COSMOS
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The ecological, the feminist and the spiritual make a common cause.

EVER SINCE THE Cradle of Western Civilization began rocking to a perverse lullaby about a thunderbolt-wielding sky-god, a desacralized Earth, and patriarchy galore; ever since the three curses of Western thought — the perception of a radical discontinuity between body and mind, between humans and nature, and between self and the world — were inscribed in our foundational philosophy; and ever since we decided to base Western knowledge on categories rather than process and Western religion on texts rather than the uncontainable fullness of being as it unfolds in and of the sacred cosmos, a resistance movement has been in play.

The organic tradition, the ecospiritual path, the holistic worldview — it has borne many names since arising to challenge the classical Greek turn of events. In the 25,000 years of Old Europe before the rise of "phallogocentric" thought (as the French feminist postmodernists label the West’s Big Problem), the organic world-view was probably called nothing at all — other than life, the deep communion that vibrates through all its forms.

So even after the Fall into sky-god-ism and a desacralized Earth, the unitive dimension of being was championed by the pre-Socratic philosophers (making a heroic effort to preserve the ancient perception of holism, even with the crutch of far-fetched monisms); the cosmological Stoics; the medieval Christians who cherished Mary as the symbolic maternal matrix, the cosmological Great Mother of the West who pre-dates all texts; the questing hermetic philosophers of the Middle Ages; and the myriad rural cultures with their herbal healers and their rituals for reaping Earth’s bounty.

Tragically, the "new mechanical philosophy" took us even further in a stultifying direction. It shaped modernity from the seventeenth century until now, when it is half dead and half thriving. Goethe, the Romantics, the Arts and Crafts movement, John Muir, the Symbolist and cosmological painters, Bergson, the new physics, Whitehead, general systems theory, Teilhard and more all rallied the side but were marginalized by the ideologies of modernity.

Then came the sixties. They exploded with three profound critiques of the Western tradition all at once: the ecological, the feminist and the spiritual. The economic critiques had been constructed, invisibly until then, of the results of the Western psyche’s response to nature, the female and the sacred: fear, greed, patriarchy. The sixties ethos of communion with nature, the recovery of the spiritual, and a sense of loving kindness that is deeply relational (and hence post-patriarchal) constituted an exuberant dream. After tripping along into partial fruition, it collapsed into the seventies.

IT WAS UNCLEAR in that strange
people became interested in women's spirituality, ecospirituality, Eastern spirituality, and various New Age manifestations. Alas, many of those brisk sellers were far more narcissistic than spiritual, but even centres for the study of serious practices such as Buddhist meditation and Hindu yoga have experienced a sharp increase in attendance. Finally, in the closing years of the century, many quarters of the medical establishment begrudgingly acknowledged the healing power of prayer, and even the intensely secular world of curators and critics of modern art began to speak haltingly of spiritual content in many of the great modern paintings and sculptures.

NETWORKING OF RELIGIONS increased. The Parliament of the World's Religions reconvened in Chicago, site of the first such parliament one hundred years earlier. It has become an ongoing activist organization, meeting last December in Capetown, South Africa, and issuing A Call to the Guiding Institutions. The United Religions Initiative emerged from the United Nations' fiftieth anniversary observations that took place in San Francisco; it has spent its first several years constructing an activist charter with a great deal of grassroots participation. The Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University sponsored a series of ten conferences on ecology and the world's religions, out of which has come the ongoing Forum on Religion and Ecology.

When we finally reached the turning of the millennium, two surprises among the many in spirituality and religion stood out. First, the fastest-growing religion in France was Buddhism. (What is surprising, I believe, is not that the rationalist French would be attracted to the Buddha's teachings on the nature of mind — "Don't believe anything I am telling you until you try it for yourselves," he admonished — but, rather, that the French post-Christian defenders of Enlightenment rationalism and humanism would turn to any spirituality in the 1990s.) Second, Catholic attendance at the Marian shrines worldwide increased sharply during the past decade, and five million Catholics have stormed the Vatican by mail with a petition urging the restoration of the Virgin.