

# 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 world-view — 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,

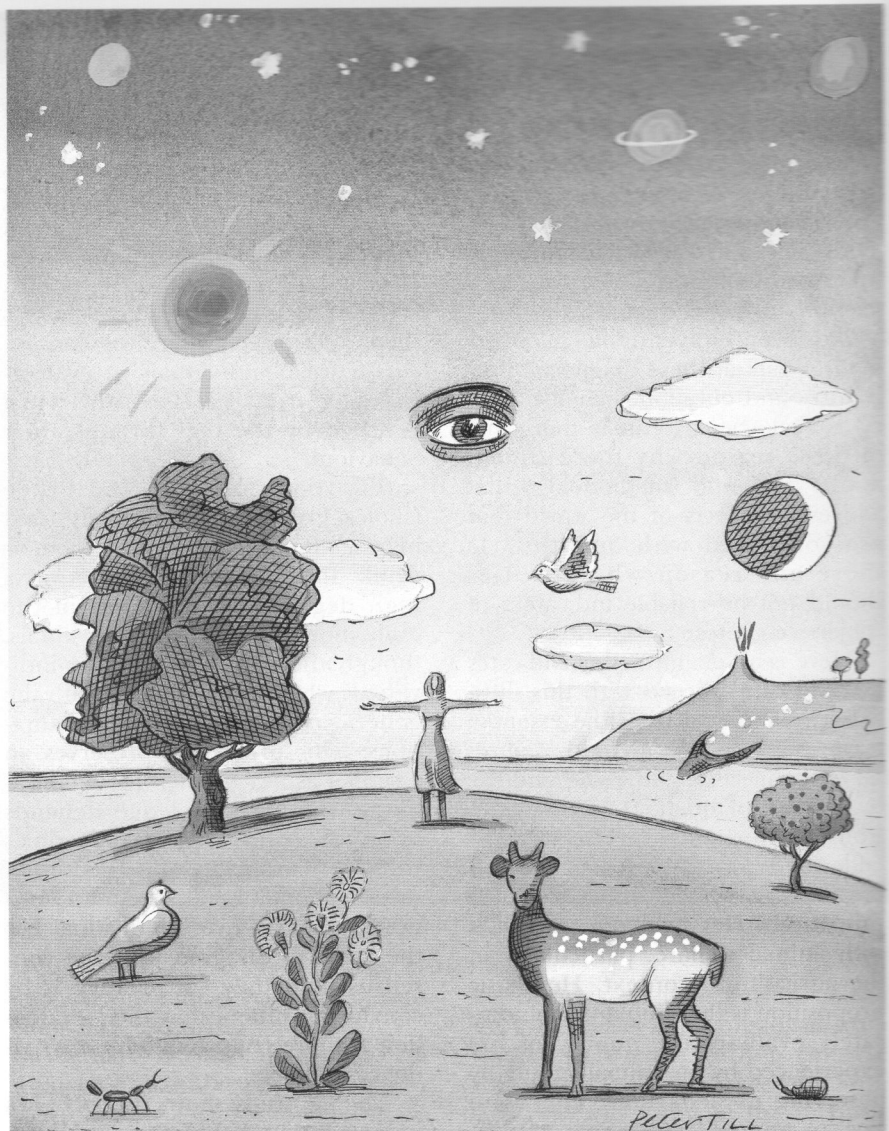


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the unitive dimension of being was championed by the pre-Socratic philosophers (making a heroic effort to preserve the ancient perception of holism, even with the crutch of far-fetched monisms); the cosmological Stoics; the medieval Christians who 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

morning-after of a decade whether any of the dream could be carried on. Only a few visionaries saw that each of the fragments could be built into a compromised success. They were imperfect yet strong enough to change the status quo in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The ecology movement, the many faces of spiritual renewal, the feminist movement, educational reforms, alternative medicine, organic farming and community-based politics made their mark. Only a gifted few — such as the founders of the Ecology Party in the UK — grasped the possibilities, which were nearly smothered as the trivial nature of the West's consumer cultures sucked in whatever energy was left from the sixties dream of organicism and spirituality, drained it of any depth, and retailed it in the most grotesque forms imaginable.

What has been the course of spirituality during the past twenty-five years? Full of surprises during the 1990s, but only after long years of slogging along. To wit, the first Earth Day, in April 1970, evoked a spate of theological articles and sermons for a few years about the sinfulness of destroying the Creation, but such concerns soon became marginal. Mainstream churches and synagogues grappled instead with large-scale feminism in their midst. Fundamentalist denominations refused to reconsider the status of either women or nature (both bad unless tightly controlled by those-who-resemble-God-in-gender), focussing instead on flexing their muscle as a political force.

All sorts of alternative varieties of spirituality arose: neo-Pagan, Goddess spirituality, and countless roll-your-own versions. The wisdom of traditional native peoples became a source of study and inspiration. A great flow of these Earth-honouring spiritualities flourished from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s. Then everyone's spare time suddenly disappeared. Ritual circles and similar groups slowly dissolved, just as bizarre appropriations of the spiritual issued from the nadir of the Reagan-Thatcher era: "the soul of the corporation", "the corporation as one's spiritual centre". Arrrrrh.

In the early 1990s, however, books on spirituality began to sell even more briskly than they had in the 1970s. An entirely new wave of

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

Mary's cosmological pre-Vatican II titles. Such an uprising would have been unthinkable twenty-five years ago, when the repressive "modernizing" of Marian spirituality into near oblivion seemed a *fait accompli*.

WHAT MIGHT WE expect during the next twenty-five years? Something new called *cybergrace* is catching on with the Internet set. Is this yet another iteration of the West's baleful leap at a perverse transcendence beyond body and nature to more rarefied realms of mentality? Is it the mistaking of a reductionist electronic network for the *organic* cosmological intelligence, the profound unitive dimension? Is it a final bad joke on the logocentric West such that our fullness of being and our deep need for communion with the rest of the natural world and the entire cosmos are reduced to words marching across a glowing screen? *In the beginning — and in the hyper-modern — was the Word?* Only?

Far better to turn off those computers and go out of doors. Meet your neighbours — the Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Jains, Taoists, neo-Pagans, native peoples, Goddess spirituality buffs, agnostics, atheists. Meet your relations — the birds, the fish, the local mammals, the earthworms aerating your soil and the bees pollinating the plants and trees. Join in celebration of what the sage Thomas Berry has called, in the pages of *Resurgence*, the Great Liturgy. Our lives unfold in the greatest mythic drama imaginable: the 4.6-billion-year unfolding story of the Earth Community nestled within the 13.5-billion-year unfolding story of the universe. As the universe acts, through trillions of micro-events each second, possibilities arise, manifest, and pass away, over arcs of a nanosecond or millions of years. The Earth spins gracefully around the Sun; the seasons in their beauty are visited upon us. Into this dynamic context of creativity, allurements and deep communion, our species brings the capacity to reflect on the grand epic and ultimate mystery of which we are a part. We respond with awe, gratitude and joy. That is religion. ●

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