

On Eco-spirituality: True, Indigenous, Western

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A B S T R A C T

This article is critical of the infusion of pseudo-spiritualities in the form of non-legitimised indigenous wisdom and activities in environmental education. Drawing on a definition of true eco-spirituality, the doctrine of the world soul, a teaching from western traditions, is presented as a viable alternative in the search for re-enchantment. Implications for environmental educators are addressed.

In seeking to respond to the growing interest in spirituality, eco-spirituality and 'care of the soul' amongst the public, in professional circles as well as in academic discourse, environmental education and associated fields such as outdoor education and experiential education face two related issues:

- To determine from the multitude of versions of spirituality currently circulating in literature and practice those deemed suitable for educational purposes, and to assess their pedagogical implications.
- To reflect on the appropriateness of the influx of indigenous spiritual practices in environmental education programs and to respond to the objections this has raised from members of indigenous cultures (Hall 1992, Oles 1992).

This paper concentrates on the second issue. In the first part of the paper, I draw on a conceptual analysis of spirituality to delineate the overarching goal of education for true eco-spirituality, that of bringing 'the sacred' alive in the Earth and all beings. In the second part, I outline approaches to resacralising and detail why the use of indigenous spiritual activities in environmental education is problematic. I introduce the doctrine of the world soul as a teaching from western traditions, a teaching which parallels some attractive elements of indigenous spiritualities.

Eco-spirituality defined

In an upcoming paper, I argued for and provided an interdisciplinary conceptual analysis of spirituality and eco-spirituality (henceforth summarised as '(eco)spirituality'), with particular reference to religious studies. In both theory and practice environmental educators need to clearly distinguish between spirituality in a broad sense— also referred to as 'broader,' 'general,' 'false,' 'anti-' or 'pseudo-' spirituality and spirituality in the strict sense— also referred to as 'stricter,' 'true,' 'genuine,' 'authentic' or 'real' spirituality (Griffin 1988). 'Connection to nature,' the popular notion of eco-spirituality, is broad eco-spirituality. True eco-spirituality, in contrast, is less ambiguous and characterised by the following ideas and attitudes (see Beringer in progress for more detail):

- Nature (in the sense of the natural world), the land, landscape, environments and/or the Earth are of ultimate importance and a source of meaning in one's life; they are 'held sacred.'
- 'God' (the sacred, holy, divine, Spirit) is in nature (immanent in the world), yet of an 'otherworldly' (transcendent) dimension. Nature, the landscape, and/or environments are a source of and/or container for Spirit.
- Commitment to the Earth is reflected in moral conduct which respects the interdependence of all life. Frequently, this takes the form of striving to live sustainably and/or engaging in a spiritual discipline.
- Other than physical-material dimensions are part of the cosmology and the universe is believed to be or experienced as a living cosmos of which the physical-material world can be considered to be the 'least Real.' Often, planet Earth is considered to be a living sentient being: 'Gaia' or 'Mother Earth.'

In sum, (eco)spirituality in the strict sense seeks to recover the divine in the form of an otherworldly sacred (Jones, 1997; Oldmeadow, pers. comm.). Within authentic eco-spirituality, 'the land' is considered to be a vessel of the sacred; consequently, elements of the landscape can be perceived as possible sources of spiritual inspiration, or can be experienced as such (Nasr 1993, see also Frederickson & Anderson 1999, Stringer & McAvoy 1992). Individuals and cultures cognizant of true eco-spirituality aspire to (re)connect with and/or experience Spirit transcendent and immanent in nature.

Goals of eco-spirituality and eco-spiritual education

The trend of (eco)spirituality suggests a more or less conscious transition on the grassroots level out of secular modernism into a somewhat resacralised postmodernism, reclaiming 'the soulful' (however that may be understood) as part of our lives. Resacralisation, re-animation, re-enchantment is considered as a means toward ecological sustainability (Berman 1981, Csikszentmihaly 1991, Griffin 1990, Moore 1992, Tacey 1995) and an approach which gets at the root of the ecological crises, these being crises in relationship, in ethics and/or in consciousness (Schumacher 1977, Tacey 1999, Tacey 1995, Orr 1992).

True ecospirituality aims to correct what has been recognised as a mistaken modern worldview of human separateness from the natural world by emphasising human unity 'with all of universal reality, in an idea of common "beinghood"' (Csikszentmihaly 1991, abstract; see also Ramsden Scott 1995). As Hayward (1990, p. 64) writes:

A mistaken metaphysics has led to the alienation between our thoughts and our bodies, between our bodies and the Earth, and between us and other species. It is vitally important that we restore the natural, heartfelt perception of our interdependence. Until this fundamental alienation and division is healed, there may be no lasting solutions to the environmental problems affecting the Earth.

As part of this project to adjust modern metaphysics, true ecospirituality aims to (re-)create an ecocentric worldview. In Beringer (in progress), I assert that the teachings of spiritual traditions can aid in this process. Ramsden Scott (1995, abstract), for instance, has shown how 'various [theological] traditions' definitions of Ultimate Reality can contribute to a fundamental restructuring of human values towards the Natural World' (her capitals).

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Ecospirituality, then, is fundamentally about healing: healing human alienation from nature; healing modern western metaphysics; healing an overly rational relationship with nature toward 'the natural, heartfelt perception of our interdependence' (Hayward 1990, p. 64); healing ecological damage via ecological restoration; and healing personal issues and social injustices as intertwined elements of ecological degradation (see Beringer 1999a, Beringer 1999b). As Hayward (1990, p. 65), writing from a Buddhist perspective, continues, with implications for environmental education:

Healing on this scale means profound re-education aimed at inspiring a deep sense of the interconnectedness of all life. This healing education must include practical methods that can help us feel our interconnectedness and the pain of what is actually happening to Earth at this moment; in turn, it must then generate the compassion needed to restore wholeness. Healing is action which shows us how we can proceed, with this understanding to restore balance to the human presence within the global ecosystem.

Remen (1996) outlines the method of healing, selfless service (see also Besant 1991, Dalai Lama 1999). She shows how such an attitude of service, as opposed to 'helping', 'fixing' or 'curing,' changes one's relationship to suffering. The implications for environmental education are important, and warrant further examination.

Environmental educators have the responsibility to help their students develop spiritually and '[t]o assist students' spiritual development ... as part of helping them to mature into well balanced adults' (Skamp 1991, p. 80). This task is aided by making the goal(s) of spiritual development and education explicit. A close look at spiritual and/or theological traditions and teachings rather than merely curriculum goals and/or educational objectives within environmental education is necessary (see also Beringer in progress).

Spiritual education and development based on true ecospirituality are, in essence, about realising divine qualities such as love, compassion and tolerance at every moment of our lives and extending them to all beings (Besant 1991, Dalai Lama 1999). This includes the Earth. According to the traditions, we are asked to transform our daily existence to such an extent that spirituality and 'ordinary life' are no longer separate; that 'the sacred' is no longer recognisable as a distinct phenomenon or experience (Besant 1907/1991, pp. 1-14, Besant 1906/1991, pp. 74-84, Oles 1992). The principal goal of spiritual education and development, then, is to experience Spirit in every aspect of our lives; to bring Spirit into matter. This is more an ongoing process than an achievement.

Approaches to resacralising: the role of indigenous wisdom
An increasingly popular way to include (eco)spirituality into the curriculum to assist students' spiritual growth and to contribute to resacralising the world is to include indigenous wisdom, particularly in the form of Australian Aboriginal and/or Native American rituals, ceremonies, teachings and activities— such as walk-about, vision quests, sweat lodges or medicine wheels— in environmental, outdoor and/or experiential education. Environmental educators frequently revere Aboriginal wisdom, spiritual practices and cosmologies precisely because they seem to offer access to the sacred dimensions in the landscape and ourselves and exemplify how (eco)spirituality can infuse and give meaning to ordinary life. However, writers from both indigenous and non-indigenous backgrounds have voiced disapproval of environmental education practices which base programs on indigenous philosophies (Couch 1992, Ellis-Smith 1999, Hall 1992, Horwood 1994, Tacey 1995, Oles 1992). The list of objections is long and includes: trivialisation of sacred religious activities when rituals are officiated by a non-indigenous person who has no formal or adequate training and/or permission to conduct such activities; putting participants' emotional, psychological and spiritual health in jeopardy; offending the religious sensibilities of members of respective congregations; perpetuating cultural insensitivity and stereotypes and compounding a perspective of indigenous peoples and their cosmologies as oddities and objects of curiosity; removing

ceremonial practices from their cultural context and tradition through which the essence of the ritual is lost; and lumping together cosmologies and traditions when tribal customs and philosophies amongst different tribes, both among Aboriginal Australians and Native Americans, are quite distinct (Couch 1992, Hall 1992, Horwood 1994, Oles 1992). When indigenous elements of native cultures are misappropriated in such ways, all that can result are pseudo-indigenous rituals, symbolism or mythologies that are no more than a superficial 'new age' synthesis (Couch 1992, p. 52, Hall 1992, p. 53).

From the perspective of resacralising the world, desacralising and thereby invalidating religious beliefs and cosmologies is perhaps the most serious offense in this list, as it denigrates rather than intensifies the presence of the sacred in the world—the latter being the reason why the activity was presumably included in the curriculum in the first place. Oles (1992, p. 20), a Mohawk/Cayuga from the Six Nations Reserve in Canada, compares these contrived, pseudo-Native American activities to 'a non-believer taking the Emblems of Communion and passing them out along the trail as a snack (see also Couch 1992, p. 54). With regard to students' spiritual education and development, risking students' well-being due to ignorance is deplorable and environmental educators need to make appropriate changes to program philosophies and practices.

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On the other hand, many indigenous people acknowledge that the ecological state of the world may warrant sharing their philosophical and spiritual worldviews beyond their culture, particularly understandings about what the western paradigm refers to as 'nature' (see, e.g., Ellis-Smith 1999; Carpenter 1996). Such a view of making long-standing and possibly sacred wisdom and traditions public is controversial among indigenous peoples. Those who favor sharing at least aspects of their indigenous heritage recognise that the modern western world can learn from their ecospiritual wisdom and practices, for example by informing policy decisions crucial to the future of the biosphere (Couch 1992, Hall 1992, Horwood 1994, see also Hoffman 1997, Holst 1997, Oldmeadow 1998). Further, they respect those from non-native backgrounds who sincerely wish to learn more harmonious ways of living in balance with the natural environments (Hall 1992, Knudtson & Suzuki 1992). They are willing to continue the dialogue on the basis that the spiritual and profane are kept clearly separate and distinct (Hall 1992, p. 54).

While including indigenous wisdom and practices may be disrespectful to members of indigenous cultures, it is not helpful to 'non-natives' either. It conveys the message that

whites have no worthy culture or tradition (Hall 1992, p. 52; see also Oles 1992) and prevents immigrants from thinking about how their respective traditions need to, and can be adapted to the circumstance of living as colonial descendants in an occupied land (Horwood 1994, Oles 1992, Tacey 1995).

Western traditions

Those who have spoken out against a potpourri of indigenous activities in environmental education can be interpreted as implying that genuine spiritual education may not be possible without an in-depth commitment to a spiritual discipline or practice (see also Hall 1992, p. 51, Jones 1997). As Spohn (1997, p. 111) confirms, '[p]roblems arise when a lived spirituality is cut off from an adequate reflective spirituality, that is, from traditions and communities that could provide normative theological and ethical categories'. In absence of relying on tradition or traditions and due to ignorance of true spirituality, secularised psychology and pseudo-spiritualities have found entry into ecospirituality and environmental education, with questionable results (Jones 1997, Williams 1997, see, e.g., Anderson-Hanley 1997). On the other hand, Macy (1998, 1990a, 1990b, 1983), for instance, demonstrates how an in-depth understanding of a particular spiritual tradition, based on personal, long-time study and practice—in her case, Buddhism—can enrich environmental education (see also Badiner 1990).

Yet environmental educators of western cultural heritage need to rely neither on indigenous philosophies nor eastern traditions to develop such understanding. Western traditions also offer access into sacred cosmologies, of understandings of the universe as not merely dead matter and particles subjected to natural (physical, chemical and ecological) laws, but as a living cosmos in which the physical world is at all times and places imbued with Spirit and which is governed by spiritual Laws. Van Rossum (1993) demonstrates that eco-spiritual awareness in the sense of finding the divine presence (Spirit) everywhere in nature is neither a new perspective nor limited to what we now call indigenous wisdom. She traces the sacred center in the ancient Judeo-Christian scriptures and shows how the people of the Judeo-Christian biblical world 'lived in a mystical awareness of the unity of all being' (abstract). What may, however, be needed is a revival of the mystical content of these teachings, particularly the Judeo-Christian ones; recreating a 'theology that is ultimately concerned with the union of God and humanity' (Williams 1997, abstract). With regard to 'pagan' or Earth-based western spiritualities such as the Celtic or Wicca traditions, the ageless wisdom contained within them may need to be extracted and/or made explicit.

An alternative: The doctrine of the world soul

The doctrine of the world soul, coming from the western traditions, could serve to counteract trends in environmental education and related fields to draw on indigenous philosophies and traditions in order to experience a sacred

connection to the land, nature, environments, the Earth. This teaching can only be introduced in brief here and will be explored in more depth in a forthcoming paper.

One of the earliest written references to the 'soul of the world' can be found in Plato's *Timaeus* (ca. 340 B.C.), but the doctrine is probably older than that (see Matthews 1991, Sardello 1995, Schipflinger 1998). To understand the 'world soul' it is helpful to draw on a Theosophical worldview, a worldview which is contained to some extent in all world religions and at least some indigenous cosmologies. In this view, the Earth is considered to be a living entity with a three-fold constitution: the planetary body, soul and Spirit. The planet is kept alive via infusion of Spirit; as Spirit meets matter, soul—the soul of the world—is formed. The 'soul of the world' (*anima mundi*) encompasses as well as penetrates the planetary body (Bailey 1934-1942/1974, pp. 17-19). Via infusion of Spirit, Earth, like all other forms of life, becomes a conscious, sentient being (Bailey 1934/1974, p. 17).

The educational implications of the doctrine of the world soul clarifies the elements which are similar to aspects of indigenous paradigms

The 'soul of the world', thus, is the vessel for Spirit in matter, or the physical-material world (including the emotional and mental realms). It is the medium through which the sacred expresses itself in the landscape (Bailey 1934/1974, Nasr 1993, Sardello 1995, Tacey 1995). As such, the doctrine of the world soul espoused in western traditions seems a valid alternative to indigenous wisdom and practice of a living cosmos imbued with Spirit. The educational implications of the doctrine of the world soul clarifies the elements which are similar to aspects of indigenous paradigms, and specifies how ecospiritual education may benefit from the 'world soul.'

Educational implications

In what ways can the doctrine of the world soul be useful in environmental education practice? Even this brief exposition of the doctrine of the world soul shows, and more extensive study by the reader will confirm this, that the teachings of the 'world soul' do not give environmental educators readily available rituals, ceremonies and/or activities to be easily included in the curriculum. The 'world soul' is immune from being 'watered down' into a pseudo-ecospirituality due to educators' ignorance regarding the necessity and/or an unwillingness to engage in-depth with the teachings of a spiritual tradition.

The doctrine of the world soul, further, does not replace religious practice or spiritual discipline to further one's own and—implicitly, by modelling—students' spiritual development (see also Besant 1991, p. 22, p. 61, Cheney

1984). The 'world soul' is not a spiritual tradition per se nor is it a method; a religious practice in the sense of systematic guidance into the contents of the doctrine of the world soul and experience of it is not to be found in the doctrine but is contained, as stated, in the various spiritual traditions of this world. As such, the doctrine of the world soul is affiliated with any of the western, eastern and indigenous traditions, and any individual interested in the 'world soul' can remain loyal to her/his respective tradition of choice. Moreover, the 'world soul' is an inclusive teaching and thus, a prime candidate for an ecospiritual education which aims to cater for diverse and multicultural student populations.

Details on how the doctrine of the world soul can be integrated into environmental education practice—of how Spirit can be brought into matter via environmental education—will be discussed in a sequel to this article. For now, it will have to suffice to claim that the doctrine of the world soul supports ecospiritual education in the following ways:

- The 'world soul' helps environmental educators discriminate between ecospirituality in the strict and in the broad sense, and thereby, to formulate realistic goals for ecospiritual education.

Infusing ordinary life with Spirit, experiencing and expressing 'the sacred' in everyday activity, is the ultimate ideal of spiritual development and one that should guide educational practice. However, authentic ecospirituality may escape the more conventional means of environmental education; broad ecospirituality, or a connection between student and 'the land' on the physical, emotional and/or mental dimensions may be more feasible and attainable (see Beringer in progress for more detail). As religious scholars insist, it is questionable whether union with the divine or Spirit can be achieved without some kind of spiritual practice (Oldmeadow, pers. comm.).

- It helps us understand why people respond to different places differently.

Places, in particular the 'spirit of place' (*genius loci*) are expressions of the world soul. Depending on their particular level of spiritual development, individuals respond to the *genius loci* differently. Thus, some places are more conducive to facilitate a particular student's spiritual development than others (see also Tacey 1995, p. 158).

- The 'world soul' enables environmental educators to present a worldview beyond the one promoted by modern western science and often cited as the root cause of the ecological challenges.

The 'world soul' advances a paradigm which does not unreservedly draw on native sacred cosmologies, yet it offers a worldview which contains similarly attractive teachings of a living cosmos imbued with Spirit.

- The 'world soul' gives us a goal to work toward in our own spiritual development, to be able to sense Spirit

everywhere and any time, and to role model the techniques and effects of systematic and rigorous spiritual practice to our students.

Role modeling and experience may be the best way to teach true ecospirituality. Embodying ecospiritual values and practices and demonstrating, by one's living example, how divine qualities can be incorporated into everyday life—these are the means to promote true ecospirituality (Besant 1991, p. 22, Dalai Lama 1999).

Conclusion

As I have concluded in an upcoming paper (Beringer in progress), environmental education has important contributions to make to (eco)spirituality, both conceptually as well as pedagogically, but it can not do so in isolation from spiritual traditions, wisdom, practices, and teachings. This paper has argued that ecospiritual education needs to eschew non-legitimised, particularly indigenous methods, instead researching western traditions and how their teachings can be adapted to immigrant cultures and multicultural student populations. It has been argued further that the doctrine of the world soul meets the criteria of inclusive and non-imposing ecospiritual education. Genuine ecospiritual education and learning is best achieved when teachers are themselves engaged in serious forms of spiritual development which are rigorous and practical enough to emanate into teachers' lives and practices but at the same time gentle enough to not offend students. Macy's Buddhism-influenced environmental education was cited as an example.

As spiritual wisdom states, we sense and respond to the sacred (divinity) in the 'not-self' to the extent that we have realised our own divinity. It further states that changing the world begins with oneself. The mandate of ecospiritual education in environmental education is thus, in essence, a mandate for environmental educators. The 'world soul,' re-enchantment of the world and consequently, movements toward ecological sustainability will be facilitated much more swiftly by environmental educators committing to their own (eco)spiritual development. ☸

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