

Nature Religion and the Modern World:

The Returning Relevance of Pagan Spirituality

by Gus diZerega

Nature religion is the world's primordial spiritual tradition. In its purest form, it is still practiced among traditional indigenous peoples. It is also the earliest tradition of our own ancestors. Today the appeal of nature religion in its various forms is growing again among modern Westerners. But even among the spiritually sophisticated, often little is known about it.

Historically there have been two broad approaches to how our world is related to the sacred. From each perspective a particular family of spiritual practices has arisen which reflect that core conception. First, there are those spiritual traditions which conceive of the natural world as innately sacred because it is a direct and on going manifestation of spiritual power. Second are those traditions which conceive of the world as in some sense separated from, even antithetical to, the spiritual. Whereas in the first perspective the world of nature can provide an entry in to deeper immersion within the world of Spirit, in the second it is usually considered an impediment, or even a barrier to our Spiritual awareness. The nature religions are expressions of the first of these two perspectives.

Nature religions focus mostly on Spirit's immanent dimension because their practitioners see our embodied existence as a blessing and a gift to be lived and a gift to be appreciated. For the nature religions, the natural world is sacred, aware, beyond our ken, and powerful, as well as extraordinarily beautiful. In fact, the Navajo word for basic reality, *hózhó*, is translated as "Beauty." The Lakota term for the ultimate reality is *Wakan Tanka*, which means the Great Mystery. For the Crow, *Akbaatatdía* is the pervasive force and meaning within and above the

cosmos. These terms refer both to the transcendental dimension of Spirit, and to its immanent presence in the reality within which we live. The transcendent truly exists, and shines through everything that is. It is responsible for all that we see and are, and is honored and revered. Everything that exists is inspirited.

Nature religions focus on spiritual truths and symbols revealed by natural cycles, such as the turning of the seasons and phases of the moon. Other spiritual insights are found in the fundamental features of the world as we experience it: thunder, lightning, rivers, mountains, waterfalls, forests and birds and animals. In addition, these religions often find spiritual meaning and instruction in natural processes such as sexuality, birth, and death. It is here that their spiritual insights can be most profound. What taken in isolation may appear a basic imperfection or misfortune in existence, such as death, takes on a different meaning when conceived as part of an eternal and sacred cycle. Like life's other basic characteristics, death then becomes a sacrament.

In contrast to religions which emphasize salvation from a world of tears and a consequent focus on Spirit's transcendent dimension, the nature religions focus largely upon spirit beings and realms which are not themselves fully transcendent in character. Among contemporary examples would be White Buffalo Woman among the Lakota, Coyote and Raven among many Native American tribes, the Kami in Shinto, Orixás such as Xango and Iansa in Umbanda, Candomble, Santeria, and their African predecessors, and the Lord and Lady in traditional Wicca. None of these spiritual entities are identified with the highest spiritual power recognized by these traditions, a power which is the ultimate source or creator of all. Yet all play central and decisive roles in these religions' spiritual practices.

Without exception, the nature religions emphasize that the most appropriate task for human beings is to live in respectful harmony with forces of the natural world, forces which also manifest the presence of Spirit in all things. From the perspective of the nature religions, our spiritual task is to be a good member within the wider sacred community encompassing all that surrounds us. This community helps us to live in harmony with and respect for all things, and for the Spirit within all.

Within the nature religions, individuals find their fulfillment as members within a earthly community, rather than seeking to transcend it. Accordingly, here we find a focus upon spiritual relationship as a primary value, rather than concentrating so intently upon individual spiritual mastery. The African proverb “I am because we are” perfectly captures this sense of relationship. My existence reflects all my relationships, and my life is most blessed to the extent I harmoniously sustain those relations. For example, upon entering sweat lodges a customary gesture is to touch the ground and say “All My Relations,” thereby honoring and inviting all to partake of its healing. Far from being in a hurry for our growing embodiment and attaining transcendence, nature religions seek deeply to honor the lives we are given.

Physical things have spirit dimensions which can interact with us. The spiritual dimensions of all natural processes, particularly plants, animals, and ancestors are the primary teachers along this path. Approached properly, our relations with the world integrate Spirit and the material in a sacred and fulfilling way.

Often, through ignorance or pride we fall out of harmony with this community, and need to restore it. The restoration and preservation of harmonious relationships is a basic task of nature religion. Many of its rituals and practices focus upon re-establishing or preserving harmonious

human relationships with the rest of the world. This emphasis flows naturally from the belief that the world is not fallen.

From this perspective, spiritual growth is judged by a person's degree of harmony with and understanding of the spiritual forces of nature, rather than by ascetic standards for overcoming the temptations of "the flesh." While asceticism and personal sacrifice often do play a prominent role in the nature religions, perhaps most spectacularly in the Plains Indian Sun Dance, their role is not to disparage or transcend the flesh. Such practices serve instead to give thanks, restore harmony, or seek spiritual wisdom and power. To sacrifice the flesh is to part with a great good, not dispense with or demonstrate mastery over an impediment. This is the opposite of mortifying the flesh to demonstrate the superiority of Spirit over matter. One Crow Sun Dancer told me his pain from piercing was his gift to his community, like the pain women suffer in childbirth. Embodiment is a blessing.

Because of their focus on Spirit as immanent in nature, as a rule these religions possess no sacred texts or strongly institutionalized hierarchies. Spirit is potentially accessible to all of us. It does not have to be provided second hand. Consequently, nature religions are largely experiential, for each practitioner stands in a direct and personal relationship with Spirit. To be sure, there are spiritual teachers within each tradition - women and men whose spiritual wisdom qualifies them as guides for others. But none are regarded as infallible. None dispense Holy Writ. Different nature traditions provide alternative means for interpreting people's relationship with Spirit, but ultimately its meaning is between each person and Spirit.

Fate and the Shift From Harmony to Salvation

As I use it, the term “nature religion” is not identical to “Pagan religion.” The overlap between the two is substantial, but not complete. All nature religions are called “Pagan,” and properly so. But Pagan spirituality is not in every case a nature religion in the sense I use here. For example, in classical times there were Pagan practices which departed in varying degrees from nature immersed spirituality. That human beings frequently failed to live up to appropriate spiritual standards was no new thing. What was new was the diagnosis offered for this failure, and so also the prescription for its rectification. Some late Pagan philosophers went so far as to say that physical matter was the source of evil, although not itself intrinsically evil, endorsing spiritual practices every bit as world denying as with more purely transcendental religions. Discovering the reasons for this radical departure from primordial tradition is important.

The usual view is that a sudden increase in spiritual development occurred among human beings. With this increase of spiritual maturity ensued the advent of the “Wisdom Traditions.” Hinduism, Judaism, and other “world religions” arose to supplant the earlier, more parochial, nature religions. Without denying the validity of these new religious traditions, I want to offer an alternative interpretation to this major spiritual transformation.

How we interpret “Fate” may be the key to understanding this departure. Fate can refer to a natural order inherent in all things, an order with which it is wise to live in harmony. There is no gulf between this view of Fate and that of the nature religions.

But Fate can also be considered a mostly capricious and disruptive force that requires manipulation, propitiation, or protection against by a tutelary deity. Insofar as this second dimension of the concept gained precedence over the first, the idea of spiritual harmony in the world is replaced by a dissociation of humanity from the natural order. The world is experienced as flawed and threatening.

I believe this momentous shift in humankind's relationship with the natural world was rooted in the change from hunting and gathering to increasingly agricultural rooted ways of life. Having to grow crops which must be defended from natural processes by human action guarantees conflicts between human beings and those processes. Most obviously, farmers are more subject to the vagaries of weather than are hunters. When a drought hits or floods pour through, hunters simply leave. A farmer, by contrast, has made a substantial investment in the land. For the hunter, nature's bounty can appear as a gift, and an act of spiritual cooperation between hunter and hunted. A farmer toiling long in the fields, battling insects and animals and the weather, is less likely to take such a purely benign stance towards nature. Even plants and animals which a hunter welcomes as nature's gifts can be disliked by farmers striving to keep their fields weed and herbivore free.

Just as important, the larger, if harder working, populations agriculture made possible allowed for far more centralized and hierarchical societies to arise in many parts of the world. As a rule, these societies consistently exploited their poor and the peasants for the benefit of ruling classes of nobles, warriors and priests. It was often no blessing to be born a serf or peasant, working long hours in fields that belonged to someone else who took the best of the fruit of the land.

The natural and social miseries of agricultural life contrasted powerfully with the unchanging procession of the eternal stars, seemingly free from corruption and decay. As a result, it is likely that the widespread belief that the heavens were unchanging and perfect compared to the mutable character of life on earth also contributed to this apparent dissociation

of Spirit from the world.¹ Almost certainly for these reasons, and possibly for others, the role of natural processes could not help but become more ambivalent in their implications for human well being within an agricultural order than within a hunting and gathering one.

From an immanentist perspective, religion can be both based upon valid spiritual insight and simultaneopously reflect the society in which it exists. Consequently, religions within agricultural orders dominated by large socially and politically hierarchical cities will differ in form and flavor from that of small hunting and gathering societies. For example, a tribe of hunter gatherers could hardly use the metaphor “King” to describe their highest spiritual power, for they had no kings. Speaking broadly, during the first millennium BC in centers of high culture all across the Old World, religions arose which vigorously rejected the world in which we live. They viewed humanity and human society as deeply flawed, and the world itself as a vale of tears, a fallen realm, a place of suffering and illusion. This perspective stood in sharp contrast to the orientation of the nature religions. It was during this period that the world’s major historical religions first arose.²

Unlike the nature religions, the world’s great historical faiths are soteriological; that is, they are concerned in one way or another with our salvation. These religions’ exoteric messages, the messages by which they attract the bulk of their members, begin with accounts of the basic shortcomings of human existence, and offer their adherents some way out of this miserable state. In its place they exalt another infinitely preferable reality, a reality into which usually only genuine believers and devotees can enter.

¹ I know of nowhere that this point is made, but suggestive hints can be found in Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) p.158-161.

² Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) pp. 22-23.

The distinction between nature and soteriological religion is most evident when contrasting their views of the afterlife. While soteriological religions promise final release, liberation, and eternal bliss, the nature religions do not emphasize these goals. The beauty and sacredness of the world wherein we already live leads many primal peoples to regard the afterlife as a continuation of embodied existence. In many cases they believe death leads again to life, with their return considered more blessing than curse.

For example, in *The Education of Little Tree*, the Cherokee, Little Tree, returns to find his ailing grandmother has passed on, as had his grandfather not long before. She left him a note: “Little Tree, I must go. Like you feel the trees, feel for us when you are listening. We will wait for you. Next time will be better. All is well. Granma.”³ Another illustration can be found in traditional Wicca, where there is a teaching that “to fulfill love you must return again at the same time and place as the loved one, and you must remember and love them again.”⁴

The nature religions’ emphasis on physical life’s basic goodness, and Spirit’s immanence within it, places us in a different relationship with the world of Spirit than that emphasized by salvation oriented traditions. Spiritual fulfillment is found with others, within a community which is itself a reflection, or emanation, of Spirit. Far from separating itself from the world, this community is the world - but the world considered in a far deeper sense than is the case today.

Because of this difference between the nature and soteriological religions, it is easy for those accustomed only to salvational religion to misunderstand the meaning nature religions have

³ Forrest Carter, *The Education of Little Tree*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), p.214. Some have questioned the authenticity of Carter’s story. I gave the book to a traditional Cherokee, who loved it, gave it to her daughter, and said it was an accurate account of their beliefs.

for their adherents. In so doing they miss their deeper spiritual significance. They also misunderstand the growing appeal the nature religions have for the modern mind.

For here is a paradox. The contemporary technological, urban and secular West is more open to the kind of spirituality celebrated in nature religion than any society in our recent history. This openness by modern Westerners is particularly great with regard to the relationship of these religions' transcendental dimension with divine immanence. The central distinction between the nature and soteriological religions; their conflicting judgments about the character of embodied life, is basic to grasping this paradox.

The societies wherein the soteriological religions first arose were characterized by enormous inequalities in wealth and power. This human world was afflicted by warfare, exploitation, slavery and the ever present threat of famine and plague. The powerful frequently achieved their success through violence and deceit. Unlike the smaller communities which characterized most societies practicing nature religions, and whose members could easily exercise collective control over the ruthlessly ambitious, these larger hierarchical orders seemed to demonstrate that there was little connection between worldly success and living in harmony with ones' neighbors, human or otherwise. Inordinate ambition wedded to a calculating and manipulative mind often led to personal success, not community ostracism.

Some scholars have suggested that the modern concept of the individual had its earliest roots in kingship, where the lone individual lorded it over others lower on the social and political hierarchy. Such a person would be continually tempted to confuse his own good with the good of the community. His sense of isolation would be intense. In the city states and empires of this period the greater scale of human settlement weakened the largely informal means for keeping

⁴ Janet and Stewart Farrar, *The Witches' Way: Principles, Rituals and Beliefs of Modern*

the more ambitious and violent members of society in line that had functioned well in earlier societies. The resulting exploitive social orders ripped people from their networks of mutual ties with their community and environment, substituting in their place hierarchies of domination. In these societies even deities were conceived as increasingly hierarchical and arbitrary in a political sense, mirroring and legitimating the political and priestly order.

Often, as in late Classical times, and even earlier in Mesopotamia, the land itself was losing its fertility. Hundreds of years of cumulative abuse from erosion, salinization, deforestation, and warfare led to declining harvests and sterile fields. Nature appeared progressively less friendly, although usually the causes of her apparent animosity lay in human practices that ruined the soil, created pestilential marshes, and crowded people together under conditions of poor hygiene, frequent warfare, and the rapid spread of disease. Combined with the divorce of many of the educated classes from a sympathetic immersion in nature, and a focus on worldly power, these conditions encouraged the dissociation of the earth and the sacred. Nature became an antagonist rather than a sacred community of which we were a part. The natural world existed to be manipulated, conquered, and brought under human control. Nature was our slave, as we were the slaves of the gods. This attitude hardly originated in the West, or even in monotheism. It is vividly expressed in the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Finally, as David Abram has so powerfully argued in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, literacy, especially when rooted in a phonetic alphabet, increasingly shifted human attention from receptivity to the signs and meanings of nature to the signs and meanings of the printed text. Literacy enabled people to separate ideas from their contexts and elevate abstractions over experience. It imposed the text between human beings and the natural world. Literacy is a

Witchcraft, (London: Robert Hale, 1984) p. 30.

technology for transmitting information, and like all technologies, it shapes the realm of the possible. While making some kinds of learning easier than before, literacy impeded other kinds. Abstract information is more easily transmitted by texts than is experientially derived insight . Most importantly, learning became progressively separated from personal experience. In this way sacred scriptures were enabled to gain supremacy over a person's own spiritual experience, inaugurating the idolatry of the word.

As Abram observed, in Homeric Greece, where literacy was rare, nature was alive with gods. Several hundred years later, with the rise of widespread literacy within the city states, Socrates' nature had largely fallen silent. It was now the city that teaches. But even in late classical times, country life beyond the city was still rooted in the land. It did not depend upon texts for its learning, and remained immersed within the animate and spiritual world of nature.

Those most attracted to the salvational faiths were usually the urban poor and oppressed. For such people an exoteric message of salvation would have greater appeal than one urging our living in harmony in a world where conflict and exploitation were daily realities and harmony a utopian fantasy. They were among the most removed from the natural world, the most immersed in the sufferings brought about by human abuses, and perhaps the most impressed with the magic of sacred texts depending upon priestly interpretation. I suspect that growing human misery rather than deeper spiritual development may be the impetus underlying the rise of soteriological religion.

I do not deny that the soteriological religions contain profound spiritual truths Their truths are as profound as those within the nature religions. But like the nature religions, the soteriological faiths were shaped and colored by the spiritual problems they most directly

addressed. They addressed the plight of those who lived in a world where suffering, misery, and injustice seemed all too common.

To grow a religion must speak to the needs and hopes of its milieu. A world of small tribes enjoying substantial equality cannot help but generate different spiritual concerns from one of extreme hierarchy, slavery, poverty, and threat of starvation. Nature religions focused on how to gain and maintain harmony in a sacred world wherein Nature was seen as a mostly provident force,. Soteriological religions focused on how to gain and keep salvation from a threatening world, a world far removed from love, justice, or beauty. Each broad religious orientation was part and parcel of a way of life, a pathway to grasping the sacred from wherever people were starting from. As ways of life change the dominant spiritual messages will also change, even if they all share a common core.

For example, concern with personal salvation tends inevitably to alienate the individual from the wider world. In its Protestant form, it encourages an attitude of each man or woman for themselves. We each require a personal relationship with God in order to achieve our salvation. Even the earlier corporate Christianity of Catholicism emphasized a “City of God” that was separate from the world - which was necessarily devalued as a consequence. Some Buddhists teach that one needs to get one’s consciousness entirely in order before trying to do anything to serve the world or improve the conditions of others, for otherwise we will simply make things worse. Similar views can be found among Hindu ascetics.

Attitudes such as these contrast sharply with nature religions which conceive our appropriate place as living within a sacred community of which the world is a vital part. Today, when the excesses of secular modernity can often be traced to our hyper individualism and our

desire to escape any limitations to our desires, the nature religions' contrasting perspectives deserve our renewed consideration.

The Modern World

At first take nothing seems more removed from the realities of the modern world than the world of nature. Fresh air and quiet are rare today. The relentless drone of the internal combustion engine pollutes even wilderness areas and national parks. Our homes and places of work insulate us from the rhythms of the seasons, for most of us spend most of our time inside. Artificial light hides the daily cycles of light and dark. From the perspective of the institutions and individuals who dominate our world, everything that exists has become either a resource for or impediment to the serving of human desires. In such a world nature religion can seem as remote, irrelevant, and out of place as a banana patch in Alaska, or a polar bear in Barbados. But this judgment is myopic.

Unlike not that long ago, the deepest challenges facing modern individuals rarely threaten our physical survival. Today, in the West, the great majority of people live relatively free from the physical suffering caused by either natural processes or unjust political and economic institutions. Even the poor usually have TV, automobiles, and dwellings with multiple rooms and privacy. The overwhelming majority of people in modern societies can take their physical survival for granted in ways our ancestors never could. Human suffering is still abundant, but has become more subtle and isolated from others, even others suffering in the same way.

Today's challenges are primarily challenges of meaning and of the heart. Nearly every thing we normally encounter during the day is now a commodity, something that is or was for sale. Buildings are created and plots of land laid out solely for sale to others, and so in

themselves are of little value to their maker. The meaning of ‘value’ has itself become slippery and elusive.

When nothing around us possesses intrinsic value, the only value left for us is utility: value as a resource. Money is the ultimate expression of utility, for it is useful for little but exchange for something else. With the conversion of increasing areas of our lives to the money economy a calculating and often egoistic kind of rationality has gradually enlarged its place within our own minds. We come increasingly to resemble economists, knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. The social sciences are now seeking to create economic models for public policy, the law, and even family life. Efficiency has become the new deity of the modern world, but efficiency concerns only the ease with which one thing may be turned into something else.

The modern world presents people with different spiritual challenges than did the pre-modern world. The oppressive and often lethal environment that supported and lent sense to the exoteric message of salvation no longer characterizes our world. To be spiritually distracted by an unending stream of novel products and experiences and an apparently pointless career is *fundamentally* different from spiritual problems that existed when the historical religions first arose.⁵ The modern world’s spiritual crisis is about meaninglessness, not physical misery. Modern life substitutes entertainment and distraction for experiences of meaning and value, because it denies that such experiences can be real. Suffering exists in both the modern and premodern world, of course, but the kinds of suffering most prevalent are different. Once potent messages of salvation now increasingly fall on deaf ears.

What has taken its place is a belief in progress towards a secular paradise promising unending material consumption. As the popular bumper sticker states: “Who Dies With ther

Most Toys, Wins.” But wins what? This new secular ideal cannot support the hopes placed on it. Secular materialism denies that we exist in a meaningful universe. In a world such as ours the highest standard of success is the satisfied consumer. But while we may sometimes envy, we will never respect someone who approaches this ideal. No one wants their children to grow up simply to be “satisfied consumers.” It is an ideal without genuine value. But it is the sole promise that modern life strives to fulfill - that whatever we have, the future will give us more of it for less effort.

Modern materialism is the unexpected offspring of Western soteriological religion. After squeezing Spirit from the world, these religions themselves fell victim to the later growth of scientific knowledge that undermined the authority of their sacred texts. But by then these texts had become many people’s strongest remaining link to the sacred. Their fear of losing contact with Spirit may explain the rank irrationalism of today’s fundamentalist movements - in many ways a peculiarly modern phenomenon.

There is a sort of divine justice here. The God of these texts has usually been depicted as a God of overwhelming power rather than of love. But such a God simply reflected the abysmal conditions of powerlessness, and hopes for eventual redress, under which most people lived at the time that He became dominant. When people turned their eyes away from nature and their own experience to words on parchment they severed their connection to the numinous, captivated by the power of words. As the power of science and technology grew, the power allotted to this God of power and words shrank. His words came to appear mistaken, His power irrelevant. As the lot of people improved, for many interest in a God who excelled only in power to punish began to fade.

⁵ The widespread popularity of Dilbert is eloquent testimony to how many people see

The idolatry of the printed text, interpreted as reflecting the will of a Divine Despot, is a false God if ever there was one. As for all false Gods, this message led directly to materialism and meaninglessness. As our power appeared to grow and God's to shrink, we found ourselves alone in a world responding only to insensate law and human ingenuity. Consumerism is probably the most constructive and humane response to living in this kind of world on its own terms. Certainly the 20th Century has witnessed some hideous alternatives. But consumerism idolizes possession, and because possessing is ultimately empty, we are incessantly pushed to acquire the power to possess more, each new acquisition promising to fulfill the fantasy disappointed by the last.

Spiritually sensitive people rightly criticize our society's infatuation with consumerism. Mass consumption is a powerful social drug that clouds spiritual awareness. But it has only become widely available in the twentieth century. It is only in our time that the poor have become a minority group.

Modernity and Nature

In this respect the modern world is almost the reverse of Classical civilization. In Greece and Rome the great mass of people lived in the countryside, remaining firmly tied to the land. Their religion reflected this fact. Even after Christianity's triumph in the countryside Pagan practices continued, sometimes in disguised form. However, many of the literate classes had come to disbelieve the traditional myths, and among Epicureans, denied even Spirit itself. City dwellers generally were more affected by these products of urban literate culture than were their rural neighbors.

their jobs.

The late Classical Neoplatonists such as Plotinus, and Iamblichus in particular, sought to unite the nature spirituality of the common people with the deepest insights of classical philosophy and mysticism. But, given the conditions facing so many people of that time, the soteriological dimension of classical Paganism would likely have dominated the remnants of nature religion surviving in rural areas. Certainly Plotinus had taken a view of the world as a manifestation of the sacred about as far from the tenets of nature religion as it was possible to go. Matter was indeed from God, and was not truly fallen, but it was the source of evil, even if not evil itself, and we should avoid much involvement with it. His focus was union with the One, not harmony with the All - though these perspectives are not strictly antagonistic.

Whatever might otherwise have happened, with the rise of Christianity and its adoption by the Roman state, the efforts of these Classical Pagans were overwhelmed. Christianity found both explanation and higher meaning in the ubiquitous suffering of the time. Initially it cut away divine approval for the corrupt secular order, and even after becoming a state religion, rendered that support ambiguous. And because of its soteriological focus, Christianity actively reached out to everyone.

Today circumstances are different. It is the most educated classes that are increasingly and disproportionately interested in nature religion. These people are mostly urban. The majority of Pagans of the American countryside are there because we moved from the cities. This reversal from classical times reflects the changed orientation of both urbanites and rural dwellers towards the land. Now it is the city dwellers who find higher and deeper meaning in nature, while all too many people raised in the countryside continue to see the land primarily as a source for money. For them it is vital to subdue it completely, controlling it like we would a machine. Such rural people are as embedded in consumer society as many urbanites. The rhetoric and actions of

“Wise Use” advocates are not created solely in corporate boardrooms. The idols of control and consumption are worshipped at the retail level as well.

Life-long country dwellers in the United States are rarely adherents to nature religion, unlike in traditional societies where the country side was (and is) the last hold out of popular Paganism. From the beginning of European settlement, the spirits of the countryside were considered devils worshipped by ignorant heathens. William Bradford, arriving on the Mayflower, described arriving in a “hideous and desolate wilderness.” Hundreds of years later Alexis deTocqueville described the attitude towards nature he perceived in the young United States.

In Europe people talk a great deal about the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them; they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests that surround them until they fall beneath the hatchet. Their eyes are fixed upon another sight, the . . . march across these wilds, draining swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature.⁶

Today the rise of secular values has strengthened this materialistic bias to the breaking point. The spirit of money is almost universally worshipped ahead of the spirit of the land - and often ahead of the spirit of the monotheistic God to which lip service is paid. For many Americans this transcendent God has fallen silent. Perhaps that is why the nature religions are again finding an audience.

In 1336 Petrarch ascended Mt. Ventoux. Roderick Nash’s account of this ascent is instructive to us today.

He initially had no other purpose in climbing than experiencing some of the ‘delight’ he found in wandering ‘free and alone, among the mountains, forests, and streams.’ After an all-day effort, Petrarch and his brother gained the summit. ‘The great sweep of view spread out before me,’ Petrarch wrote to a friend, and ‘I stood like one dazed.’ . . . Had he descended from the mountain at this point Petrarch might have retained an undiminished sense of enjoyment in the view, but it occurred to him to look at a copy of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* he was accustomed to carry. By chance he opened to the passage that admonished men not to take joy in mountains or scenery but rather to look after their salvation. Petrarch responded as a Christian: ‘I was abashed, and . . . I closed the book angry with myself that I should still be admiring earthly things After this he hurriedly left the peak, ‘turned my inward eye upon myself,’ and returned to his inn muttering imprecations at the way the world’s beauty diverted men from their proper concerns.⁷

We are more fortunate than Petrarch. We rarely read Augustine. When modern city dwellers enter nature, they usually do so not to make a living, but to enter a world where their daily concerns can be set aside; relaxing and opening their minds and hearts. In doing so they become receptive to Spirit. Even without consciously acknowledging a spiritual dimension to our experience, we are inevitably drawn to a perspective in harmony with the nature religions. We are closer by far to the Roman Emperor Hardrian, who climbed mountains in order to see the sunrise, than we are to poor Petrarch.⁸

⁶ Both the Bradford and Tocqueville quotes are from Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd. ed., (Yale: New Haven, 1982), 23-4.

⁷ Nash, *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁸ J. Donald Hughes, *Pan’s Travail: Environmental Problems of the Greeks and Romans*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994), 58.

By contrast, today many country dwellers take their daily attitudes with them when entering nature because, for them, this is their normal life. They are alert to new opportunities to “subdue” nature, turning it to human purposes. However greater their detailed knowledge of nature may be, this utilitarian approach blinds them to nature’s deeper values. Her more subtle messages are wasted on minds thinking only in terms of board feet and bushels. Of course, there are country dwellers who also listen to the wild, and who treasure their experience in nature. But among their peers they appear to be a quiet minority.

Today our national parks have become national shrines. Even when they may never see wild places and species, many people still value their preservation. They understand that here, at least, is something whose existence is not predicated upon profitability or power. In nature, we can encounter a peace and beauty and presence which places both our personal concerns and human life itself into a bigger, wider, and deeper context. We encounter the sacred, usually without quite knowing what to call it. And so we use substitute words: virgin forests, unspoiled streams, pristine wilderness, and “God’s country.”

Nature Religion Today

Encounters with wild nature first demonstrated to many of us the limitations of our society’s dominant worldview. It is in nature that we most easily encounter a reality greater than human plans and aspirations. In nature our preconceptions and prejudices are most easily quieted, for they are not continually reinforced by encounters with others. In quiet alertness, our perceptions open to a meaning and goodness unconnected with human ends. Spirit in nature reaches out to us through beauty, through peace, through the openness of heart it evokes within us, and through our direct experience of its presence. Nature religion is hardly the only spiritual path open to

humanity, but today it is a particularly powerful and appropriate one, for it teaches us lovingly to accept and embrace our world as a manifestation of the sacred.

Spiritual values are perceived more readily through receptive and open minds rather than judging and calculating ones. The spiritual path opened by the nature religions enables us to enter into a deep and profound relationship with the immanent aspect of the divine. In doing so, like all genuine religious traditions, it encourages possibility for personal transformation, away from egoism and towards love, away from selfishness and towards compassion, away from need and towards abundance.

Because Spirit is truly immanent these values lie within us all. To be sure, often they are deeply buried, under layers of fear and ignorance, of pride and despair. But they are there. And as our lives become materially easier we are increasingly aware of the void in our emotional and spiritual existence. While becoming aware of this void many of us also experience the healing power and beauty of nature and, through a variety of means from psychology to meditation, have glimpses of something sacred and beautiful that permeates everything, even themselves.

While a God of texts and power has ceased to attract the devotion of many of us, that hardly means we remain uninterested in Spirit. And many people then seek out personal experience of the sacred, a source far more compelling than the old texts which have been used to justify so much bad as well as good. And for many of us our seeking is answered. As is said in the Wiccan Charge of the Goddess

. . . thou who seekest to seek for me, know thy seeking and yearning shall avail thee not unless thou knowest the mystery; that if that which thou seekest thou findest not within

thee, then thou wilt never find it without thee. For behold, I have been with thee from the beginning; and I am that which is attained at the end of desire.⁹

This is why nature religion is particularly meaningful for modern Americans. In what is perhaps the best study of Neopaganism in America, Margot Adler concluded that “contrary to my own expectations and the assumptions of various scholars, the majority of Pagans are optimistic about the uses of science and modern technology.”¹⁰ According to Adler, and confirmed by my own experience, Neopagans are disproportionately attracted to scientific and computer oriented professions. Indeed, the largest single profession identified by Neopagans answering a questionnaire she developed in 1985 was “Computer programmer, systems analyst, or software developer.”¹¹

A traditional Sun Dance priest of the Crow tribe is also the popularly elected Sheriff of his county. By both traditional and modern standards he is among his tribe’s most successful members. And traditional spirituality is reviving among the Crow, and many other, Indian peoples.

Malidoma Somé, a traditional African who urges the wisdom of traditional ritual and respect as a cure for many of the ills which plague Western communities, also holds Ph.D.s from the Sorbonne and from Brandeis. Somé was asked to get an advanced Western education by his village elders in order better to communicate with the West. With the blessing and encouragement of traditional elders, Somé now spends most of his time teaching in the West.

⁹ Janet and Stewart Farrar, *The Witches’ Way*, (Robert Hale: London, 1984), p. 298.

¹⁰ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, revised and expanded ed., (Boston: Beacon, 1986), p. 392.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

None of these people are simply saying “No” to the modern world, however deeply critical they are of portions of it. The growth of Neopagan and traditional nature spirituality in the West cannot be reasonably equated with romanticism, escapism, or psychological regression to a supposed earlier Golden Age. Of course there are people with such motivations. But they do not set the tone for what is happening. Something far more interesting is going on. We are not witnessing, as some have ignorantly suggested, a regression.

The current renaissance of nature religion within the modern West is not simply a return to the spirituality of early times. The cultural context is entirely different. Modern Neopagans deal with nature not because they have to, as did the Pagans of the past, but because they want to. They are less concerned with basic survival than are today’s traditional indigenous peoples.

Perhaps more than their ancestors, Neopagans focus on spirit in nature as a source of meaning, because the society in which we live so thoroughly denies such meaning. By contrast, our ancestors lived in societies where religion and daily life were completely integrated, so that even the most utilitarian activities had spiritual dimensions. Contemporary practitioners of nature religions are slowly rediscovering this primordial truth. We are journeying from an instrumental way of life idolizing our power to one that is grateful and respectful, honoring our blessings.

The greatest weakness of traditional nature religions, a deep provincialism that respected the locale but not neighboring peoples, has been overcome by the rise of the modern world. Traditional nature religions were rooted in particular tribes and in particular places. In most cases, members of these communities never left the general area in which they were born, nor encountered practices much at variance with those of their ancestors. Their sense of a wider

humankind was nonexistent, as evidenced by so many tribes whose name for themselves translates as “the people” and whose word for stranger also means “enemy”.

Today, by contrast, virtually everyone has a vivid image of humanity as a whole, and some awareness that alternative spiritualities exist. This is particularly true among Neopagans. Unlike even a hundred years ago, for nearly everyone today there is an irreducible element of self-conscious choice in our spirituality. We are aware of alternative spiritual paths which we could have taken but did not choose. Even Native American traditionalists now must *choose* to be traditionalists. Nothing spiritual can be taken for granted. No path comes completely as a matter of course. In the context of the modern world nature religion constitutes a deep expression of individual awareness and choice, and with it, a recognition that our responsibilities and choices are exercised as members of communities - for the ideal of living in harmony with “All Our Relations” is the opposite of the individualistic ideal of Promethean modernity.

A major difference distinguishing the nature religions from the soteriological faiths is that they are not competitive. They do not claim exclusive access to the Sacred. During a presentation by traditional African elders at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1994, a white woman in the ensuing discussion said that she was thrilled by what they had said, and asked how she could learn more. One elder advised her to look towards her own ancestral paths. Another added, “Yes, study Wicca.”

This same spiritual pluralism, and the opportunity for choice it presents, deeply challenges the salvational religions. As a rule, they have linked their promise of salvation with a claim to spiritual exclusivity. That is why they send out missionaries. It is difficult to imagine a Christian minister suggesting that a Tibetan embrace Buddhism - and rarely indeed does a Buddhist lama urge an American to pursue the Christian tradition, although it does occasionally

happen. Since the nature religions never claimed exclusivity, they are not threatened by the existence of other ways. Nor do they seek to incorporate other traditions within some overarching framework. Greater awareness of and respect for other faiths does not weaken their spiritual relevance.

Today practitioners of nature religion are living within a secular society which, mostly unconsciously, does everything in its power to segregate the spiritual from the rest of life. The future of the nature religions will rest on their capacity to overcome this dichotomy for the people within their communities. By virtue of its distinguishing sharply between the sacred and the profane, a purely transcendental religion can to some extent survive in such a rigidly secular society, at the risk of being marginalized. Because it defines itself in opposition to “the world” the salvational faiths can compartmentalize themselves away from it. However, a religion focusing primarily upon Spirit’s immanence cannot. When the world around us is sacred, ultimately there is no such thing as the purely secular. The nature religions therefore challenge the preconceptions of the modern world in a way the salvational faiths cannot - because they engage them on their own ground.

The Transcendent

Is there an esoteric core here? Where does that ground which ultimately undergirds all spirituality enter in? The nature religions do not reject the lives we are given or the beautiful and sacred world we inhabit in order hurriedly to try and evolve to somewhere else. Everything can come about in its own time. Let us keep our feet on the good earth as our hearts and minds open to embrace All That Is.

Yet the transcendent does play a role. It provides the ultimate context within which life is lived. It is life's ultimate source of meaning and significance. And the nature religions do enable people to encounter the transcendent - in a way in keeping with that spiritual path. Spirit as immanent is not understood or experienced as radically divorced from the transcendent.

Mystical experiences of the transcendent are not completely unmediated by one's spiritual understanding, at least as reported to us by those who have had them. John Hick observed that

whereas the Real directly apprehended as Sunyata is totally immanent in the ever changing forms of concrete existence, directly apprehended as Brahman it is a totally other reality in relation to which the 'ever changing forms of concrete existence' are mere illusion. And whereas for the Mahayana Nirvana and Samsara are one, for advaita Vedanta they are distinguished as respectively reality and illusion. And so we have here two very different reports which, taken as accounts of direct, unmediated awareness of the Real as it is in itself, offer incompatible alternatives. . . . Or again, is the Real *an sich* the personal loving Lord of the theistic traditions, said to be directly experienced in Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Hindu Bakhti mysticism, even sometimes to the point of union. . . .¹²

The way in which the mystic describes his or her experience seems inevitably conditioned by the spiritual preparation acquired prior to the experience. A Hindu Yogi will experience neither Nirvana nor union with God. A Christian mystic will experience neither Nirvana nor Brahma. Negative theology, which denies that anything definitive can be said of the One which

¹² John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 293.

is beyond description offers us a way out of this problem. But it does so only by denying that anything at all can adequately be said about the Most Real.

Hick's observation suggests that at the level of reported experience, descriptions of nature mysticism may not resemble the details of Theistic, Vedantic, or Buddhist mysticism. Certainly Black Elk's description of the details of his vision while performing a sacred ceremony for his people do not resemble accounts from Christian, Jewish, Hindu, or Buddhist mysticism. And yet, the way in which he describes it will perhaps sound unsettlingly familiar to some readers of this essay.¹³

And as we stood there facing the west, when I looked in the cloud . . . only [the] grandfathers were beholding me and I could see the flaming rainbow there and the tipi and the whole vision I could see again. I looked at what I was doing and saw that I was making just exactly what I saw in the cloud. This on earth was like a shadow of that in the cloud.

Black Elk's accounts uncannily resemble Plato's myth of the cave. In Plato's description, one of the foundational images in Western thought, the shadows reflected on its walls represent the world of daily experience. For Plato this myth led to his dismissing the material world's importance.

¹³ Raymond J. DeMallie, (ed) *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt*, University of Nebraska Press, 1984) p. 220. I have used a transcript of Neihardt's actual interview with Black Elk, rather than *Black Elk Speaks*, to minimize the influence of Neihardt's wording on interpreting Black Elk's vision. Equivalent, but more obviously Platonic, terminology can be found in John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), pp. 41, 142. For a discussion of those criticizing the genuineness of Black Elk's account as transmitted by Neihardt, see Ed McGaa, Eagle Man, *Native Wisdom: Perceptions of the Natural Way*, (Minneapolis: Four Directions Publishing, 1995), pp. 16-17.

Yet it is clear that from Black Elk's point of view, while an even greater reality existed "elsewhere," it in no way detracted from the world in which he lived and the people he served. Nor was he the only Lakota to peer beyond the shadows of Plato's cave. Speaking of Crazy Horse's vision, Black Elk's father had told him "that Crazy Horse dreamed and went into the world where there is nothing but the spirits of all things. That is the real world that is behind this one, and everything we see is something like a shadow from that world."¹⁴

The nature religions emphasize experience over texts, and sometimes even over tradition. A vision quest is an intensely personal encounter with the transpersonal. That it is later interpreted within a spiritual community conditions but does not over rule this point. I know first hand that encounters with the gods at a Wiccan ritual need not be mediated by the interpretation of a priest or priestess, let alone a text. The nature religions offer spiritual experience, not scripture, as their ultimate claim to authenticity. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put so well, "We are as much strangers in nature as we are aliens from God."¹⁵

By conceiving our world as sacred and alive, we open ourselves up to ways of knowing and being ignored by our culture for countless generations. We find that when we do so, nature answers. Sometimes those answers come in the form of spirits and gods. And in encountering the gods, we learn what love truly is. Sometimes the veil is swept away even more completely, and we see through nature the full transcendent beauty and love that underlies, permeates, and transcends everything of which we can speak, and more. It is then that we learn a still deeper truth about living in harmony: that the most complete harmony comes from the most complete love, a love given without condition.

¹⁴ *Black Elk Speaks*, p. 71.

¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Portable Emerson*, Carl Bode and Malcom Cowley, eds., (New York: Penguin, 1981) p. 43.

