

**Creating and Sustaining Spaces for
Marginalized Spiritualities & Social Transformation**

Presentation at the 5th Annual Pagan Conference

February 2009 - Claremont University

By: Chandra Alexandre

In early 2000 when I first began an exploration of dissertation topics, I was coming fresh off of several years' worth of engagement at the intersection of politics and feminism. Developing an integral ecofeminism, as I called it some ten years ago, had left me with a clear sense of not only the importance of the combination of activism and spirituality when attempting to create a more just and sustainable world, but also the reality of how people were taking ideas motivated by a deep connection to Spirit out into the work and relationships of every day life.

It was somewhat natural then that as I turned my sights to the grassroots environmental movements of South Asia, I was concerned most with the question of whether or not there were spiritual motivations for some of the most famous women-led movements of the time. Did the Chipko, or tree-hugging, movement, for example, connect trees to the heart and spirit of people in Uttarakhand (India), and not just to their stovetops and livelihoods (although that, in and of itself was important)? Was the planetary not only the personal...but the transpersonal? And if spirituality mattered, I wondered, how much did it matter in the quest for equality and justice, as through these movements...then again, did it matter to those who didn't claim a religion but were responding to "a calling" in their work born out of what might be called a "spiritual sentiment"?

Although my research took a different turn (due to the desires of the Divine, I can readily admit here), and my inquiry was initially regarded skeptically by many in the academy with whom I shared it, the topic of engaged spirituality is nonetheless on my mind today. Since I now function as clergy within a spiritual community whose members are Witches and Pagans and others concerned with human rights and environmental issues...people who see the relevance of a spiritual politic and a political spirituality, this inquiry turns in my mind as a spiritual leader within a marginal spiritual tradition...knowing that ours are not-so-marginal concerns.

Fortunately, the topic of engaged spirituality is very much alive today—albeit more generally—with practitioners, business schools, seminaries, therapy rooms and social science researchers now both documenting and discussing the ways in which connection to something outside of oneself can often serve to fuel passion and catalyze action for the betterment of society. In this beginning conversation, I believe, there is room for those of us who sit at tables other than the ones catering to the world's main religions. The focus of my paper therefore is engagement in the question of the relevance of an engaged spirituality dialogue for those of us who occupy the margins of religion but whose very spirituality carries the weight of non-marginal concerns.

But does the landscape of engaged spirituality offer anything substantive upon which to build our discussion? First, it is indeed filled with a rich history of religious-inspired grassroots movements making significant contributions to social change efforts. For example, the Second Great Awakening of American Protestantism (which took place between about 1790 and the 1840s) helped fuel and inspire the movement for the

abolition of slavery. There is too the work of individuals set within a religio-cultural framework; for example, Gandhi's civil disobedience at the heart of which lies the Jain-inspired enactment of the principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence), and this in turn at the heart of a resistance movement in the quest for a free Bharat Mata (Mother India) and release from the grip of British colonialism. Similarly and more recently, Dr. Martin Luther King's moral command coalesced hundreds of thousands across the nation, building on the energies, networks and leadership of southern black churches in the call for civil rights and an end to segregation. Indeed, the intersection of religion and social change is a known entity.

But we can go back even further and to other margins, looking to the indigenous peoples of the world for inspiration at the intersection of spirituality and social justice. Here, through these peoples' ties of spirituality to place and to land, we may remember their admonition to colonizers and conquerors that the land can not be owned because Earth is our mother. First Nations peoples have long taught that as part of the web of life, humanity is tied through common bonds to Earth as Earth is to us—we are one interdependent, interrelated system. Through this awareness of our unity, principles of solidarity and the common good come to the fore, advocating for social conditions that ensure all people and groups in society are able to meet their needs and realize their potential. Certainly, we know that our living environment is critically important to quality of life, and it is both unjust and unfair that the risks and costs of production are loaded onto the living environments of some people, while others enjoy the benefits but avoid those costs.

Today, these and other wisdoms that honor both human and Earth bodies as sacred are being continued, reclaimed and evolved, forging a deep and strong relationship among equity, ecology and economy—the three e’s of sustainability; and many of us here are part of that process, knowing that to succeed, our actions must be "sustainable—in harmony with the Earth's physical ecology; satisfying—in harmony with others or the social ecology; and soulful—in harmony with the spiritual ecology."¹

For some, we are aware that our spirituality offers a direct response not only to ecological disasters and global warming, but also to abuses that have led humanity away from ethical, just, integral and holistic ways of being and doing—often because of or at the behest of religion. For others, we are aware that reclaiming the human tradition of spirituality—spirituality beyond and outside of religion—that has existed since long before recorded history is opening us to healing on multiple levels—and we notice that as has been argued: a spiritually impoverished world is not sustainable; because meaninglessness, anomie, and despair will corrode our desire to sustain it and the belief that humanity is worth sustaining along with it.²

The healing process into which we have tapped is also driving the living of an engaged spirituality that makes sustainability real and leads so many of those called to respond to the environmental and other crises to a place of balance from which new meanings, new relationships and new visions wholly relevant now are being created. This too

¹ Elgin, D. (1993). *Awakening Earth: Exploring the Evolution of Human Culture and Consciousness*. New York: Morrow.

² Orr, D. (2002). "Four Challenges of Sustainability" in *Conservation Biology*, Vol. 16, No. 6, December. p. 1457.

moves us out of the boundaries of a purely religious sphere and sets us in alignment with those who have catalyzed humanity around greater truths and values than those offered by any one tradition...offering us access to universal truths that touch those of all faiths and backgrounds.

In the realm of the practical, take, for example, Starhawk's Earth Activist Training which provides two weeks of permaculture, earth-based spirituality, organizing and activism designed to, "set your life on a new path...or show you how to save the world." Or the programs of organized religions that have been active on environmental issues. Many Christian coalitions are making a strong case for stewardship and social justice. For example, the Evangelical Environmental Network worked to prevent the dilution of the Endangered Species Act some thirty years ago, and more recently popularized bumper stickers such as, "What would Jesus drive?" to promote awareness about gas-guzzling SUVs. Nationwide, conservation efforts sponsored by both Episcopal Power and Light and Interfaith Power and Light have helped houses of worship become more eco-efficient with better building materials and electricity sourcing from companies using renewable energy. And the Lutheran Church was a tremendous help in starting the Interfaith Coffee Program of Equal Exchange coffee, which sells only fair-traded coffee at faith-based meetings and services.

These kinds of efforts are also found on a global scale, and to give them voice, even as far back as 1993 the Parliament of World Religions recognized the power of creating a dedicated space for concerns larger than us all, issuing a statement of Global Ethics of

Cooperation of Religions on Human and Environmental Issues. More than 8,000 people from all over the globe were present at this convening. This year in Australia, it is anticipated that 10,000 will attend the Parliament's convocation.

It is thus with the help of the very organizations and groups—both religious and spiritual—that serve to help give meaning to life for so many that the transformation of social consciousness is explicitly being chronicled and the fabric of society is being changed. Theorist Ken Wilber notes, “Body and mind and spirit—and self and culture and nature—are all there, all exerting an influence, all actively shaping events, and you either consciously take them into account in any human endeavor, or stand back and watch the roadkill.”³

Formerly thought of as an intensely personal (even narcissistic) affair, the extent to which spirituality is more than just an inner dialogue and experience—the roadkill of human endeavors done in isolation—is increasingly being revealed, accepted, and celebrated. Spirituality in the post modern context is moving from the historical dustbin associated with superstition and ignorance to a positive claim on at least the Western psyche; and spirituality (usually taken to mean an individual's call and connection to something larger than the self) is increasingly being written about and discussed publicly as a social resource, a motivating factor that sustains individuals and communities long past political agendas and economic cycles. It is in fact being proffered as the reason, beyond religion, for much of the work being done in

³ Wilber, K. (2006). Forward to *The Spirit of Conscious Business* by Fred Kofman. Source: http://www.kenwilber.com/Writings/PDF/ForewordSpiritofaConsciousBusiness_OTHERS_2003.pdf

communities on behalf of the environment, the poor, the disenfranchised, and the otherwise marginalized. As one researcher notes,

“Spirituality in this sense is a vital resource, sustaining people in the hard work of social change, and, on regular occasions, inspiring them to imagine possibilities that exceed realistic expectations...”⁴

As we sit here today, bearing witnessing to the trajectory from Dr. King’s famous “I have a dream” speech to the recent inauguration of our first African-American president, we realize the importance of what it means to imagine possibilities that exceed the realistic expectations of the time in which they have been offered.

In Gregory Stanczak’s 2006 work, “Engaged Spirituality: Social Change and American Religion” the author shares detailed interviews of religious persons doing the work of engaged spirituality, and he writes, “Asking ‘does your spirituality influence your social commitments’ is simply not enough. The book is instead focused on the chronicling of the way in which “spirituality is embedded within lived experience and in concert with the communities of believers and communities of activists that reinforce and provide outlets for their values”.⁵

A provocative and informative account, it begs the question, however, of how those on the fringes are to be considered. Do those of us on the margins of America’s religiosity matter in the call for a better world? We can also easily ask, What of the long-standing commitments and profound engagement of First Nations people through their spiritual roots to movements for change? What of the fundamental importance placed by other

⁴ Stanczak, Gregory C. & Miller, Donald E. (2006). *Engaged Spirituality: Spirituality And Social Transformation In Mainstream American Religious Traditions* - Report Supplement. Center For Religion And Civic Culture, University Of Southern California, p. 18.

⁵ Ibid. p. x

earth-based and goddess-centered traditions on Gaia, our Mother Earth and the call through this lens to equity? What of those others outside of the mainstream who harbor a deep-felt understanding of the link between their spirituality and ecological responsibility, and with that, the connection to social justice? There are likely many reasons for why we are not heard; but we on the margins must first choose to engage on this playing field.

This is doable, I argue, because our spirituality is part of something much larger and greater and this “something” is not located on the margins; rather, it is indeed at the center, at the very heart of our world soul at this moment in time. For many of us, and as a Witch and Tantrika I include myself in this ‘us’, at the essence of our devotion and worship is a fundamental alignment with the(a)ologies and philosophies that support the antinomian in service to health and wholeness. We may cherish our marginal status because we detest the center of religion and the normative; but the work we do every day, as both individual practitioners and communities, is part of the fabric of social transformation in service to the life of our world. And that is not marginal—that is a space we must claim and claim loudly. With millions of Americans today lying outside of the religious mainstream, and with over one million Pagans (and our numbers growing significantly), this is certainly within the realm of the achievable—part of our imagining of possibilities.

Here is where our thinking may stretch, for this is not just about biodiversity and green witchcraft for the cause; it is about an inclusivity of consciousness and of forging

pathways on which spirit can act both theoretically and concretely to counter the destructive paradigms of today. It is about being out, about alliance building, about collaborations, about finding common language. As one interfaith minister recently told me in conversation, it may very well be about adopting the language of mysticism in order to get the message through—because from that place, it doesn't matter that you're Pagan—it matters that you're one of them.

In this way, we are creating a new center, a new reality of lived spaces of and for engagement that are meaningful yes, personally, but also collectively. The first task we must assign ourselves in attempting to claim this space and a more central voice is the taking of personal responsibility; for as Huston Smith has noted:

"Living as we do in a civilization that prides itself on using everything at its disposal—its resources, its invention, every scrap of information its computers can deposit in their data banks—it is not idle to ask if our most valuable unused resource may not be the capacity of persons to recognize themselves as responsible agents; selves who ask not that the world deliver things into their laps, but that it provide a matrix for their moral and spiritual development—structures on which character can climb if it resolves to do so."⁶

In this way, religion may very well provide that matrix, that structure upon which our characters can climb up to the possibilities we envision for tolerance, justice, wholeness and peace. And this is where soul-making qualities such as vision, leadership, community, integrity, wisdom, courage and commitment are appearing on the path of an acknowledged spirituality in arenas outside of the traditional places of worship.

⁶ Smith, H. (1982). *Beyond the Postmodern Mind*. Quest Books, p. 213

Accordingly, our claiming this space means that the traditional metaphors by which we live, the values upon which we base decisions and the assumptions we make about the impact of our engagement with the world are all to be challenged. Here again, spirituality is the springboard to truth, meaning and connection. Digging deeper into our selves, we find the center of everyone; this is how the work of sustainability across social, environmental, political and other spheres happens. In this space, by evoking and listening to each other's stories, the invitation is to allow our work together to be "a gift given to the community and the cosmos...";⁷ unfolding into the process by which humanity begins to become aware of co-creating with one other, with our ecological matrix, and ultimately, with the Divine from whom all creativity and consciousness arises.

Thank you.

⁷ Spretnak, C. (1991). *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age*, p. 189