

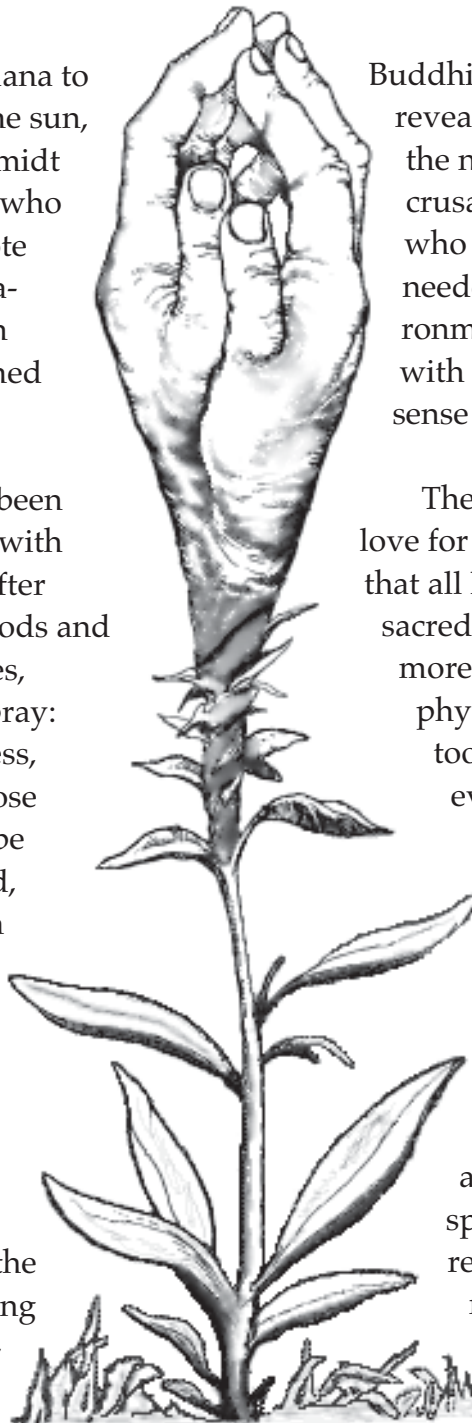
PUTTING THEIR FAITH IN GOD'S GREEN EARTH

RELIGIOUS GROUPS ADD A MORAL APPEAL TO THE ANGER OF RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISTS

Wearing a tie-dyed bandana to shield his head from the sun, the Rev. James Compton-Schmidt joined the circle of protesters who had recently occupied a remote logging site in the Sequoia National Forest. Behind them an enormous logging crane loomed like an iron dinosaur.

Before them a stump had been made into an altar decorated with crystals, food and flowers. After others had invoked various gods and goddesses, prophets and sages, Compton-Schmidt began to pray: "Oh Creator, God and Goddess, Mother Earth, we pray for those who are not here but should be such as George Bush," he said, looking over a hillside strewn with fallen pines and debris. "And we cry and weep and moan, Mother, at this terrible gash we have put in your side."

The prayer, chanting and ritual continued for much of the morning at the desolate-looking tract deep in the Central California forest. The ceremony included Christians, Jews,



Buddhists and others. And it revealed the growing presence in the nation's environmental crusade of spiritual ecologists, who are bringing a much-needed dimension to the environmental movement, infusing it with a moral purpose and a sense of responsibility.

Their appeal is based on their love for the planet and the belief that all life, including mankind, is sacred. This approach is much more appealing than the philosophy of radical ecologists, who too often view mankind as evil and who seem to be motivated by anger and fear.

Many of the spiritual ecologists connect their faith and environmental concerns by viewing the Earth as "God's creation and that the wilderness is spiritually inspiring. This reflects the almost-mystical regard for the wilderness that runs deep in American culture. A second group of eco-spiritualists

includes some liberal Christians and others who are developing a complex Earth-based religious philosophy.

Heavily influenced by Native American religious concepts, they see the planet as Godlike and consider pollution a sin. For these activists, environmentalism is tinged with remorse and a fear that a kind of ecological Armageddon is at hand. Activism, on the other hand, is an act of redemption.

A third group is comprised of mainstream Jews and Christians such as Compton-Schmidt, who apply traditional religious teaching to the global environmental crisis. Their activism demonstrates how eco-spirituality has filtered into mainstream religion.

"If he were physically alive, I believe Jesus would have been here today," explained Compton-Schmidt. "Jesus' opposition to oppression would include the oppression of the Earth by pollution," he added. "This kind of witnessing, standing up for the Earth, is very consistent with Christianity."

A number of influential religious leaders apparently agree...

Pope John Paul II, who has called for Catholic participation in the ecology movement, began 1990 with a New Year's declaration asking "Peace with God the Creator, peace with all Creation." In May, more than 350 religiously concerned activists participated in the North American Conference on Ecology and Religion at Washington's National Cathedral. The delegates to the conference agreed to promote environmentalism through both worship and direct

action. And in June, the Presbyterian Church (USA) adopted a new statement of faith, declaring that when Christians "threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care, we deserve God's condemnation."

Indeed, the health of the planet is such a significant concern in mainstream religion that is the subject of sermons in countless churches and a matter for study for divinity students from Harvard University to Holy Names College in California. Of course, not all religious groups have jumped into the "green" campaign. After all, traditional Christian theology stresses man's unique position among the Earth's inhabitants.

The scriptures encourage man to have dominion over nature, to "be fruitful and multiply, fill the Earth and subdue it." Many fundamentalist and evangelical Christians, mindful of what a literal reading of the Bible suggests, remain skeptical, even suspicious, of environmentalism. And for the most part, their churches are not involved in protesting pollution or opposing development.

Nevertheless, even among conservative Christians there is a growing sense that believers should help protect nature. These evangelicals are emphasizing each Christian's responsibility to be a careful "steward" or "caretaker" of a world they believe was created by God. "We Christians," noted evangelist Billy Graham has said, "have a responsibility to take the lead in trying to take care of the Earth."

All this spiritual concern about Mother Earth is leading to some curious alliances. The most unlikely has been a joining of scientific skeptics and faith-filled clerics

who in the past only came together to fight about evolution or population growth. The most prominent of science's ambassadors to religion is physicist and agnostic Carl Sagan, who has repeatedly called for an environmentalism infused with a spiritual sensibility. "If we were to invent the environment with a vision of the sacred . . . this would be a most important way to help preserve it," Sagan recently told a reporter for the St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times. "A thing you consider sacred, you do not destroy."

While Sagan and the others seem eager to tap the power of religious symbolism and spiritual zeal, the partnership of science and religion is strained by several issues. Many scientists continue to attack Catholic Church opposition to birth control and abortion, arguing that they contribute to over-population. Others remain uneasy with the Christian concept of humanity's "stewardship" over the earth, because it suggests that the global environment could be perfectly controlled through technology.

Similarly, some long-time environmentalists have reservations about religious involvement in their cause. This division became apparent at the Sequoia National Forest rally. The protest was organized by the radical environmental group Earth First!, which is best-known for its confrontational style and a tactic called "monkey wrenching," which involves damaging logging equipment.

During the recent protest, the more aggressive activists repeatedly argued with the religiously inspired newcomers, who insisted on nonviolence. In the end, the spiritually motivated newcomers came to dominate the event, drawing the great

majority of the participants to their rituals, much to the dismay of some hard-core Earth Firsters, who derisively referred to the eco-spiritualists as "woo-woos," or wackos.

But while a minority among ecology groups fear that the "woo-woos" will damage their movement, it's quite likely they will have a much different effect. As religious leaders and everyday believers rush into environmentalism, they will bring the strength of their numbers and a spiritually inspired sense of commitment. Their presence will temper the violent impulses of Earth First!- style radicals and broaden the appeal of the environmental movement. But most importantly, they will turn the debate about ecology into a matter of morality, rather than politics.

This kind of transformation marked a similar turning point in the civil rights struggle of the 1960's. The religious activists of the civil rights era succeeded in making racial equality a matter of conscience and thereby forced a dramatic shift in public policy. Environmentalists can hope that their "woo-woo" allies will do the same for their cause in the 1990's. The eco-spiritualists could lead us to save the planet, not out of fear, but out of the conviction that it is our moral duty.



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New York Newsday, March 1998

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