
Book Review

Leslie E. Sponsel, *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), xxii + 285 pp., \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-313-36409-9.

This is a wide-ranging and impressively informed book. Its chapter-by-chapter discussions extend from the animistic worldviews of indigenous peoples; to religious and philosophical spokespersons of various backgrounds, time periods, and persuasions; to poets; to the film *Avatar* and its director; to spiritually directed ritual practices; and to activists deeply moved and motivated by a nature-respecting spirituality. A partial list of the subjects of the book's discussions includes the Buddha, Saint Francis, the Ecumenical or 'Green' Patriarch Bartholomew I, the current Dalai Lama of Tibet, Henry David Thoreau, the Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Muta Maathai, and the activist poet William Stanley Merwin. The book brings into comparative focus a splendid collection of spiritually inspired persons and movements whose exemplary ideas, convictions, and actions have significant bearing on the field of environmental thought and action.

Four major themes are highlighted in Sponsel's book as I read it. One is his insistence that today's ecological crisis of environmental despoliation and accelerating endangerments and extinctions of biological species is immediate and dire. He does not mince words in talking about the urgency of the ecological crisis. He characterizes it as posing a forced and momentous 'choice between ecocide and ecosanity' (p. 170). And he keeps this crisis in the foreground of his discussions throughout.

A second emphasis of the book is that this crisis raises more than scientific, economic, and political challenges. It poses a deeply spiritual challenge as well and is in desperate need of all available historical and worldwide resources of spiritual sensitivity, outlook, commitment, and practice if it is to be effectively addressed. Sponsel brings into bold relief the latent power of religious traditions and institutions for bringing forceful attention to ecological issues and for rallying support and action in the face of them. He also stresses the potential power of religiously dedicated individuals for working with these issues. He notes in this connection the crucial importance of inward as well as outward spirituality when it comes to dealing effectively with pressing ecological problems. How we see *ourselves*, he observes, is a necessary complement to how we see and react to the natural environment and our place as humans within it. In Sponsel's view, spirituality and religious faith are essential factors in raising our worldwide consciousness and motivating us to think and act with respect, reverence, and due regard for the whole of nature—a nature in which we are embedded and by which our lives are daily nurtured and sustained.

The spirituality or concerted religious awareness and action for which Sponsel pleads are not for him confined to any one religious tradition or single set of outlooks and practices. A third theme of his book is his belief that past and present spiritual or religious perspectives of many different kinds have vitally important overlaps of insight, outlook, and conviction that can be cooperatively drawn upon—despite the

admitted many differences among these perspectives. These overlaps or commonalities can provide valuable, mutually enriching resources for awakening concern for the plight of nature in our own time and for directing actions that can deal effectively with it.

Such effective thought and action require that we humans cease striding over nature with the arrogant illusion of being its rightful masters and that we learn to accept a humbler and more balanced relation to the natural order. We must learn to serve nature instead of expecting only to be served by it. This fundamental change of attitude is nicely captured by Sponsel's plea for nature to be viewed as a 'sanctuary' rather than a 'warehouse' (p. 144).

A fourth motif of this engaging book is Sponsel's conviction that a 'Great Turning' (p. 170) or 'quiet revolution' (the book's subtitle) is gaining momentum around the world. The Great Turning is away from a former crass anthropocentrism and indifference toward the wellbeing of the natural environment and its creatures and toward a new recognition of us humans as natural beings with compelling responsibilities toward the community of all of earth's creatures, of which we are an integral part. Sponsel's perceived worldwide turning or revolution provides him with some ground for optimism.

Thus, his is a hopeful book and not one of unrelieved disparagement and despair. It is a hope accompanied by warnings and cries for radical revision of prevalent attitudes and urgent action in the face of present and imminent ecological disaster. The essential spiritual dimension in such hope is Sponsel's overriding emphasis. He provides evidence of the vital role of this spiritual dimension with his detailed discussions of persons and movements that exemplify it in striking and inspiring degree. However, in view of the deeply entrenched attitudes and practices against which his alleged coming revolution must contend, Sponsel's optimism should be tempered with sober acknowledgment of the extremely hard road ahead.

Despite my profound appreciation for the overall quality and value of this book, I have three critical issues to raise about it. First, in his discussion of the religiosity of indigenous peoples, Sponsel rightly notes that for them spiritual powers pervade nature in such a manner as to challenge the duality of natural/supernatural. Yet he speaks in the same place of their shamans having the ability to 'communicate with the supernatural' (p. 9). The duality is rejected in the first instance but seemingly accepted in another. I suggest that the animistic presences and powers about which Sponsel writes be described as other than human or superior to human rather than supernatural and that they be recognized as integral aspects of nature rather than as transcending nature. I should also note, however, that some indigenous peoples do have what could rightly be termed 'supernatural' presences and powers as part of their religious outlooks and worldviews. These presences and powers do in fact transcend the natural order but also interact regularly with it.

A second issue is the sharp contrast Sponsel sometimes draws between the spiritual and the material (pp. 48, 76, 146). He seems to assume that a materialistic metaphysics must be inimical to a spiritual one. But it is quite possible to be a materialist and to view mentality and spirituality as having emerged by evolutionary processes from a material basis and as constituting genuine new aspects and powers of embodied beings. A stark dualism between matter and spirit is not necessary for a spiritual outlook on the world. 'Materialistic' often does have a suggestion of preoccupation with material things at the expense of spiritual concerns, but metaphysical materialism

need not have this connotation. On the pages I have cited, Sponsel misleadingly conflates these two very different meanings of the terms *material*, *materialist*, and *materialistic*. Clarification of his intended meanings of these three terms would have been helpful and less misleading.

A third point of contention is Sponsel's claim that nature religion in the absence of God, gods, goddesses, animating spirits, and the like must be seen as 'purely secular' (p. 152). But nature religion can be just as deeply religious as any other form of religion. Why, then, should it be branded as secular? This term has the connotation of either rejecting religious faith altogether or of standing in sharp contrast with it. Sponsel perhaps has in mind a contrast between institutional forms of religion or established religious traditions, on the one hand, and nature religion on the other, but his term 'purely secular' needlessly confuses the issue.

These three points suggest to me that Sponsel may be assuming that there must be something non-natural or non-materialistic in an outlook for it to be rightly thought of as religious. Not only is this clearly not the case, the assumption detracts from the kind of religious concern for the natural environment he champions. It does so by seeming to exclude from the relevant religious outlooks those that may be frankly naturalistic or materialistic in their metaphysical beliefs. But the truth is that these outlooks as well can be profoundly religious and spiritual in their concern for the health and wellbeing of the ecologies of earth and in their commitment to the religious ultimacy and sacredness of nature.

Donald A. Crosby
Professor of Philosophy Emeritus
Colorado State University
Donald.crosby@att.net