

# Reclaiming the Lost Gospel

By Tom Hayden

Mainstream religious institutions have been largely silent and little engaged in the environmental debate of the past twenty-five years. The religious community has not defined the actions of corporate and government polluters as a mortal sin against God's creation, nor have the clerics defended the Earth as sacred in the way they have vigorously defended the poor and victims of discrimination as God's children. Religious institutions are the source of guidance and teaching on questions of morality and justice, and their relative silence on the fate of the Earth robs the environmental movement of the moral legitimacy it needs to change our behavior. There is hope that the religious default is beginning to end.

I am neither a theologian nor a religious scholar. But as an environmentalist for twenty-five years, and as a senator who has chaired the Natural Resources and Wildlife Committee in the California Senate, I am convinced that we cannot resolve the environmental crisis without rediscovering its lost spiritual significance. Only when enough people awaken to a deep spiritual connection with nature will environmentalism become a global ethic. With what sociologist Robert Bellah calls a new "habit of the heart," institutional change will follow.

This next wave of environmentalism must include a passionate, spiritual alternative. Just as we humans are not expendable parts of a machine to be used and thrown away, neither are forests, soil, and rivers.

For the past several years, however, America has been in retreat from even its modest 25% off. Commitment to be the manager of the environment. A backlash has been underway in the name of God; one that asserts the absolute rights of human beings to help themselves to nature's bounty. As the backlash proceeds, as more of our forests and wetlands disappear, as more of our rivers and estuaries are degraded, as more of our cities are congested and polluted, I envision an even stronger environmental outcry arising once again.

This next wave of environmentalism must include a passionate, spiritual alternative. Just as we humans are not expendable parts of a machine to be used and thrown away, neither are forests, soil, and rivers. In every political and economic act, we must treat the Earth as an organic whole, recognizing and appreciating the interdependent diversity of people and nature.

We need a new gospel (or Torah) of the Earth to make our religious traditions relevant to the environmental crisis, and to provide the philosophical and spiritual basis for the evolutionary leap we must make for our quality of life to survive.

It is not a "new religion" that is needed but a new sanctification of nature in all our religions.

We are caught in a cycle of consciousness (or unconsciousness) that once led to growth and now threatens destruction. The cycle begins with the religious overview of Genesis, in which a God in the sky has appointed human beings as his divine regents over nature. The community of sacred things includes God and human beings, nothing more. The rest is a vast Earth filled with resources for human development. Since human beings are

The vision must change, beginning with our religious framework. Carl Jung explained how powerful our religious traditions are in shaping the vision and psychological assumptions that guide the daily behavior of believers and non-believers alike. "We entirely forgot that the religion of the past two thousand years," he wrote, "is a psychological attitude that lays down a definite cultural pattern and creates an atmosphere that remains wholly uninfluenced by intellectual denials."

How can we still claim to conquer, control, and manage a creation larger and greater than ourselves?

The modern vision of an external God, a mechanical universe, and a utilitarian approach to nature-as-resource arose long ago in debate and war against a seamless spirituality that was centered in the Earth and universe. That lost gospel is what we need to retrieve and examine.

The lost gospel is ecumenical and universal. It is a challenge to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism to expand their definitions of the sacred to include the natural world. It is a challenge to nonbelievers, too, to return to a spiritual path whatever their tradition. It demands that ancient nature wisdom be taken as seriously as any chapter of the Bible, Torah, or Koran. It is a connecting thread between the traditions, a common ground of reverence.

The relationship between the human community and the natural world cannot be healed by a single, particular faith, but only by a profound understanding that all faiths should revere a single Earth. If it is to succeed, it cannot be as a rival or alternative faith in the major world religions, but as a resource to them all. Therefore it is not a "new" religion that is needed but a new sanctification of nature in all our religions.

The enemies of the lost gospel—the hard-line zealots still espousing God-given entitlement over the Earth, remain entrenched in all spheres of society. The lost gospel must challenge, at times confront, and ultimately change the assumptions of those who justify their war on nature on religious grounds. This means that more environmentalists need to embrace a spiritual dimension to our struggle.

Those who accept a spirit in nature actually are gaining access to a powerful resource that lies



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within our grasp. To think otherwise is to perpetuate the illusion and denial that we are separate from nature, or that our minds can understand and control its force. But how can we still claim to conquer, control, and manage a creation larger and greater than ourselves? The modern state and its adherents may attempt to dominate and transcend nature, but the effort is finally in vain.

No state is greater than the state of nature. No government can usurp the governance of nature's laws of life and death. No executive can be the chairman of the corporate Earth. No planner can control what is larger than himself.

Modern man's strength is itself, it is our conquest nature to build empire. We have become ourselves weakened. We have forgotten another possibility, of being modern villagers in the country of nature, souls participating in creation itself. It is never too late to remember the lost gospel of our origins.

Tom Hayden is a California state senator who lives in Los Angeles. In recent years, he has taught and lectured on the subject of ecotheology. This excerpt is reprinted from his book, *The Lost Gospel of the Earth*, with permission of Sierra Club Books.

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[Return to Table of Contents](#)

[Return to Section 9](#)