Women and the Sacred Earth: Hindu and Christian Ecofeminist Perspectives

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Abstract
Women’s voices within the Christian and Hindu traditions contain theoretical and practical resources for dealing with issues of ecological concern. Hinduism’s teachings about Mother Earth and newly crafted eco-feminist theories in Christianity provide a philosophical context for regarding the earth as sacred. The Chipko movement, organized and implemented by local women, prevented the commercial harvesting of lumber and its consequent habitat destruction in India’s Uttarakhand Province. In North America, members of Christian women’s religious orders have converted many of their properties to organic gardening and teaching centers, and into wildlife sanctuaries. Both movements are providing models for ecological sustainability.

Keywords
Chipko movement, Christianity, Dharmic ecology, ecofeminism, Green Nuns, Hindu religion, Mother Earth, sacred earth.

I. Religion and the Healing of the Earth
The fact that our planet is facing huge global environmental challenges is undeniable. Even those who argue against the theory of human causation in the phenomenon of global warming do not deny that the human population is greater than ever before in history, and its impact upon the environment enormous. The Earth Charter, an international declaration of principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world, states: “The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing...
environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species” (Earth Charter 2000). It calls for a move towards the provision of basic human needs for all, while at the same time respecting the needs of all other species, and adopting sustainable development plans.

The Earth Charter is not the product of any religious or spiritual group alone, yet it does make reference, in its preamble, to the “spiritual challenges” that are interconnected with the environmental, economic, political and social challenges facing the world. Similarly, feminist theologian Carol Christ writes, “The crisis that threatens the destruction of the Earth is not only social, political, economic, and technological, but is at root spiritual” (Christ 1990: 58). This essay examines the spiritual roots of the ecological crisis, and considers the teachings of the Christian and Hindu religions, as they relate to the earth and humanity’s place within it. In both Christian and Hindu religions women have been active in working to bring healing to the ravaged earth. Thus, the paper offers case studies of two phenomena to illustrate women’s role in the religious environmental movement: the Chipko movement in the 1970s in India; and the “Green Nuns” in contemporary North America.

In Hindu religion, there is no dividing line between the sacred and secular as the divinity is present everywhere. Nature and environment are not alien and hostile to human beings; instead they are an inseparable part of our existence and consciousness. Hindus regard the earth as a mother deserving their reverence, because without her gifts, human survival is not possible; and thus, there is a mutuality of interests between humans and Mother Earth (Rao 2000: 34). Consequently, the Hindu attitude to nature differs significantly from that of the West or Christianity, in which the human being is separate from the natural world and dominates it. For example, in Christianity, there appears to be a fusion of two different patterns of human superiority to nature: domination over nature and negation or flight from nature. Such a fusion “helps explain the destructive combination of abusive use and yet obliviousness to the results of this abuse” (Ruether 2006: 364). On the other hand, Hindu religion as practiced in olden times, required people to spend the rest of their lives—Vanprastha (after fulfilling their duties as house-holders) in forests, and live in harmony with nature. Another example of how this attitude towards nature and Mother Earth is expressed by women in their daily worship of the sacred Tulsi plant (Ocimum sanctum), tying sacred threads to the trees.
as a token of their vow of protection, and drawing a *Kolam* at the sun-rise as a mark of welcome to divinity in nature. Another important variant from Christianity is the concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the family of Mother Earth) where every entity and organism is a part of one large extended family system presided over by the eternal Mother Earth. Thus, there are multiple ways in which Hindu religion frames and reveals the complex and respectful relationships towards nature and Mother Earth.

In Christianity there is no corresponding concept of Mother Earth. The term does not occur in the Bible, and the creation stories in the book of Genesis are deeply ambiguous in their implications for the relationship between humanity and the earth. Indeed, as Thomas Berry observes, “The first commandment might read, 'Thou shalt not have an Earth Mother'” (Berry 2006: 25). Historically, the Christian focus on heaven has often led to a denigration of earth. (Carmody 1983:100-115; Reid 2005: 106-123; Scharper 1997: 132-164.) As Catherine Keller has shown, in some Christian apocalyptic thought there is a yearning for the end of the earthly world, and for an ushering in of a new heavenly realm (Keller 1990: 249f.). This in turn has led to a scorning of the things of the earth, and a belief that they are transitory and expendable, with no inherent value. In a parallel dualism, creation has been ranked hierarchically from the supremacy of male human beings down to supposedly inanimate “Nature,” and this has led to wanton destruction of the earth’s ecosystems and plundering of earth’s resources.

And yet within the Christian tradition are also the witness and teachings of those who have seen the earth as sacred (Berry 1988, 1999, 2006), as the body of God (McFague 1993), and its creatures as our brothers and sisters (Roberts and Amidon 1991: 226). The medieval mystics, those who glimpsed and comprehended something of the oneness and blessedness of all things, both earthly and heavenly, wrote and taught of God’s presence in creation, and loved the earth with a deep passion and humility (Uhlein 1983). More recently, feminist theologians have critiqued the patriarchal aspects of Christianity, and contributed fresh ways of seeing the earth and humanity in interdependent relationships (Ruether 1975, 1992; Spretnak 1990; Primavesi 2000).

In the Hindu context, environmental movements within India have, in some instances, stressed spiritual connections to nature. With respect to the role of spirituality, Cohen (2002: 288) states that spirituality may be
related to satisfaction with life in that religious people may feel close to God, see beauty in the world, and feel their lives have purpose. One can extrapolate from this that spirituality also has a positive impact on how we treat nature and the environment. Although not all religious beliefs and practices may have the same impact on environmental issues, spirituality does play an important role in shaping our views towards nature. It does not mean that Hindus in general are more environmentally caring people, but Hindu women with their involvement in Chipko and Narmada Valley Dams movements, do appear to be nearer and respectful to nature and the environment. In fact it could be said that there is a definite “feminine” tone in such movements. These movements centre on women’s leadership, participation, and voicing of their concerns. Nature is regarded as the creative principle of the cosmos, and as such an indication of sacred feminine power. In a sense, the Chipko movement (to protect trees from contract felling) was a women-led response to the assault upon nature. The protest took a religious character by the use of satyagraha, a Gandhian approach to civil disobedience.

As the ecological movement has taken root in Christian women’s communities it is transforming the understanding of what it means to take religious vows and live a Christian life (Taylor 2007). The traditional vows of commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience are being supplemented by commitments to, for example, sustainable living, simplicity and respect for the earth. The social justice aspect of the religious life that has long involved advocacy for the poor and marginalized in human society has been extended to include the earth in its scope (Green Mountain Monastery 2007). The earth is now being viewed as marginalized, exploited, abandoned, just as the impoverished in human societies have been. Women living the religious life are therefore working to alleviate the suffering of the earth, as well as the suffering of other humans.

In ecofeminist thought women are not merely partners with men in the environmental movement, but are also the victims (and survivors) of a destructive, dualistic ordering of the world, where the masculine is superior to the feminine, the heavenly to the earthly, the spiritual to the material, and so on. There is, therefore, a link between the abuse of the earth and the oppression of women (Carmody 1983; Ruether 1975; Scharper 1997). We hope to show that there is also a link between the empowerment and activism of women, and the healing of the earth, in both Hindu and Christian religious traditions.
II. Mother Earth and Hindu Religion

The most important aspect of Hindu eco-theology pertaining to the treatment of the animal and plant kingdom is the belief that the Supreme Being was incarnated in the form of various species. For example, among the various incarnations of God (numbering from ten to twenty-four depending upon the source of the text), He first incarnated Himself in the form of a fish, then a tortoise, a boar, and a dwarf. His fifth incarnation was as a man-lion. As Rama, He was closely associated with monkeys, and as Krishna, He was always surrounded by cows. The \textit{Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana}, beautifully states this aspect: “This form is the source and indestructible seed of multifarious incarnations within the universe, and from the particle and portion of this form, different living entities, like demi-gods, animals, human-beings and others, are created” (Book 1, Discourse III:5). The same sacred book further states: “One should look upon deer, camels, monkeys, donkeys, rats, reptiles, birds, and flies as though they were one’s own children” (Book 7, Discourse XIV:9). In addition to this, many animals and birds are revered by Hindus as these are the mounts or vehicles of various gods, goddesses, and incarnations. In India, Nepal and Bhutan, there are many sacred forests and groves where green trees and plants are protected. Also, for Hindus, the planting of a tree is still a religious duty. Thus sanctity has been attached to many trees and plants. Through such exhortations and various writings, the Hindu religion has provided a system of moral guidelines towards environmental preservation and conservation. Furthermore, a main premise of Hindu religion is that every entity and living organism is a part of one large extended family system (\textit{Kutumba}) which is presided over by the eternal Mother Earth (called by Hindus \textit{Devi Vasundhara}). The development of humanity from creation till now has taken place nowhere else but on the Earth; thus, our relationship with Earth, from birth to death, is like children and their mother. The mother—in this case Earth—not only bears her children but also has been the main source of the fulfilment of their unending desires. Earth provides energy for the sustenance of all species. The Hindu religion teaches that just as one ought not to insult, exploit, and violate one’s mother but be kind and respectful to her, similarly, one should behave thus towards the Mother Earth. This relationship is superbly depicted by Rishi Atharva in the \textit{Prithivî Sûkta} (Hymn to Mother Earth) of the \textit{Atharva Veda}. 
The *Atharva Veda*, written about 1500 BCE, is perhaps the first of its kind of scripture in any spiritual tradition where the concept of respect for the earth has been propounded. An entire chapter consisting of 63 verses (Mantras) has been devoted in praise of Mother Earth. These verses integrate much of the thoughts of Hindu seers concerning our existence on earth. A series of verses follows, addressed to Devi Vasundhara, Mother Earth, evoking her benevolence. Mother Earth is seen as an abode of a large and extended family (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*) of all beings (humans and others alike). As Mantra 11 tells us:

O Mother Earth! Sacred are thy hills, snowy mountains, and deep forests. Be kind to us and bestow upon us happiness. May you be fertile, arable, and nourisher of all. May you continue supporting people of all races and nations. May you protect us from your anger (natural disasters). And may no one exploit and subjugate your children. (*Prithivi Sukta* of Atharva Veda, Kanda XII, Hymn I, verse 11)

This prayer, which is based on the cosmic vision of planet earth, and which also relates to our consciousness towards the environment, is based on the fundamental concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. Every entity and organism is a part of one large extended family system which is presided over by the eternal Mother Earth. It is She who supports us from her abundant endowments and riches, it is She who nourishes us, it is She who provides us with a sustainable environment, and it is She who, when angered by the misdeeds of her children, punishes them with disasters. Through ethical exhortations and various writings, Hindu religion has provided a system of moral guidelines towards environmental preservation and conservation. From the perspective of Hindu culture (as well as from the Buddhist and Jain perspectives), abuse and exploitation of nature for selfish gain is unjust and sacrilegious.

The Hymn also exemplifies the relevance of environmental sustenance, agriculture, and biodiversity to human beings. All the three main segments of our physical environment, that is, water, air and soil, are highlighted and their usefulness is detailed. The various water resources (*Prithivi Sukta*, verse 3) such as seas, rivers, and waterfalls flow on earth. The earth itself consists of the three layers of brown, black and red soil which are used for agricultural purposes. The Hymn maintains that the attributes of the earth (such as its firmness, purity and fertility) are for everyone, and that no one group or nation has special authority over them. That is why the welfare of all and
hatred towards none are enjoined as the core values for people on this planet (Prithivi Sukta, verse 18). For example, there is a prayer for the preservation of the original fragrance of earth (Prithivi Sukta, verse 23 and 25) so that its natural legacy is sustained for future generations. Further, there is a prayer which says that even when people dig the earth either for agricultural purposes or for extracting minerals, it should be done in such a way that no serious damage is done to her vital body and appearance (Prithvi Sukta, verse 38); that is, that her natural resources and vegetative cover be conserved.

Although human greed and exploitative tendencies have been the main cause of environmental destruction, inter-religious and inter-cultural conflicts and wars have also contributed to the environmental problems. In contrast to human divisions, the Hymn enunciates the unity of all races and among all beliefs, and urges respect for a diversity of cultures, faiths and languages with a prayer which says that Mother Earth bestows upon all people living in any part of the world the same prosperity:

Mother Earth where people belonging to different races, following separate faiths and religions, and speaking numerous languages cares for them in many ways: May that Mother Earth, like a Cosmic Cow, give us the thousand-fold prosperity without any hesitation without being outraged by our destructive actions. (Prithivi Sukta of Atharva Veda, Hymn I, verse 45)

Moreover, those who defend and protect the environment are showered by blessings (Prithivi Sukta, verse 7). That is why, in verse 59, Mother Earth is implored to bless us with all kinds of nourishment and serenity so that we may live in peace and harmony. “May Mother Earth, who is the provider of milk and many nourishing things, grain and other agricultural produce, and fragrance, bless us with peace, tranquillity and riches” (Prithivi Sukta, Hymn I, Verse 59).

In summary, the Hymn for Mother Earth can be seen as the foremost ancient spiritual text from India which enjoins all human beings to protect, preserve and care for the environment. This is beautifully illustrated in Mantra 16 which says that it is up to us as the progeny of Mother Earth to live in peace and harmony with all:

O Mother Earth! You are the world for us and we are your children; let us speak in one accord, let us come together so that we live in peace and harmony, and let us be cordial and gracious in our relationship with other human beings. (Prithvi Sukta, verse 16)
These views denote the deep bond between earth and human beings, and exemplify the true relationship between the earth and all living beings, as well as between humans and other forms of life. Such a comprehensive exposition depicting a theory of eco-spirituality is not found in any other religious tradition and beliefs as clearly portrayed as by these 63 Mantras. The Hymn provides us with a moral guide to behave in an appropriate manner towards nature, and explains our duty towards the environment. It enjoins us to take care of God’s creation in the form of stewardship.

Stewardship of the environment requires that one consider the entire universe as his/her extended family with all living beings in this universe as the members of the household. This concept, also known as *Vasudha eva Kutumbakam* (*Vasudha* means this earth, *Kutumba* means extended family consisting of human beings, animals, and all living beings), means that all human beings as well as other creatures living on earth are the members of the same extended family of Devi Vasundhara. Only by considering the entire universe as a part of our extended family, can we (individually and collectively) develop the necessary maturity and respect for all other living beings.

On the concept of *Vasudha eva Kutumbakam*, Dr. Karan Singh has said: “that the planet we inhabit and of which we are all citizens—Planet Earth—is a single, living, pulsating entity; that the human race, in the final analysis is an interlocking, extended family—*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* as the Veda has it…” (Singh, 1991: 123). We also know that members of the extended family do not wilfully endanger the lives and livelihood of others; instead, they first think in terms of caring for others before taking an action. That is why, in order to transmit this new global consciousness, it is essential that the concept of *Vasudha eva Kutumbakam* is encouraged. For this, the world’s great religions would have to cooperate with each other so that the welfare and caring of all can be realized through the golden thread of spiritual understanding and cooperation at the global level. Vandana Shiva suggested that people of all faiths and other spiritual traditions should view the large existing in small because their every act has not just global but cosmic implications (Shiva 1991: 3). One specific step already taken in this direction is the formulation of Earth Charter, “an instrument through which a new universal consciousness for the healing and caring of creation and a befitting understanding of divine purpose can be created to transform that human spirit which unites material realities and spiritual imperatives” (Dwivedi 2006: 168).
III. Christian Ecofeminist Thought

The Hebrew creation story recorded in the first chapter of Genesis depicts God creating humankind, both male and female, after the creation of other living creatures. Humans are to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Gen. 1:26). This position of dominance is reinforced a few verses later, when God says to the first humans, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28).

In the second chapter of Genesis the order in which God creates the world and its creatures is different. A man is formed from the dust of the earth before any plants, birds or animals are made. His task is to till and keep the garden of Eden. After the creation of plants, animals and birds, a woman is made from one of the man's ribs, God’s final creation, to be the man’s partner. In place of the theme of human dominance over nature that we see in the first creation narrative, there is a theme of stewardship and the responsibility of caretaking in the second narrative. But as the story continues, humans disobey their instructions and God punishes them by declaring that the woman must henceforth be ruled over by her husband, and the man must live by sweat and toil on a cursed and inhospitable earth until he dies (Gen. 3). Gone is the partnership between man and woman, and gone are the paradisical conditions of life on earth.

These creation and curse stories have served as the underpinning of a Christian dualism (Reid 2005: 108f.). Earth is not seen as sacred but as cursed, the prison we seek to escape (Tucker 2003: 44f.), or the wild nature we seek to tame and suppress. Sin and death are associated with the earth, and salvation and eternal life are awaited in heaven. God, who used to walk in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8), has removed himself from the earthly realm and is now distant and separate from humanity.

This narrative has had a toxic legacy in creating a sense of alienation from the earth and hostility towards it. When the divine is sought exclusively beyond the earth, the sense of the sacredness and blessedness of the earth and its creatures is lost. When humans seek to subdue and dominate the earth, an attitude of respect and caretaking is lost. And when patriarchy sets men over women as their rulers, a reciprocity and equal
partnership between the sexes is impossible. The exploitation and abuse of women and nature go hand in hand (Lorentzen and Eaton 2002).

Ecofeminist theologians in Christianity have seen these connections and challenged this theology of dominion. In her book *Gaia and God* Rosemary Radford Ruether writes that the quest of ecofeminism is for earth healing, whereby the damaged relationships between humanity and the earth, as well as between men and women, and between races, classes and nations, can be made whole again. “Such healing is possible,” she maintains, “only through recognition and transformation of the way in which Western culture, enshrined in part in Christianity, has justified such dominance” (Ruether 1992: 1). The title of Ruether’s book refers to two very different ways of naming the divine. Gaia is the Greek earth goddess, while God is the transcendent divine in heaven. Ruether teaches that we need to hear and heed the holy voices of both Gaia and God, the wisdom of the earth and the inspiration of heaven.

If Gaia stands for an awareness of humanity’s place within creation, not separate from or superior to it, as well as a reverence for the earth and a commitment to live with a light footprint on it, then we need Gaia now more than ever. We need a return by Western Christian consciousness to this dimension of theology. Rather than focusing on the mythical return of Christ to banish evil and rule the world at some time in the future, ecofeminists suggest we look to the return of Gaia, and do all we can to usher her in. For some, this has meant exploring pagan or neo-pagan religions such as Wicca, with their nature-based spirituality and teachings. Starhawk, for example, a modern exponent and practitioner of Wicca, describes it as a religion of ecology, wherein the earth is the manifestation of the Goddess (Starhawk, 1989). The natural elements of earth, air, fire, water and spirit are the body of the Goddess, and are to be honoured and revered, not used and exploited.

An understanding of nature as sacred is present in the writings of the medieval Christian mystics. Hildegard of Bingen, for example, writes that creation is a “mirror of God that glistens and glitters,” revealing the Creator to us within it. She continues: “As human persons view creation with compassion, in trust, they see the Lord. It is God which humankind is then able to recognize in every living thing” (Uhlein 1983: 76-78). With this compassion and trust the earth is seen as more than a resource, a threat or an object; it becomes for us the place in which we encounter the divine. As the mystic Meister Eckhart expresses it, “Spirituality is not to be learned...
by flight from the world, by running away from things, or by turning solitary and going apart from the world. Rather . . . we must learn to penetrate things and find God there” (Fox 1983a: 90).

Ecofeminist theologians sometimes use the term “panentheism” to refer to the belief that God or Goddess is present within all of creation, and all of creation exists within God or Goddess (Reid 2005: 54; Taylor 2007: 261). Unlike theism, which states that God created the world and then withdrew to a relationship of complete transcendence and otherness, and unlike pantheism, which affirms that God is all that is, with no separation, panentheism balances the transcendence of God with the immanence. The divine is both within and beyond the complex web of life, and that web is not fallen or evil or dispensable, but is good and blessed.

Drawing on the writings of thinkers from second-century Irenaeus to the medieval mystics to twentieth-century Paul Ricoeur and Mary Daly, theologian Matthew Fox rejects the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin as inherently destructive in its implications (Fox 1983b: 46-51). He believes that if we teach that Adam and Eve’s sin brought a curse on the earth and set up an enmity between humanity and nature, we are bound to live that out in relationships of alienation from nature, as we have stated above. Instead, he proposes that we teach about the original and continual blessing of creation, and learn to love it, trust it, befriend it, know it and share with it by being co-creators rather than destroyers of the earth. Ecofeminist theology embraces this perspective because of its positive view of the earth and its rejection of the myth of woman’s guilt for bringing sin into the world.

A theology that is rooted in respect for and connection with the earth as blessed brings with it a sense of homecoming. The dualistic striving to get to heaven as our ultimate home, far above earth, is replaced by a deep awareness that we are already at home. As Thomas Berry affirms, “The Earth is our primary community” (Berry 2006: 43). Heaven can be heaven on earth, and God can be found here and now. Indeed, the Greek word oikos, from which the word “ecology” is derived, means “home.” An ecological theology brings us back to our bodies, our earthiness, and all the companions with whom we share this home. We do not need to shun the world, mortify our bodies, tame nature or subdue the earth; we simply (and urgently) need to come home, to make our home with the earth, not just on it. We need to make our peace with the earth. “We need no new heaven and Earth,” writes Catherine Keller. “We have this Earth, this sky, this water to renew” (Keller 1990: 263).
As our understanding of and love for the earth deepens, so too does our desire to do it no harm. This is not because of a divine command, but because the earth is our home, with much to teach us. Feminist theologian Sallie McFague argues,

There is a hole in the centre of Christianity’s environmental ethic . . . created by centuries of indifference, ignorance and destruction of nature. Christians need to become reacquainted with nature at all levels: local, regional, planetary. We need to learn about the natural world by taking care of houseplants, working to create city parks; fighting environmental racism; and informing ourselves about climate change, soil degradation, deforestation, and sustainability. (McFague 2000: 39)

Christian ecofeminists therefore advocate both rethinking traditional theological views of the earth and humanity’s relation to it, and becoming active in various ways to reverse the destruction wreaked on our planetary home. We need to work to save the earth, and we need to be saved by it.


The effectiveness of any religion in protecting the environment depends upon how much faith its believers have in its precepts and injunctions. Its value also depends upon how those precepts are transmitted and adapted in everyday social interactions. In the case of Hindu religion, some of its precepts did become ingrained in the daily life and social institutions of a section of the people. One specific example is given as a case study of the Chipko movement to illustrate this point.

In March 1973, in the town of Gopeshwar in Chamoli district, in the Himalayas (Uttaranchal province, India), villagers formed a human chain and encircled earmarked trees to keep them from being felled for a factory producing sports equipment. The movement leader, Chandi Prasad Bhatt declared: “Let them know we will not allow the felling of a single tree. When their men raise their axes, we will embrace the trees to protect them (Shephard 1987: 69). This incident, embracing trees by making a human chain, gave the name Chipko (embrace). The same situation later occurred in another village, when forest contractors wanted to cut trees under license from the provincial government Department of Forests. The movement acquired a special significance in 1974 when, lured by the provincial gov-
ernment to receive a long disputed war compensation payment (from the 1962 China-India conflict), men from villages had gone to the district headquarters—Chamoli to receive compensation, leaving behind only women, children and older people. In the absence of men, when the lumber company employees arrived to begin logging in the Reni Forest area, near Joshimath, thirty women marched into the woods to protest against logging by hugging trees. One of the women, Gaura Devi, said that the forest was like her mother, and before anyone dared to cut a single tree, they had to shoot her (James 2000). After a heated confrontation, the loggers turned back without felling a single tree. Those thirty women used the Gandhian philosophy of *Satyagraha* to fight against an ecological abuse. Since then, the Chipko Andolan (movement) has grown from a grassroots eco-development movement to a worldwide phenomenon.

The above example is illustrative of the practical impact of Hinduism on environmental conservation, especially as the Dharmic ecology in action (Dwivedi, 2000). The example of Chipko is also illustrative of the fact that when appeal to secular norms fails, one can draw on cultural and religious sources for environmental protection. The Chipko movement has also demonstrated that (a) there is a need to stress a harmonious and holistic relationship between humans and nature; (b) villagers (compared to urban people) may have an ingrained respect for natural resources surrounding their villages; (c) the wellbeing of the community depends largely upon the protection and maintenance of Mother Earth; and (d) environmental abuse can be handled through non-violent means.

Reverence for trees and, by extension, for the entirety of nature, is advocated in the Hindu religion. The Chipko movement which was supported by villagers (but highlighted by women) has its root in the ancient Hindu religious practices of showing reverence to trees and plants with prayers and offerings of water and flowers, and by encircling a venerated object with sacred threads. At the same time, trees and plans are also considered as the abode of various deities. By tying sacred threads to the trees, one takes a vow of protection in the same manner as on the day of *Raksha bandhan*, when girls tie a thread around their brothers’ wrists, thus seeking protection throughout their life. The same is true with respect to trees or plants when women tie a thread around those trees, they endorse and thus acknowledge their complete dependence upon these trees for their life and well-being and announcing their vow to protect them (James 2000: 512). And as tying of sacred threads is done by women, Chipko, in a sense, is an...
eco-feminist movement that affirms the spiritual value of nature. The movement also strengthens the Dharmic approach to environmental protection and sustainable development. It is not too far fetched to suggest that the Chipko movement is inspired by and grounded in the Hindu religion (Dwivedi 1997).

While the genesis of the Chipko movement has its background in religious belief, it is also based on ecological or economic concerns. Villagers have noted how industrial and commercial demands have denuded their forests, how they cannot sustain their livelihood in a deforested area, and how floods continually play havoc with their small agricultural communities. Women specifically have noted how men are often employed in ways that are destructive to the earth. In the Himalayan areas, where the pivot of the family is the woman, men often go away to distant places in search of jobs, leaving the women, children, and elders behind. The Chipko movement has thus emerged as women's movement to protect nature: women, in this context, are the ones who worry most about nature and its conservation, in their dependence upon it for their families' sustenance.

The Chipko movement and its relevance to environmental protection and conservation suggest a common strategy for environmental stewardship. Such a strategy requires that together we (a) perceive a common future for humanity; (b) insist upon respect and compassion for all creatures as well as for nature itself, (c) understand that any destruction of the earth results in turn in the erosion of human values, (d) interweave the spirituality of Ahimsa (non-violence) into the economic, political, social and technological domains of the so-called secular world, and (e) believe in the endeavour for the preservation and sustenance of Vasudhaiv-kutumbkam—the family of Mother Earth.

V. Green Nuns

Vowed communities of men and women living in celibacy have always been part of religious life, in many different eras, cultures and faiths. Traditionally they have withdrawn from the mundane world while at the same time responding to a call to meet its needs, and have followed a religious life of prayer, spiritual disciplines, poverty, service and radical dependence on God. In North America today another characteristic is emerging: an intentional environmental activism is being practised, as members of
Christian religious communities educate themselves about ecological issues and embrace sustainable ways of life. We will consider here the development of this feature among women religious.

In her book *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology*, Sarah McFarland Taylor writes that women religious are “hearing and answering a call from the earth” (Taylor 2007: 2). She summarizes the ecological activities of so-called “green nuns” thus:

Some sisters are sod-busting the neatly manicured lawns surrounding their motherhouses to create community-supported organic gardens where they engage in ‘sacred agriculture’ and ‘contemplative gardening.’ Others are building alternative housing structures and hermitages from renewable materials… They are building composting toilets, heating their buildings with solar panels, installing compact fluorescent bulbs, cooking with solar ovens, and replacing old ‘gas-guzzling’ automobiles with new, efficient electric-hybrid vehicles. They are… creating wildlife sanctuaries… leading struggles to stop the proliferation of suburban sprawl… and adopting environmentally sustainable lifestyles both as daily spiritual practice and as models to others. (Taylor 2007: 1-2)

Taylor’s research in the USA and Canada has documented a phenomenon that is transforming the face of convent life. “Green nuns,” also called “green sisters” or “eco-nuns” (and these nicknames indicate that it is a phenomenon primarily present in women’s religious communities, rather than in men’s) are finding many and varied ways in which to formalize and live out their commitment to the earth. Some religious communities, such as the Sisters of Providence in Kingston, Ontario, and the Sisters of St. Joseph in London, Ontario, have created specific Offices within their administrative structures to focus on issues such as ecology, earth literacy, organic gardening and systemic justice. Others have appointed co-coordinators of particular initiatives, or established Centres within their communities for the study and practice of environmental healing. The School Sisters of Notre Dame passed an Earth Charter resolution at their 2002 Canadian provincial General Chapter meeting, in which they referred to their need for “ongoing conversion”—a conversion not to a set of doctrines of the church, but to respect and reverence for life. In the USA in 1994 a small group of women religious founded a network called “Sisters of the Earth,” and began providing resources, educational material, gatherings and support for others concerned about ecological issues. Taylor has now catalogued fifty earth ministries run by green sisters in the USA and Canada.
In addition to these formal ways of expressing their commitment to the earth, green nuns are themselves earth activists in many ways, as outlined above. From adopting vegetarian diets to embracing comprehensive recycling, the sisters are reinterpreting their traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and applying ecological principles to all that they do. Taylor writes that Sister of Charity Maureen Wild, at her profession of vows in Halifax, Canada, in 1990, said:

I profess a life commitment to poverty/ by striving to become more and more creatively simple in my living;/ learning to live appropriately within the limitations/ of the earth-life process./ I profess a life commitment to chastity/ acknowledging the sacredness of my own relational, sexual being/ and desiring to relate to all of life as sacred./ I profess a life commitment to obedience/ by listening to the needs of life within and around me/ and responding with my gifts. (Taylor 2007: 64)

Taylor calls this movement the “greening of religion.” Cristina Vanin, writing of the Canadian context, describes the green nuns as “models of ecological spirituality” and understands their significance thus: “Each is contributing to what Thomas Berry calls the Great Work of our time, carrying out the transition ‘to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.’ Each has much to teach us about what it means to be a part of the single, integral community of the Earth” (Vanin 2005). Indeed, Berry sees the “wisdom of women” as a necessary part of this task of moving away from human devastation of the Earth (Berry 1999: 180).

Green nuns are demonstrating a way to live communally, co-operatively, environmentally responsibly and ecologically sustainably on the earth. As women religious they are integrating spirituality with ecology and thus are not only contributing to a much needed twenty-first century reformation of Christian religion and practice, but are also pioneering a way for the secular world to relearn how to live in balance with the rest of nature.

VI. Conclusion

Every deep spiritual tradition has the potential to help humanity live more peaceably and responsibly on the earth. Those who see divinity in nature
(or worship nature) have increased our sense of beauty, our understanding of the largeness and height of our life, and our aim at perfection. Christianity has given us the vision of divine love and social justice; Buddhism has shown us a noble way to be kinder, purer and nobler; Judaism and Islam have shown us how to be devoted to God and faithful in following God's command; Hinduism has given us the exhortation to see divinity everywhere, and to see the whole universe of life as one vast family. It is also true that with the beginning of the new millennium, it is becoming increasingly clear that many of our values are totally inadequate for long-term survival and sustainable development; that is why it is not surprising that we are witnessing an emergence of a wide spectrum of challenges to the traditional materialistic view. Guided by Western culture, people have had blind faith in the prowess of science and technology to bring material progress over the past several hundred years. It is only recently that some of them have come to understand that so-called material prosperity should not be an end in itself. This has resulted in a realization that spirituality and the control of one's desires can bring a more lasting happiness than acquisitive materialism. This relates to the new planetary vision created by the Earth Charter, supported by the new configuration of inter-religious relations indicating a new way of life in which the family of Mother Earth can live in an ecologically sustainable manner. Of course, while each religion and culture has its opponents to the new vision, there has also emerged “a common vision on such matters as mutual ecumenical respect for different religions, feminism, and ecology, although they may use somewhat different language to express those common visions” (Ruether 2006: 374). Christianity and Hindu religion, as world religions, have much in common to share and support such visions.

The environmental crisis facing us has given the various religions and cultures an opportunity to come together and work for the protection and sustenance of the entire cosmos. There is an urgent need to encourage cooperation among the people of the world. The complexity and scale of environmental problems no longer permit a water-tight division of environmental issues between religions, faiths, nations and communities. Mother Earth does not differentiate between Christians and Hindus, rich and poor, strong and weak. We are one, and as we care for the earth we care for the home in which we belong. This is the message of the Chipko women of India and the Green Nuns of North America.
References


