U'wa Indians (Colombia)

The U’wa Indians live on the slopes of the Andes in northeastern Colombia, along the eastern side of the range called Sierra Nevada del Cocuy. Brutally reduced in numbers and in territory by the Spanish conquest, the U’wa remained somewhat isolated in the Andes until the 1940s and 1950s when a road was constructed by the government opening their lands to white peasants and to Catholic mission settlements. At the turn of the twenty-first century the U’wa numbered about 5000, and the Colombian government acknowledged only a small portion of their original territory. Much of this land has been affected by ongoing civil war, by illegal drug trafficking, and by the government’s policy of promoting oil exploitation. A large number of U’wa, and the governing authority of the tribe itself, adhere to their traditional ways while they struggle to keep these outside forces from invading their culture. Their struggle is carried on by political and legal means, but at bottom it is a religious one, for the U’wa world is essentially constructed of spiritual beliefs.

The U’wa believe that they are descended from deities of an upper world and a lower world. They occupy a middle world that is delicately balanced between the upper and lower worlds, and believe it is their duty to maintain this balance through chants and by living in harmony with the processes of the universe. If the balance is upset, the universe will come to an end. Thus, for example, in certain ceremonies the U’wa chant myths all night to assure that the sun and other natural processes continue along their proper courses, and they chant at different times of the year to keep the cycle of seasons moving. There are pathways connecting the three worlds, along which the deities travel. The paths of the upper world are those of certain stars, sun and moon, while the paths of the lower world are rivers, and all paths meet in lakes. By these paths, various good and bad qualities enter the middle world, and the master shaman chanters, under hallucinogens, travel the paths in order to shut out bad qualities or allow good ones to enter the middle world. Nature serves as a central symbol in this cosmology, as it does in the simpler metaphor that the U’wa sometimes use, namely, that the world is a body with its head in the highlands, caves are mouths, mountain ranges the spinal cord, and the forest the pubic hair of lower world deities.

This religious view of nature guides the way the U’wa live in their environment. As agriculturalists, hunters, gatherers and fishers, they change their place of residence several times a year, from tropical lowlands, to foothills, to high mountain rainforest. The moves, at set times, appear not to be related to agricultural or climatic advantage, but rather to maintaining the balance of upper and lower worlds. Maize is not sown in optimal planting conditions, but rather to maintaining the balance of upper and lower worlds. Nature serves as a central symbol in this cosmology, as it does in the simpler metaphor that the U’wa sometimes use, namely, that the world is a body with its head in the highlands, caves are mouths, mountain ranges the spinal cord, and the forest the pubic hair of lower world deities.

The U’wa have no known tradition of violence to settle conflicts among themselves or with outsiders. Animosities do arise within the tribe and with outsiders, but the U’wa eschew use of knives or firearms in disputes, and say their weapons consist of thoughts and words. Today, they strive to be left alone, aligning themselves with neither side in the civil war and resisting foreign encroachments that affect their land or environment. Through political stances and legal actions, they accuse white colonization and the Colombian government in general of taking their territory, introducing diseases, exhausting natural resources, causing hunger, preventing them from living materially on their land in the traditional way, and refusing to acknowledge their beliefs that all the natural world is sacred and the U’wa are its keepers. They view the government’s current opening of their territory to international oil companies in apocalyptic terms. In actions from lawsuits to civil disobedience to an international media campaign, the U’wa insist upon recognition of their belief that oil was distributed throughout this world and the lower world by the deities when they created the universe, that it is a living resource as if it were the blood of Mother Earth doing its sacred work just where it is, and that to exploit it would be a sacrilege destroying the balance of the universe and provoking the collapse of U’wa culture. A network of international activists has formed to aid the U’wa in their...
struggle against oil companies and the government. Struck by the poignancy of this small, spiritual tribe resisting oil exploitation because it believes oil is the blood of Mother Earth, human rights and environmental activists from Colombia, the United States and Europe have publicized the natives’ plight, helped them in litigation, brought U’wa tribal leaders on foreign tours, and pressed their own governments to protect the U’wa. Colombian anthropologists and lawyers, the Italian Green Party, a coalition of several groups operating as The U’wa Defense Project, Earth Justice Legal Defense Fund, and Harvard University’s Program on Nonviolent Sanctions and Cultural Survival, among others, have all played key roles. Amazon Watch several times brought tribal leaders to address the annual shareholders’ meeting of a California oil company threatening U’wa land. A young American environmentalist, impressed by the naturalistic religion of the U’wa, was in U’wa territory in the late 1990s together with two native American Indian women leaders to build international solidarity when the three were sequestered and assassinated by gunmen of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), demonstrating further that the U’wa world has turned chaotic.

If the oil drilling goes ahead, the council of elders – the most respected tribal authority – has recommended that the U’wa follow a precedent said to be known in their oral history from the sixteenth century: with the Spanish in pursuit, the U’wa men, women and children jumped from a high cliff in a mass suicide.

Robert W. Benson

Further Reading


See also: Amazonia; Andean Traditions; Ayahuasca; Ethnobotany; Ethnology; Huaorani; Incas; Indigenous Activism and Environmentalism in Latin America; Kogi (Northern Colombia); Mother Earth; Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo – and Ethnology in Colombia; Rubber Tappers; Shamanism–Ecuador; Shamanism–Traditional; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; Tukanoan Indians; World Conference of Indigenous Peoples; Yanomami.

UFOs and Extraterrestrials

Flying saucer cults and the broader UFO movement work in general within a galactian theological framework that ranges between gnostic and astral worldviews. From the transcendental orientation of gnosticism in which the material is either denied reality or significant value, nature is dismissed as a foil to spiritual meaning. The astral view is of course closer to the pagan inasmuch as both ground themselves in the tangible. Where it differs, however, is in crossing the “death of God” threshold to deny any ontological validity to the supernatural. Astral galactianism replaces the supernatural with the extraterrestrial and technological in order to demystify and demythologize primarily the Abrahamic religions, simultaneously (if unconsciously) mythologizing and ideologizing science and technology. Inasmuch as galactian spirituality centers on the cosmos as its all-encompassing structural reference and tends often to employ an Enochian narrative concerning “fallen angels” and their revolt against the divine hierarchy, nature religion becomes largely incidental. Nevertheless, UFO groups are highly individualistic, and must be examined on an ad hoc basis to discern whatever nature-spiritual dynamic may inform their particular outlooks. These range from James Jacob Hurtak’s writings (The Keys of Enoch), those of Elizabeth Clare Prophet (Church Universal and Triumphant) and the Urantia Foundation to such groups as George King’s Aetherius Society and Claude Vorilhon’s Raëlians.

The galactian inspiration of New Age UFO thought derives from Theosophy and the concomitant notion of the Great White Brotherhood of Ascended Masters who have become reinterpreted as extraterrestrial space beings. In a language reminiscent of science-fiction and scientific conceptualization, the galactian matrix includes an emphasis on cosmic law, engineering codes, electromagnetism, wave-form harmonization and/or “faulty genetic circuits” as well as such notions as pyramid power, Atlantis, Lemuria, extraterrestrials or space brethren, and the Pleiades as a command center of higher forms of consciousness. Such groups as Guy and Edna Ballard’s I AM Religious Activity or Mark and Elizabeth Clare Prophet’s Summit Lighthouse/Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT) concentrate on the principle of cosmic law alone, whereas Hurtak, the Raëlian Movement, Urantia, Ron Hubbard’s Church of Scientology, and Marshall Applewhite’s Heaven’s Gate all express a typical and fully galactian cosmology of absolute and material immanence in which life is not the result of a process of natural evolution, but one of extraterrestrial biotechnological fabrication. At the same time, while spiritual seeking through galactian frameworks often intersects with ufology, not all flying saucer cults are necessarily galactian or can even be considered as New Age. Closer to the gnostic galactianism position that considers supersensuous possibilities that transcend the natural might be King’s Aetherius Society and Ernest and Ruth Norman’s Unarius. But like New Age’s lack of clearly articulated differentiation between its gnostic and pagan elements, the same fluid confusion exists between galactianism’s gnostic and astral
formulations. Elements of both appear throughout the various UFO or flying saucer groups as well as in José Argüelles’ *Surfers of the Zuvuya* or Benjamin Creme’s teachings on Maitreya.

At the center of the galactian theological world is a single ultimate God. In other words, the galactian worldview extends the gnostic and medieval chain of being into an infinite plenum of multiple dimensions. This divine source of all being is usually presented in masculine terms (e.g., Urantia’s Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of Man). Nevertheless, although the heavenly bureaucracy is also portrayed as male, Urantia does speak of a Mother Spirit. A different galactian understanding is encountered with the Universal Faithists of Kosmon (headquartered in Salt Lake City). For the Faithists, the godhead is both masculine and feminine, and half the heavenly host is female.

In galactian spiritual history, the central rupture is the Luciferian rebellion considered as the free will breaking on higher dimensions with the even higher law of cosmic harmonics and its plan for intergalactic evolution. The story of the segment of heavenly hosts who broke away under the leadership of Lucifer and came to Earth is recorded in the Genesis 6:2 tale of the “sons of God.” The fuller version is found in the apocryphic Book of Enoch’s narrative of the Watcher Angels who, in violation of their assigned role, had intercourse on Earth with female humans. Their giant offspring, consisting of “genetic aberrations,” are accordingly the corruptive elements within the human race. In CUT’s understanding, these descendents of the Watcher Angels are now those who head the world’s governments, financial institutions, multinational corporations and the underworld drug cartels.

In galactian expectation, the rebels are eventually to be defeated by the archangel Michael. They will be imprisoned and secluded in permanent torment. This notion of eternal damnation is a prominent feature of most galactian theology. There are, however, exceptions. For both the Aetherius Society and the Faithists, as recorded in their central work *Oahspe*, there is no ultimate annihilation and all souls are finally cleansed. There is no hell of everlasting punishment. But what is common to all forms of galactian mystic theology is the belief that the purpose of existence is the continual progression of the human soul toward perfection. The idea of *nirvana* or the attainment of supreme oblivion is considered a delusion and replaced with the notion of eternal evolution.

Consequently, there are different understandings of space brethren and the role of the flying saucer or space ship. Following a more Theosophical gnostic orientation, former CUT leader, Elizabeth Clare Prophet considered the visiting extraterrestrial as a dangerous Luciferian agent. On the other hand, in the non-Theosophical astral framework such as we find in Raëlianism, Heaven’s Gate and possibly Urantia, it is the advanced knowledge of the “more advanced” races from other spheres or dimensions who, through their superior technical skills concerning genetic manipulation, are responsible for life on Earth in the first place. The Raëlian Movement International began in December 1973 when French race-car driver, Claude Vorilhon, while walking in the Clermont-Ferrand region of France, encountered and boarded a flying saucer. Over a six-day period, the extraterrestrials taught to Vorilhon the “true” purport of the Bible concerning the biotechnological origins of humanity. Henceforth known as Raël (“messenger of the Elohim”), Vorilhon is accepted by his followers as the last of forty prophets. In Raël’s reinterpretation of the Old Testament, the alternate designation of Yahweh, namely, Elohim, becomes a reference to the extraterrestrials (“our fathers from space”) who, through their perfect mastery of DNA, created humanity in their own image. While in the past, the Elohim have subsequently spoken to their creations through Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed and others, their mission is now to convey through Vorilhon/Raël the imminent danger to the human race through self-annihilation. So while CUT considers that we are entering the New Age of Aquarius in which the central spiritual master is the Comte de Saint Germain rather than the Piscean Jesus Christ, Raëlians consider instead that the foremost prophet for the present “Age of the Apocalypse” that began with the nuclear detonation of 1945 is Raël.

Typical of galactian thinking is the concern with “interdimensional reality.” Its spiritual hierarchy often exists on multiple levels or dimensions of cosmic reality. However, in the Urantian understanding of the cosmos, allegedly channeled and recorded during 1934 and 1935 to assist humanity in our local galaxy’s evolution toward perfection, the elaborate polytheism presented in its *Urania Book* is not outside our space-time, but one in which its higher beings live on various spheres found within our universe. This more corporeal notion of the heavenly hosts may reflect Mormon theology in which God has a material body. Usually, however, galactian theology comprehends its enormous hierarchical bureaucracy of spiritual beings (angels, deities, evolved souls and ascended masters) in a plenitude of realms that extend not only throughout our own three-dimensional world but beyond it as well – a perspective closer to contemporary cosmological theory that envisions there to be an eleven-dimensional multiverse containing an infinite number of parallel universes. For the Raëlians, our galaxy is simply a tiny particle of an atom of a living being on a planet revolving around a sun in some super-galaxy. Likewise, the sub-atomic particles of atoms in our own world are seen by Raëlians as galaxies in themselves. The Raëlian mystical union between the sub-universes and super-universes within and beyond the individual is accomplished through the practice of Sensual Meditation, a set of contemplation techniques that aim for individual communication with the Elohim in order to regain control over and happiness in all areas of life.
When the multiple cosmos is conceived along Theosophical gnostic lines, it will entertain an understanding of the supernatural as an operative factor. But if galactian thought formulates itself along a strictly astral horizon, there is no spiritual, and the universe has no beginning. For the Raëlians, for example, matter is purely mechanical. There is no *anima mundi* to the world or the cosmos. Consequently, while the “astral” realm is a Theosophical concept developed to describe a supersensible substance supposed to pervade all space and bodies and one that provides a bridge between the spiritual and physical planes, in the astral school of galactian interpretation, there is no spiritual dimension, and the astral is essentially an extension of matter. The final contrast between the two forms of galactian theology is in the gnostic understanding of the spiritual as *a priori*, while the astral recognizes instead the centrality and permanence of matter. This last is similar to Paganism and the general emphasis of nature religions which also centralize matter, but it differs from these by not regarding the mental, spiritual and supernatural as emerging from the tangible and at best achieving an ultimate co-validity with it. With astral galactianism, in place of evolution, there is simply engineering of the eternally pre-given physical reality.

Unlike the more atheistic astralism of the Raëlian movement, the Aetherius Society founded in 1955 by George King (1919–1997), is both gnostic and astral. This “saucer cult” reveres a Cosmic Hierarchy, engages in a battle with evil forces, and expects that everyone will eventually become a Master and continue to evolve. As a regular practitioner of yoga, King claims to have attained *samatā* in which he has gained access to many cosmic secrets. In 1954, the Venusian Cosmic Master who had assumed the name “Aetherius” reputedly told King that he was to become the voice of the Interplanetary Parliament that is headquartered on the planet Saturn. The following year the Aetherius Society was established in London, and King allegedly receives “Cosmic transmissions” from Aetherius and other Cosmic Masters while in his yogic trance state.

The Aetherius Society holds belief in both reincarnation and the Great White Brotherhood of Ascended or Cosmic Masters that includes Jesus, Krishna, Buddha and others. Inasmuch as everyone will eventually become a Master, the Brotherhood consists of members from both genders. Like CUT, the Society’s belief system is essentially both Christian and Buddhist (both Jesus and Buddha are said to come from Venus), but unlike CUT’s distrust of flying saucers as containing negative entities, King teaches that saucers have played an important role for humanity and have saved the planet on several occasions from atmospheric damage caused by human civilization – specifically from experimental nuclear fallout. His movement considers that the Earth is regularly orbited by space ships, and, in particular, Satellite Three distributes special Prayer Hours of spiritual energies or *prana* that members of the Society can then channel toward specific concerns through King’s invention of Spiritual Energy Radiators. The periods during which this distribution occurs, usually lasting three to four weeks, are called “spiritual pushes.” One, designated Operation Bluewater, ended in 1976 and involved charging a specific Spiritual Energy Battery, a “radionic” storing device that can be used in times of crisis to alleviate the Earth’s magnetic field warp caused by both atomic experimentation and negative human thought. Another “spiritual push,” Operation Starlight, lasted for just over three years (1958–1961) during which King and others climbed eighteen mountains around the world that had been selected through a vision of the Master Jesus. The purpose of this push was to charge these mountains permanently with spiritual power. Regular pilgrimages to these sites now allow members to use the holy energies through prayer for terrestrial benefit such as the relief of physical suffering, diminishment of belligerent tensions, the aversion or reduction of such catastrophes as earthquakes or famine, and individual and environmental healing.

While the Aetherius Society’s Interplanetary Parliament (or Cosmic Hierarchy) is responsible to the Lords of the Sun, it argues that each planet functions as a learning stage that must be completed before one progresses to the next. Many reincarnations are necessary on each planet before one learns to live according to God’s Laws. Some Masters already live on the Earth, but the coming Master, whose magic powers exceed all terrestrial military might, will appear in a flying saucer and launch a millennium of planetary peace. Before this, however, the Great White Brotherhood is engaged in a cosmic battle with an organization of black magicians who seek to enslave humanity. The Society assists in this warfare by training its members in what is known as Operation Prayer Power: redirecting or channeling *prana* (energy) through mantras and prayers in order to heal disease. Apart from spiritual healing and the use of yoga, the Aetherius Society is also concerned with alternative medicine, dowsing and most of the practices characteristic of New Age and Human Potential. It has remained at the forefront of ecological anxieties relating to nuclear radiation pollution and industrial contamination.

Similar concerns with planetary well-being are shared by the Raëlian movement. While Raël communicates with the Elohim and Yahweh, his personal teacher and Elohim president, primarily through telepathy, he has been instructed that a major enterprise for the Raëlians is to construct an international embassy to which the Elohim can return once more to Earth to welcome the planet into a technological world of choice, infinity and pleasure. Following instructions from the Elohim, the movement would hope to establish this embassy near Jerusalem.
World government is then to be established as a form of “geniocracy” or rule by geniuses. Along with this, a universal humanitarian economy will eliminate the need for inheritance. The movement’s mission as well as difficulties involved in establishing its Elohim embassy, however, is similar to the delays and opposition to the construction of the Pyramid Temple of the Unity of God’s Faces by the Religion of Aumism at its monastery of Mandarom Shambhala in Castellane, France. The followers of Hamsah Manarah likewise believe that such an “anchoring bridge” is required for the inauguration of a Golden Age of Unity but, following a more Theosophical and Hindu framework, the Aumists understand their Temple as a “Spiritual Pole” that will link God to the material realm, whereas for Raëlians, the embassy will serve as a landing station for the spaceships of the Elohim. Nevertheless, the Aumist temple is expected to facilitate the rapprochement of science and spirituality and allow nature to recover its proper position by returning to ecological equilibrium.

Unlike the more typical gnostic-idealist aversion to the joys of the physical universe, with the Raëlians there is no rejection but rather an endorsement of worldly pleasure. Some of the methods of its central practice of Sensual Meditation are to be used by two people of the opposite sex, and this involves nudity, sensory awareness exercises and sexual experimentation with the aim of achieving a mystical experience of oneness. Nevertheless, the movement stresses complete choice in the selection of sexual partners as well as in all other aspects of life. As long as no one else is harmed, Raëlians are encouraged to be free of social mores and inhibitions. With its astral rejection of the supernatural and/or spiritual, the immortality of reincarnation is instead to be achieved through the process of serial cloning. Consequently, and in view of the Raëlian belief that all earthly life originated artificially, Raëlians support biotechnological developments – whether concerning genetically altered foods, increased mechanization, robotized automation, space exploration, use of computers or reproduction of animal and human life through cellular cloning. The Raëlian belief that all life is synthetic “grounds an empathy for all organisms, vegetable and animal” in appreciation of the biotechnological artist’s abilities: “This approach to nature and the advocacy of the use of reproductive technology are the religion’s primary points of engagement with ecological concerns” (Sentes and Palmer 2000: 101). It is through the steady advances of science as well as the assistance of the Elohim that the Raëlians expect the world will enter its golden age.

Whether pursued by organized groups and movements, or whether individual UFO sightings made by pilots of aircraft or by people of all occupations, the UFO myth remains “one of the world’s most powerful religious or semi-religious narratives” (Rothstein 2001: 134). It relates to the “crop circles” of Britain, and while many of both flying saucer sightings and crop circle constructions are clearly hoaxes, some are not as readily established as such but persist as unexplained paranormal paradoxes. Psychologically, the UFO would appear to be a product of counter-intuitive beliefs that include what we normally relate to the supernatural but are not necessarily restricted to this. But as a phenomenon in and of itself, contact with spaceships and extraterrestrials tends to interlink with the ideas of evolution that derive from Theosophy and have entered the general New Age vocabulary. For Rothstein, the UFO is “elusive, flexible and versatile and therefore an obvious candidate to become a global cultural representation distributed along the ever-expanding means for easy international communication” (2001: 147). As twenty-first-century Earth continues to face ever-increasing environmental threats, and while the possible perception of extraterrestrial technology is nothing new (e.g., the experiences of the biblical prophets Elijah and Ezekiel), the UFO encounter and corpus of belief are now more focused on both spiritual and ecological progress.

In this light, the studies conducted by Harvard psychiatrist John Mack on UFO abductees have shown that while little is reliably gained concerning knowledge of extraterrestrial life, abduction reports tell us much about our own culture and psychology and an emerging ecological sensitivity. Mack finds that the chief reasons given for UFO abduction are either to develop offspring between humans and aliens or to increase human consciousness toward preventing the destruction of the planet’s ecosystems. By linking ufology and ecology, Mack is possibly founding a new religion based on the “green politics” of star people. He has at least uncovered within the U.S. alien-abduction mythology that has developed since the 1960s the link between an alleged encounter with extraterrestrial beings and both spiritual transformation and environmental awareness.

Michael York

Further Reading
Umbanda

Umbanda is a syncretic religion *par excellence*, creatively blending African religions, particularly from Yorubaland and Congo, with Native American traditions, folk healing, Iberian Catholicism, spiritism, “Oriental” esoterism, and popular culture. This complex and often contradictory mixture emerged in Brazil in the early 1900s, as the country was making the transition from empire to republic. This period also marked Brazil’s entry to modernity, with incipient processes of industrialization and urbanization. Umbanda reflects these social dynamics, originating in the increasingly cosmopolitan cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Today, Umbanda is present throughout Brazil and sustains relations of competition, accommodation, and cross-fertilization with other Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé, Xangô, Batuque, and Tambor de Minas. Umbanda has also spread in South America, with thriving centers in Uruguay, Argentina, Peru, and Venezuela. Not surprisingly, it has also traveled to the United States, to New York, Boston, and Miami, with the waves of immigrants who have come from Brazil since the late 1970s.

Umbanda holds ambivalent attitudes toward nature. As a “cult of affliction,” to draw from anthropologist Victor Turner, this religion takes an instrumental view of the environment, seeing it as a set of forces that can be carefully manipulated to produce physical and spiritual healing and well-being. Nevertheless, Umbanda has at its core a relational ethos that tightly links humans, spirits, and the natural world. This ethos challenges notions of a sovereign, detached, and purely calculating self, standing over against nature.

As an African-based religion, Umbanda shares many elements with Candomblé. Like Candomblé, Umbanda adheres to a monistic and panenthetic worldview. All entities – animate and inanimate, mineral, vegetable, animal, human, and spiritual – are informed by and are ultimately expressions of a sacred vital force called *axé*. Because this elán vital flows unevenly across the Umbanda cosmos, a central concern in the religion is to provide practitioners with the right knowledge and proper ritual practices to place themselves strategically in the changing grid of energy generated by *axé*. Umbanda’s aim is thus unabashedly practical: to help the practitioner negotiate a favorable position *vis-à-vis* other entities, particularly humans and spirits, through strategic exchanges of energy (for example, special foods offered to one’s head spirit in exchange for health, good fortune, or happiness in love). The aim is to establish a reciprocal balance of forces that will allow the practitioner’s own *arê* to fulfill its destiny.

As in Candomblé, Umbanda locates high concentrations of *arê* in the *orixás*, the ancestral spirits that are part of the African pantheon of gods. *Orixás*, which are associated with specific natural forces or domains like thunder (*Xangô*), the sea (*Iemanjá*), and sweet water (*Oxum*), and their iconic representations serve as powerful openings to and conduits for *arê*. This explains why the religion is organized around *terreiros*, territorially based extended spiritual families headed by specialists (*pais and mães de santos*) who train initiates in the correct ritual etiquette to relate to *terreiro*’s and the practitioner’s head spirits. An essential component of this relation is the incorporation of *orixás* by practitioners in trances that are often accompanied and supported by drumming and the use of liquor and tobacco. In these trances, the *orixá* descends on the head of the medium, “riding” him or her, that is, controlling his or her body movements and speech. In this way, *orixás* become publicly present and can receive the respect and loyalty of their devotees.

In contrast to more Africanized Candomblés, however, Umbanda tend to privilege interaction with what we may call intermediate or lower spirits. It is not that *orixás* disappear altogether; they continue to be displayed prominently in *terreiro* altars albeit through their Catholic correlates (the saints). However, Umbanda mediums prefer to work with spirits native to Brazil, rather than with the African royalties represented by the *orixás*. This is where Umbanda demonstrates a high degree of syncretism and adaptability to the local environment, for the central spiritual characters in Umbanda are indigenous Brazilians and backwoodsmen (*caboclos*), old African slaves of colonial Brazil (*pretos velhos*), and rogues and prostitutes (*ezus*). These are characters that are salient in the way in which Brazilians, particularly at the grassroots, imagine their nation.

*Caboclos* play a key role in Umbanda’s attitudes and relations toward nature. In the Umbandista imagination, *caboclos* are associated with Brazil as it existed prior to the conquest, an exuberant mythical land without manmade social hierarchies. *Caboclos* represent the untamed spirit of the wilderness, the undifferentiated jungle prior to domestication by the Portuguese. This idealized wilderness is often connected with the land of Aruanda, the mythical home of *caboco* spirits said to be located in the Congo-Angola region of Africa. *Caboclos* belong to a wild, pristine place where all species are closely interconnected and where distinctions between animals and humans are tenuous. Thus, *caboclos* are seen as rugged, proud, and...
rebellious characters, always capable of transgression. As part of this transgressive personality, they are quick to smoke cigars and drink jurema, a drink with mild hallucinogenic properties made out of a mixture of the sacred plant *Pithecolobium diversifolium* Bent, herbs, honey, and alcohol.

**Preto velho**s contrast sharply with *caboclos*. They represent post-conquest Brazil, a Brazil marked by violence and deep social inequalities. Whereas the initiate who incorporates a *caboclo* becomes brash and struts around whooping and beating his/her chest, the medium who receives a *preto velho* will behave meekly, speaking softly and haltingly and walking with his/her back bent to represent the fact that s/he is carrying the whole weight of slavery. Their humble condition allows *preto velhos* to have great empathy for those in trouble and to be great healers. Like the *caboclos*, they also carry a wealth of ethnobotanical knowledge (from the forest in *caboclo*’s case and from the ancestors in the case of *preto velho*), which they can use to cure ailments ranging from persistent headaches to nervous breakdowns.

Besides contributing to the therapeutic dimension of Umbanda, the *caboclo-preto velho* dyad serves a commentary on what the religion sees as the contradictions in Brazil’s entry to modernity – tensions such as servitude versus autonomy, hierarchy versus equality, and domination versus resistance. The dyad is a way to narrativize, and thus legitimize, the civilizing process in Brazil. Yet this civilizing process is incomplete, subject to the destabilizing power of nature as represented in the transgressive, almost carnivalesque figure of the *caboclo*. The *caboclo-preto velho* dialectic, thus, offers a view of nature as “savage and primitive” forces periodically irrupting in the midst of a precarious and contradictory humanmade world.

Transgression is also preeminent for *exus*, spirits commonly associated with the underworld. In West African traditions the *eru* is a single trickster figure linked to sexuality and fertility. In Brazilian Umbanda, the *eru* assumes multiple identities, coming to stand for marginal social groups like thugs, thieves, prostitutes, and other “devils,” figures which local lore and the national mass media alternatively vilify and celebrate for their resourcefulness. The centrality of *eru* in Umbanda reflects its adaptation to the modern urban environment, where the tough streets of the city become the stage for sacred dramas. The *eru* are, in fact, a vehicle to sacralize the profane, to cosmicize the everyday life of poor Brazilians, who are the country’s vast majority. Extending Karen Brown’s argument about Vodou in Brooklyn, it be can argued that Umbanda’s emphasis on protean *eru* is a way to solve the “cosmological problem”: the ecological dissonance produced by the need to practice a religion that is tied to natural places and entities in the heavily humanmade context of the city. If *caboclos* are the transgressor of the originative jungle, harkening back to pristine origins, *exus* are the border-crossers of the new concrete and asphalt jungles, subverting bourgeois morality. *Exu* help Brazilians negotiate the tension between the city’s built environment and the “natural” environment. It is common to find food offerings to the *exus* at street corners near Umbanda centers. After all, because they are lower spirits, very close to matter, *exus* are considered masters of the crossroads. They literally have one foot in the spiritual world and another in the all-too-human world, which is the reason why they limp when they walk. Because of their hard life and street smarts, *exus* are considered excellent problem solvers. They can be very loyal and effective when accorded the proper recognition and properly fed, but they can rapidly turn vengeance and destructive if disrespected or ignored.

Umbanda also distinguishes itself from Candomblé by its closer relation with Spiritism. Spiritism originated in France in the mid-1800s, with the prolific writings of Hyppolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869), a Parisian educator and translator of scientific books, who took the name of Allan Kardec from his previous incarnations. Spiritism is itself a highly syncretic philosophy, blending “Eastern” notions such as karma and reincarnation with parapsychology (construed as the science of the soul), Enlightenment ideas of progress and education, and a secularized version of Christianity stripped of supernatural content and stressing heavily a humanist ethic of charity. Borrowing piecemeal from Hinduism and Buddhism, Kardec held the existence of disembodied spirits closely connected with the material world. Sensitive to the effects of good and bad actions (the karmic law), these spirits seek to purify themselves through multiple reincarnations. As part of their education and progress toward becoming pure light (gaining release from the constraints of material world), the spirits may communicate with us through mediums to guide us in our own spiritual development or to request our help.

Spiritism’s belief in the close interaction between the spiritual and material world dovetails with Umbanda’s monistic panentheism. Spiritism’s therapeutic system is partly based on the notion that all animate beings contain a spiritual fluid, a kind of electro-magnetic energy, that can be transferred. Spirit centers train *passistas*, literally “hand passers or hand layers,” who hold periodic cleansing clinics where they help discharge negative energies, often produced by *espíritos obediados* (obsessing or perturbing spirits), by passing their hands over the bodies of those afflicted by physical or psychological problems. Positive spiritual fluids can also be concentrated in water that has been prayed over by the religious specialists. This “sacred water” (*água fluidificada*) is imbibed by the practitioners. Along with fluidified water, clients may also receive homeopathic prescriptions. Umbanda also recognizes Spiritism’s concern with disincarnate spirits seeking perfection by giving place to *eguns* (the wandering souls of dead people) and more evolved spirits in its pantheon.
The latter are considered spirits of light or guide spirits (babas/espiritos guias ou de luz), who like Socrates, Buddha, and Francisco Cândido Xavier (a.k.a. Chico Xavier, a famous Brazilian Spiritist and interpreter of Kardec), stand in sharp contrast to the “baser” spirits, the exus. Whereas exus are summoned through drumming and relish the pleasures of the flesh, the wild dancing, drinking, and smoking involved in many Umbanda public celebrations, spirits of light prefer to engage in quiet learned conversation. This tension has led scholars such as Roger Bastide to argue that Spiritism “whitens” or “europeanizes” Umbanda, distorting its African roots. Umbandistas, for their part, see the confluence of European, Eastern, African, and Brazilians strands as proof of the universal nature of their religion and as a reflection of the hybrid culture that is Brazil.

In terms of attitudes toward nature, Spiritism’s influence on Umbanda is ambivalent. On the one hand, Spiritism’s religious humanism reinforces Umbanda’s anthropocentric tendencies – the stress on the instrumental manipulation of natural forces to produce personal well-being and success. Moreover, Kardec affirms that, from the moral point of view, there is a clear hierarchy in the universe, with human beings being able to rise above their instincts and have full consciousness of their spiritual nature. On the other hand, this anthropocentrism is counterbalanced by Spiritism’s recognition that there is an underlying order in the universe in which all entities are interconnected in a progressive evolutionary scale. Thus, it is essential to overcome egotism and behave charitably toward the whole of creation. For instance, in his popular psychographed book Nosso Lar (Our Home), Chico Xavier offers a utopian vision of a celestial colony in which spirits hold basic goods in common and are governed by benevolent philosopher kings, the most evolved spirits. Leaving aside Diana Brown’s and David Hess’ discussion as to whether Umbanda and Spiritism reproduce the clientelism that has typified Brazilian politics, in Xavier’s spiritual home there is not only peace and moral happiness – since everybody knows his/her place – but also harmony with nature. The spirits are presented as carrying their intellectual discussions in a tropical paradise of inexhaustible resources which the inhabitants exploit with rational moderation. This tropical paradise is suspiciously similar to an idealized version of Rio de Janeiro. This perfect society is said to exist directly above the city.

Spiritism’s contradictory impact on Umbanda highlights the latter’s complex character. Umbanda reflects Brazilians’ ambivalent relations with their local environments, both natural and humanly constructed. On the one hand, Umbanda offers a pragmatic ethics of individual self-improvement adjusted to the demands of Western, urban modernity. On the other, it holds a relational ethos more in tune with traditional, “rural” lifeways which stress interdependence and reciprocity. Umbanda’s hybridity, its power to syncretize, adapt, and even present itself as an all-encompassing religion, is in large part the result of this capacity to bridge between individuality and collectivity, and between matter and spirit.

Manuel Vasquez

Further Reading


See also: Candomblé of Brazil; Caribbean Cultures; Santaria; Trickster; West Africa; Yoruba Culture (West Africa).

Umehara, Takeshi (1925–)

Takeshi Umehara, a Japanese philosopher, has published many works on philosophy, religion and literature. His unique approach to the deep strata of Japanese culture and religions through archeological and mythological studies is known as "Umehara’s Japanology." His numerous lectures and writings, which have drawn people from various academic fields and sections of society, are given considerable credit for the recent rise of interest in rediscovering Buddhism, Shintoism and earlier Japanese spiritual traits, as well as so-called "Joomon (Japanese neolithic) period studies" in general. His insight has also proved to be a particular inspiration for environmental educators and conservationists calling for the revitalization of forests, rivers, wetlands and indigenous lifestyles harmonious with the natural environment of each region.

Umehara was born in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture in 1925. He grew up in Aichi Prefecture and graduated from Kyoto University, where he majored in European philosophy. Immediately after World War II, haunted by the specter of the nuclear holocaust in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he became absorbed in the writings of Frederich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Umehara was acutely conscious of the void left by a collapse of values following the introduction of European modernism. Influenced also
Unitarianism

The Unitarian movement can be defined as a radical tradition that emerged into self-consciousness during the European Reformation in the sixteenth century as an alternative to the authoritarian traditions of Luther and Calvin. Like their Anabaptist cousins, the Unitarians were suspicious of the misuse of ecclesiastical power to enforce such non-biblical teachings as the eternal Trinity, infant baptism, the exclusivity of revelation, and the doctrinal method of establishing worthiness for salvation. On the positive side, Unitarians affirmed a more immanent deity closely bound to nature, universal salvation, and the necessity of religious tolerance and freedom of the pulpit. Because of these beliefs, many Unitarians lived under religious persecution from both the Protestant and the Roman Catholic authorities until well into the eighteenth century. The most infamous case of this occurred when the Spanish Unitarian theologian Michael Servetus was burned at the stake by Calvinist forces in 1553. Servetus’ crime was to have published a treatise, Christianismi Restitutio in 1552 in which he attacked the Trinity, orthodox Christology as it was determined by the Council of Nicaea in 325 – which affirmed the co-equality of Christ and God while rejecting the proto-Unitarian view of Bishop Arius who denied this equality – and the doctrine of infant baptism. Implicit in his views was a pantheism that found God
to be co-extensive with nature. This early Unitarian laid the groundwork for a universalist pantheism, which rejected a transcendent, sovereign, deterministic and punitive God.

Unitarianism’s most readily identifiable form emerged in 1805, when radical professors at Harvard won the Hollis Chair of Divinity for their Unitarian candidate Henry Ware, thus marking the end of Congregational power at that institution. Soon Unitarianism was rocked by the even more radical religious movement of Transcendentalism initiated by the former Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson when he threw down the gauntlet to the church establishment in his 1838 Divinity School Address, in which he went so far as to divinize the self, deny the centrality of Jesus, make nature holy, and posit a form of purely personal revelation that was self-validating outside of any form of ecclesial community. Three years later the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker delivered an equally controversial ordination address, The Transient and Permanent in Christianity. While more Christian in tone than Emerson’s address, it rejected the importance of dogma, liturgy, and anything other than ethics and a gospel of love.

Theologically, contemporary Unitarianism is diverse in expression and often even questions the need for theological reflection insofar as there is no agreement as to the real or alleged object of such reflection. However, there are identifiable philosophical commitments that mark Unitarianism as a decidedly nature-oriented perspective. Historically the distinction between liberal and conservative Protestant traditions was expressed by the difference between positive and natural religion. In the context of the post-Kantian milieu in which this distinction came to the fore, positive religion stressed a unique historical revelation, a unique textual record of that revelation, the centrality of a founder whose eternal word was embodied in a spirit-guided church, and the superiority of Christianity to any other religion. Natural religion denied any special revelation while placing a great deal of value on universalizable reason. It rejected the importance of texts in favor of a renewed understanding of the book of nature. The power of autonomous natural and atemporal reason replaced the role of the historical founder. Reason operated within the framework of a radically open experience of the whole or the infinite. Further, Christianity was often seen as a religion that had begun to exhaust its resources, thus paving the way for an honest exploration of other religions. Unitarianism has long embraced the basic commitments of natural religion, but has moved them more directly into a post-mechanistic view of a growing, infinitely complex, and fecund nature.

Insofar as Unitarianism would affirm a metaphysics it would deny the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo, while asserting that nature has neither beginning nor end, with the stipulation that the world of astrophysics, which affirms the Big Bang creation, is but one world within the infinity of nature which has its own subaltern conception of creation, perhaps out of imaginary time. Transforming the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century distinction between positive and natural religions, it is perhaps preferable to speak of anti-naturalist and naturalist religions. The anti-naturalist forms embrace supernaturalism, miracles, a sovereign and external Creator, and a devaluation of creation over its Creator. Naturalist religions, which can be either panentheistic or pantheist, but not theistic or personalistic, are not only immanentist, but also affirm that nature is the genus of which the object of religion is the species. Nature is the all-encompassing category, and actually transcends the genera (classes) of all orders that occur within and as nature. Hence the term “nature” functions as both the highest category and a pre-category, that is, there is no opposition term to nature precisely because nature is all that there is, both actual and potential. For many Unitarians all-encompassing nature is itself holy while for others nature is neither holy nor unholy per se; it simply obtains in its infinite unfolding.

Pantheist naturalism retains some remnants of the Christian traditions insofar as it affirms that a dimension of the divine is discontinuous with the orders of nature (the dimension of nature natured), even though fully relevant to them. Pantheist naturalism is more radical in that it decisively moves beyond the Christian traditions by asserting that the dimension of the divine in nature can in no way be discontinuous from any or all orders of nature natured. This deeper dimension of the one nature is often denoted by the term “nature naturing,” a term used by Emerson in this sense.

Within the Unitarian movement this tension is expressed as the difference between a more optimistic somewhat Christian progressivism tied to the evolutionary advance of the divine (panentheism) and a more quietist post-Christian meliorism correlated to a less optimistic view of human prospects within infinite nature (pantheism). In either case, Unitarianism affirms that supernaturalist religion remains a destructive force in culture insofar as it masks our deeper relationship to the eternal self-creating nature.

This underlying, and not always self-conscious, naturalism is manifest in both the liturgy and practice of the contemporary Unitarian Universalist Church. In 1961 the then-separate but theological similar movements of Unitarianism and Universalism joined to form a common Fellowship that is now call the Unitarian Universalist Association. Since 1961 the liturgy of the Fellowship has been shaped in ways that mark the transition to a more nature-centered worldview. Services are now dedicated to solar and lunar events as well as to the inner rhythm of the seasons. Generally the liturgy celebrates cyclical rather than historically unique events, although traditional world religious holidays are often celebrated as well, and the
services use texts from all of the major religious and secular traditions.

Native American and pagan traditions are often used to transform religious consciousness by returning to the pre-monotheistic world, a world held to be friendlier to nature than that of the supernatural monotheisms. Among the more important yearly events is the Flower Communion in which each member of the congregation is asked to bring a flower that is placed in a common vase at the front of the meeting room or sanctuary. At the end of the service, each member takes a different flower home. The Czech Unitarian minister Norbert Capek created this service before the Second World War. Capek also created the symbol of the flaming chalice, which combines the naturalistic symbols of enlightening fire and the wisdom-holding cup, which is now the central liturgical object in the Unitarian Universalist movement. Capek was executed in a Nazi concentration camp in 1942 for his resistance work in which the symbol of the flaming chalice was used as a code to help escaping Jews.

Along with a strong social gospel tradition, Unitarian Universalists today fully participate in the worldwide movement of the greening of the Church. There is a direct involvement in local issues of justice and the use of resources in a way that distributes them equitably and does minimal harm to the environment. Each member of the congregation is asked to use ecologically friendly practices in all dimensions of personal and social life. In the national realm, the Association works to create laws that will bring these practices into being. On the international level, the Association has long fought for forms of just trade and reduced First World consumption. One particular focus of this concern is with critiquing the growing power of international corporations as they control the yearly sale and distribution of hybrid seeds for which they have the patents. Given that Unitarian Universalism denies the reality of a potentially salvific deity who could create an apocalypse that would rescue a few of us from our abuse of nature, congregation members feel compelled by conscience to work toward the reversal of the natural degradation partially caused by the monotheisms.

Robert S. Corrington

Further Reading


See also: Corrington, Robert S.; Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Nature Religion in the United States; Pantheism; Spinoza, Baruch; Transcendentalism.


United Nations’ “Earth Summits”

The first international United Nations’ “Earth Summit,” formally known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil from the 3rd to the 14th June, 1992. It included 172 national representatives (of which 108 were heads of state) and over 2400 representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and addressed the threat of global environmental degradation as nations seek economic development. The gathered national leaders signed the Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity and the conference itself adopted the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Forest Principles, and Agenda 21, a plan for coordinating environmental and national development by the next century. The Commission on Sustainable Development was formed to monitor and report on the implementation of these declarations and principles.

The 1992 Earth Summit emerged from an earlier United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held at Stockholm in 1972, which for the first time placed environmental issues before the international community, and led to the formation of the United Nations Environment Program. By 1983 the relationship between environmental degradation and economic and social development had led to the formation of the United Nations Environment Program. By 1983 the relationship between environmental degradation and economic and social development had led to the formation of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, known as the Brundtland Commission. This issued the 1989 report entitled *Our Common Future*, which defined sustainable development as “that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” and called for international strategies combining both environmental protection and development. Significantly, the envisioned programs include action not only at the international, but also at regional, national and local levels, and involving state and non-state actors. The United Nations General Assembly voted in 1989 to hold the first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992.

UNCED was a watershed, but not only for the obvious environmental reasons. The United Nations moved toward
the Rio meeting by hosting several preparation committee meetings in New York. Those who attended these meetings included not only government officials but also representatives of non-governmental organizations who could apply for official NGO status with the UN and provide input into the process. Each country could solicit contributions from numerous organizations and individuals, including that of both organized religious bodies and other groups motivated by nature-related spirituality whose main identity was not religious. These official conversations involved intense debates and disagreements about what was to be included and excluded from the agenda. Many compromises were made prior to and at UNCED.

Running parallel to the UNCED was an “Earth Summit” – a people’s conference – an exclusively NGO event that coexisted with UNCED also in Rio. Although sponsored by the UN, this event drew environmental and political activists from all over the world. Seventeen thousand or more people (or their organizations) paid their own way (or their organizations did) to discuss the social and environmental situation around the world. Here a radical environmental and social agenda emerged and alternative treaties were written. The Earth Summit represented the critical social politics that had been emerging over decades, such as international feminism, indigenous peoples’ rights, post-Marxist and post-colonial analyses, peace, human rights, and environmental agendas. The crucial presence of these groups pressured the UNCED’s official governmental representatives to strengthen their environmental commitments, with particular attention to marginalized peoples. One result of UNCED and the Earth Summit was that it was now evident that citizens groups had developed their own analyses and viewpoints, were no longer going to accept their government’s positions, and would be very active in planning and presenting alternatives. One of the most dynamic conversations took place at the Women’s Tent – Planeta Femea – with speakers such as Wangari Matathai, Peggy Antrobus, Bella Abzug, Vandana Shiva, and over a hundred other engaging radical feminists, all of whom asserted strongly that the environmental crisis is connected to the oppression of women. The women’s caucus worked hard to make the negotiators respond to the world’s most disadvantaged peoples, especially women, who make up the majority of the world’s poor in every country and are critical to sustainable agriculture and poverty eradication.

Others, such as the Canadian Scientist and television documentarian David Suzuki, North American Indian Faithkeeper Chief Oren Lyon of the Onondaga, economist Hazel Henderson, and world-famous television oceanographer-documentarian Jacques Cousteau, and many more, brought a sharp and multidisciplinary focus on the complexity and urgency of the environmental crises around the world. Religious voices were woven throughout these presentations. Oftentimes there was an open speaker forum, such that the conversation was participatory, democratic and lively. Music from indigenous drummers, the Earth musician Paul Winter, and the North American popular singer John Denver, brought home the need to connected together spirituality, music and politics.

Thousands of journalists reported on Rio 1992. This event showed clearly the signs of a global citizens movement, which continued on to Rio+10 and is manifested in the World Social Forum.

A strong religious voice promoting environmental sustainability and social justice emerged at Rio and continued to develop through subsequent United Nations environmental events. The World Council of Churches, the Vatican, and representatives of other world religions, notably Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Bahá’í for example were represented at the 1992 Earth Summit. The Dalai Lama played a significant role as a spokesperson for religious sensitivities. He spoke at UNCED and especially the Earth Summit, offering a sunrise ceremony for participants at the latter venue. Given his respect for diversity and reputation for moral and spiritual integrity the Dalai Lama was able to call to awareness the many religious traditions that teach the sacredness of the Earth. Reverence for the Earth was a dimension added to intense environmental and social analysis, which strengthened both. His presence also brought a certain spiritual authority to the NGO community at the Earth Summit, as it pressured the UNCED delegates to take action. In addition, hundred of indigenous peoples gathered nearby at Altamura and brought both indigenous teachings and a powerful political presence to the events. They focused attention on the importance of protecting “Mother Earth” and helped contribute to the growing appreciation among some United Nations officials and delegates of the value of their cultures and “traditional ecological knowledge.”

Although many religious traditions were present in Rio, the overall effect was an interreligious cooperation on social and environmental issues. The fact that religious leaders from around the world, representing many faiths, symbols and customs, could join as one voice in claiming the religion is an integral aspect of any viable solution. Rituals occurred at many times, and most often in a combining of rituals, teachings and wisdom. This multi-religious presence registered the need for religions to work together, and initiated a host of public and political collaboration on environmental issues. As well, religious leaders were often on panels where economics, human rights, gender equity and biodiversity were discussed, which led to an understanding that religion is an integrated voice in the conversation and solutions.

A proposal for an “Earth Charter” may prove to be the most significant religion-related development at the UNCED. This initiative mimics the strategy that guided the
United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, in which ratification by member-states is sought as a means to leverage better environmental behavior among individuals, institutions, and nation-states. Although not officially embraced at the UNCED the idea was soon championed and developed by influential actors in the non-governmental community.

The Earth Charter was initially brought forward by Maurice Strong, the Canadian who was the main organizer of the Earth Summit. In subsequent years Strong laced his speeches promoting the Charter with Gaian spirituality. The Charter’s most famous early proponent was Mikhail Gorbechev, the former leader of the Soviet Union, who promoted Glasnost and presided over the Soviet Union’s rejection of communism, before going on to serve as the President of Green Cross International, which is devoted to turning international institutions green. Less well known is that Gorbechev’s environmentalism was grounded in a biocentric axiology in which “life has value in itself” (Gorbechev 1997: 14), and a pantheistic, earthen spirituality, as he put it, “I believe in the cosmos . . . nature is my god. To me, nature is sacred. Trees are my temples and forests are my cathedrals” (1997: 15). It is not uncommon for actors engaged with the United Nations’ sustainability efforts to express such spirituality.

After the UNCED at Rio, the next United Nations Conference on environment and development was labeled the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and held in Johannesburg, South Africa from 26 August to 4 September 2002. This summit was the largest UN conference ever held, with 65,000 participants, including 104 heads of state, and with representatives from over 8000 NGOs and voluntary associations. There were, however, fewer heads of state than at Rio; in contrast, there were many more NGO representatives and other citizens. The conference was contentious as it spotlighted the growing imbalance in living standards between developed and less developed nations. According to most observers, the progress that was made on a number of issues was insignificant when compared to the scale of the problems, and overall the conference failed to gain a comprehensive implementation plan for Agenda 21, a chief conference objective.

There was, however, significant evolution in the religious, ethical challenge to business as usual by the nation-states. A “Sacred Space” was designated at Ubuntu Village, for example, the main exhibition venue, where interfaith ritualizing and prayer for the well-being of the Earth’s community of life was a regular occurrence. The primatologist Jane Goodall, for example, spoke widely from the official venue as well as at the venue devoted to non-governmental organizations representing “civil society” and at a conference organized by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. She brought her own biocentric ethics and animistic spirituality to a wide audience, including during one session devoted to promoting the Earth Charter, which by 2002 had been through many drafts and had been officially brought before the United Nations. At this Earth Charter celebration, an “Arc of Hope” was present, which was on its own pilgrimage around the world, taken by those promoting this initiative. Its outside was adorned with Earth-related symbols from the world’s major religious traditions, and inside of it, in addition to messages of hope from children around the world, was the Earth Charter itself, as a new sacred text, painstakingly scribed on papyrus. The Charter was mentioned favorably by a number of heads of states, or their representatives, during the WSSD, and in the conference’s political declaration, a phrase from it urging respect for the wider “community of life” remained in the final text, which was the first such reference in a United Nations International Law document, according to Stephen Rockefeller, one of the Charter’s most influential proponents (email correspondence after the conference).

Jane Goodall and some other important figures who had promoted Earth-focused spirituality at the official WSSD venues also appeared at the so-called “People’s Earth Summit,” held nearby at an Anglican school, which became during the WSSD the epicenter of anti-globalization resistance. At that venue, spiritualities of connection and belonging to an Earth considered sacred were often expressed, even being included in declarations protesting the failure of the WSSD itself to take decisive action to protect the environment and promote social justice. African traditional religions and religious leaders (Sangomas) were given a special place of honor. Among the well-known activists and scholars speaking at that venue, in addition to Goodall, were the ecofeminist Vandana Shiva and the anti-globalization leader Helena Norberg-Hodge. For them and others at the venue, “disconnection” with nature was viewed as a fundamental cause of environmental decline and “reconnecting with nature” as the antidote. African Sangomas led rituals to connect people to the ancestors and solicit their guidance and power for the present environmental struggle, explaining that in African traditional religion the ancestors live in a corporeal world connected to this one, and that the well-being of the Earth and the worlds inhabited by the ancestors are connected, and that environmental protection is necessary for our well-being not only in this world, but also in the one to come.

But it was not only at the WSSD’s margins that Earth-related spirituality appeared, and was evolving. In addition, the Japanese power industry ran expensive advertising in the International Herald Tribune under the headline “Let’s Be Grateful to Mother Earth”, then defending nuclear power as an energy source. Less commercially, the major institutional religious actors who had been present at the Rio Summit were represented again, issuing
position papers, and endeavoring to influence delegates toward strong positions in defense of ecosystems and for greater equity in the distribution of the world's natural resources. Perhaps even more significant were developments in Earth-related spiritualities beyond the sphere of institutional religions, some of which may presage the emergence of a kind of non-sectarian global civic Earth religion.

Jane Goodall, South African President Thabo Mbeki, and the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, for example, along with many other dignitaries, led a pilgrimage on 1 September to Sterkfontein, which was located near the WSSD site, and had been inaugurated in 2001 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as a World Heritage Site. There the Austra-
lopithecus, an extinct form of pre-humans dating to 4 million years ago, had been found in the 1930s, leading the place to be called the "Cradle of Humanity." Mbeki himself gave a speech there (and during his comments during the WSSD’s opening ceremony) and although not overtly religious, his words were in many ways reminiscent of the Epic of Evolution, expressing a reverence for the natural world as the habitat of humanity. He asserted that this site in particular, and evolution in general, shows the kinship of all humanity, and the interconnection of all life forms. The pilgrimage to and celebration of this site was remarkable, as was the way in which it was repeatedly mentioned at the WSSD and viewed as relevant to the conference’s mission, given that so many, on religious grounds, reject a Darwinian understanding of human origins, and because politicians generally avoid making pronouncements that might give offense. Even the pageantry of the conference’s opening ceremony assumed an evolutionary understanding, implied a reverence for life, and envisioned an (at least) quasi-religious utopian hope for the reharmonization of all life on Earth. Such events suggest that the consecration of evolutionary narratives is making progress beyond the figures and religious enclaves that have birthed and nurtured such religious production.

The United Nations has thus become a venue where the world’s religions and newer forms of religiosity increasingly press an environmental agenda upon nation-states and international institutions. Increasingly these diverse voices express the conviction that all is interconnected and that the Earth and its living systems are inherently valuable and sacred in some way, understood either as divine themselves, or as divinely imparted gifts from a beneficent Creator.

Further Reading
See also: Bahá’í Faith and the United Nations; Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites; Earth Charter; Epic of Evolution; Environmental Ethics; Environmental Sabbath; Globalization; Goodall, Jane; Indigenous Environmental Network; Primate Spirituality; Religious Studies and Environmental Concern; Shiva, Vandana; Sustainability and the World Council of Churches; World Conference of Indigenous Peoples (Kari Oca, Brazil); World Council of Churches and Ecumenical Thought.

Universal Pantheist Society

Founded in 1975, the Universal Pantheist Society (UPS) is the world’s oldest membership organization dedicated to the advancement of modern pantheism. The Society’s stated purposes are to unite Pantheists everywhere into a common fellowship, to undertake the conveyance of information about Pantheism to the interested public, to encourage discussion and communication among Pantheists, to provide mutual aid and defense of Pantheists everywhere, to stimulate a revision of social attitudes away from anthropocentrism and toward reverence for the Earth and a vision of Nature as the ultimate context for human existence, and to take appropriate action toward the protection and restoration of the Earth.

The Society’s name underscores its “universal” outlook, not tied to any single view of pantheism, but rather recognizing a diversity of viewpoints within it. UPS accepts and
explores various interpretations of pantheism, stressing the importance of each member’s personal pantheistic beliefs. Recognizing that freedom of belief is inherent in the Pantheist tradition, the UPS’s bylaws prohibit any particular interpretation of Pantheism or imposition of any particular dogma.

Comments by members on what Pantheism means to them reveals the insights that are our collective faith. One member stated simply: “Being one with all life and nature.” Another said, “All are one – I am a part of nature not above nature.” Similarly, another wrote, “I am somewhat surprised, but delighted to learn that there are other Pantheists . . . I find a grand Unity, a wonderful Oneness with the Universe.”

This last statement shows Pantheism is not usually something that someone hears from others and then decides to become. Instead, our members typically say they already know how they feel and what they believe about religion and nature, and rejoice when they find the name “Pantheism,” which they find an apt term for what they already believe. One new member wrote: “I feel a strange feeling of relief – because for many years I felt the forces of nature were ‘God’ – without ever hearing about Pantheists.”

Such statements testify that despite the diversity of viewpoints, members share one consistent direction in looking toward the natural world for our source of spiritual enrichment. Pantheism is an ancient faith experiencing a modern renaissance. Out of this understanding the UPS was born.

Accordingly the overall vision of the Society is more attuned to promoting reverence for nature and an ethical pantheism of responsible action and life-affirming practices than philosophical debate regarding the nuances of religion or philosophy. Persons joining the UPS may engage in seeking freedom and nourishment of religious experience from fellow pantheists and through the practice of the spiritual path of Pantheism in ways meaningful to themselves.

UPS publishes a quarterly journal Pantheist Vision and maintains a website offering an array of material on pantheism, including articles, reading lists, and members reflections on their beliefs. An online forum addresses questions about pantheism, lifeways, and other issues. UPS hosts an Ecological Community Preservation Fund that encourages donations from members to protect natural habitats.

Harold Wood

Further Reading

See also: Pantheism.

University of Creation Spirituality – See Christianity (7e) – Creation Spirituality.

University Story – See Berry, Thomas; Epic of Evolution; Religious Studies and Environmental Concern; Swimme, Brian; United Nations’ “Earth Summits”.

Urban Reinhabitation – CERES as Case Study (Australia)

How do we treat the ground beneath our feet? What is the attitude of Western civilization to the ground on which we walk and live? This ground is always, of course, part of land, and the approach of Western civilization to land has been to treat it as a tabula rasa on which individuals and societies are free to impose their own designs. This is true in every society which has been subjected to regimes of Westernization/modernization: land, in all its ecological, topographical and geological particularity, has been reduced to a neutral substrate to be divided up in accordance with abstract geometrical principles.

This approach has been described as a Euclidean one: it imposes a conceptual grid of straight lines on land, and land is then parcelled up into the discrete, usually rectangular “blocks” of the surveyor’s plan. The blocks are treated as separate entities, generally leveled or otherwise physically modified to constitute the “blank sheet” that can then accommodate the designs of its subsequent “owners.” In this process little if any account is taken of the contents even of adjoining blocks, let alone of the character of the region at large. The bumps and curves of actual things, the particularity of the actual ground on which we stand, is regarded as incidental, contingent; the world as it is given to us is mere “scenery,” a manifold of “appearances” which can be replaced and rearranged, like theatrical backdrops, to suit our purposes. All the world is indeed, from this point of view, a stage.

Why has the West opted for this approach and why is it wrong to do so? Suffice it to say here in answer to this very large question that the Euclidean approach follows from a worldview according to which the fundamental metaphysical datum is not land, in all its particularity, but matter, conceived as neutral substrate. From this point of view, the objects that we see around us and the ground beneath our feet are just the forms that this neutral substrate, this essentially undifferentiated matter, happens to take at a particular point in space and time. Neither objects nor ground possess integrity of their own or intrinsic significance. There is thus no reason why we should not rearrange this matter to suit our convenience. The Euclidean grid is a correlate of this view and serves as a conceptual tool for optimizing our use of matter.
If we are to respect the world as it is given to us however, if we are to adapt our thinking and our practice to the “lie of the land,” following the original contours of the environment rather than imposing our Euclidean grid, then we need a metaphysics which affirms that the world as it is given to us does indeed possess a certain integrity. Such metaphysics will involve an ascription of *life* to the world: the things around us and the ground beneath our feet will harbor ends and meanings of their own, ends and meanings which they can moreover share with us. Such a view of the world, as alive with a life of its own and potentially communicatively open and responsive to us, of course suggests the possibility of new forms of praxis and a new poetics to match.

Does environmentalism hold the key to such a praxis and such a poetics? In its traditional forms, hardly. As Aboriginal philosopher, Mary Graham, says, environmentalism is just another Western “ism.” It is just another grid that we impose on the world, failing to notice the contours of the given. In this sense it is as decontextualized as the rest of Western praxis. Consider, for instance, how environmental organizations are typically housed in ordinary offices – neutralized, decontextualized spaces – which environmentalists themselves treat in as instrumental a fashion as real-estate agents treat other “property.” More generally, environmentalists tend to ignore the world as currently given, urbanized and industrialized and ecologically “fallen,” in favor of a dream, a “mise-en-scène,” of restored forests and eco-villages.

We can begin truly to respect the world as it is given to us, to regard it as a thing with ends and meanings of its own which it can in principle communicate to us and in which we can participate, by simply honoring and cherishing the place in which we find ourselves, whether that place happens to fall in the degraded heartlands of the inner city or the pristine expanses of the outback. To affirm the life and integrity of the world is to *reinhabit* it just as it is, via the local modality of place. To reinhabit the places in which we live is not to raze the smokestacks and freeways that we might find there but to fit them back into larger unfoldings of land and planet and cosmos. It is to embrace our own role in those unfoldings, both at the level of sustainable practices and at the level of communicative exchange: by engaging with place communicatively, by singing it up, as indigenous people say, we encourage it in its unfolding and become implicated in its ends. In this way a dialogical poetics begins to evolve out of a praxis which turns around engagement with the given. Indeed, praxis and poetics become inseparable, because all the praxes of everyday life constitute interactions with world, and hence in a reawakened world all these interactions will have a dialogical, and hence a poetic, potential.

One example of such an integrated praxis-and-poetics of reinhabitation in an urban context is CERES (Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies), an environment park in the inner city of Melbourne. CERES differs from most environmental organizations in that it is first and foremost a *site*. That is to say, it is not merely housed on a site; its identity is inextricable from the site itself.

CERES started out twenty years ago on a degraded ten-acre lot on the banks of the Merri Creek. In its early days it was used by a number of community groups for small environmental projects. As these groups had few resources, they had no alternative but to work with the site as it was, adapting their plans to the contours of the land and to the materials at hand. No “master” plan prevailed. In consequence, the site developed *organically*, taking shape by a kind of natural selection of appropriate initiatives rather than by any premeditated design. Since the site was “in charge” of its own regeneration in this way, it soon assumed a life of its own, emanating a palpable presence. Attuning to this presence, people developed a sense of loyalty to the site, a loyalty which also generally translated into loyalty to CERES’ organizational aims. By inducing this custodial sentiment in people, the site enabled CERES, as an organization, largely to transcend ideologies of the political left or right, and to attract a true community to itself on its own account.

CERES then represents an instance of environmentalism in a custodial and dialogical mode. The role that *naming* has played in the “singing up” or “en-chanting” of place in this instance is notable. “Ceres” is, of course, the Roman name for the Greek grain goddess, or goddess of fertility, Demeter. The original choice of this name – on the one hand an allusion to an ancient fertility goddess of the settler peoples and on the other an acronym for one hand an allusion to an ancient fertility goddess of the settler peoples and on the other an acronym for a thoroughly technical exercise in scientific intervention – accurately portended the unique blend of techno-environmentalism and reenchantment that would in time give rise to this now blossoming locus of reenchantment. But the name functioned not only descriptively and predictively in this way, but also as an *invocation*, a *call* to the sacred forces of renewal in the land. In this sense CERES’ intent was dialogical from the start. Though the call was drawn from the mythic memory of a colonizing culture, it was nevertheless addressed to *this* land, as it now is; it was thus less a homage to a foreign past than an attempt, in an only dimly remembered idiom, at dedication to an indigenous presence. The resacralization of this degraded site via its dedication to Demeter has in any case been unencumbered successful: Demeter’s myth is being played out with extraordinary appositeness in its present antipodean setting.

What is this myth? It is, of course, a myth of descent and return. Demeter loses her beloved daughter, Persephone, to the god of the underworld. In her desolation she withdraws the life-force from the land; plants wither, animals cease to thrive or give birth. The goddess retreats, in her grief, to Eleusis. Eventually Persephone, who has
become Queen of the Underworld, is restored to Demeter, but only for part of each year. Reunited with her daughter, Demeter renders the land fruitful again, and thereafter Persephone’s descent marks the onset of winter, her return the arrival of spring.

The CERES site itself started out as a quarry, a hole in the ground, a gateway to the underworld. Subsequently, it was a tip – the very image of waste, desolation, blight. Then, twenty years ago, when the goddess Demeter was invoked, the process of renewal began. The soil, originally compacted and barren, gradually became fertile again. The ground sprouted with gardens and groves; animals (particularly pigs, the creatures sacred to Demeter) made their home there; and people – especially schoolchildren – came from far and wide to visit the site and learn about the ways of renewal, exemplified in windmills and solar generators, methane digesters and grey water systems, worm farms and native permaculture. There was music and dancing and art, as the devotees of Demeter understood the need for celebration as much as for work. There were many festivals, notably the annual Kingfisher Festival.

In classical times, the cult of Demeter and Persephone gave rise to the most revered and hallowed event in the religious calendar of the ancient world: the initiation rites at Eleusis. There, where Demeter was believed to have grieved for her daughter, a large-scale enactment of the descent of the goddess was conducted each spring, for the purpose of revealing to initiates the promise of regeneration hidden within the mystery of death.

In an almost eerie resurrection of the Eleusinian Mysteries, adapted to the present place and time, the Return of the Sacred Kingfisher Festival is held at CERES each spring. The recent return of this little azure bird, the sacred kingfisher, to its homelands along the Merri creek, after the long “winter” of colonization/development/modernization, affords an appropriate indigenous Australian expression of the sacred daughter’s return.

The festival brings hundreds of local performers of different ethnicity and cultural provenance – schoolchildren, dancers and artists – together with thousands of local residents, environmentalists and activists, in a cathartic, high-energy celebration of place. Its dramatic reenactment of the retreat of the kingfisher in the face of ecological holocaust and its return in response to the efforts of local people to regenerate their “country” through revegetation and restoration, symbolizes the beginning of a new “season” of peaceful coexistence between people and land in this locality. Mythic elements from Aboriginal culture are woven into the proceedings, and the Aboriginal custodians who lead the entire performance “initiate” non-indigenous Australians into ancient local rituals of place, thereby inducing a more custodial consciousness in the new peoples, and inviting all, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, to become “reconciled” as one people through their common commitment to homeplace. With a blend of forms faithful to the land and its first and later peoples then, but also to the archetypal meaning of its eponymous goddess, CERES both celebrates and powerfully invokes, via this festival, the return of life, of fertility, to our blighted planet.

The Kingfisher festival is an instance of a participatory poetics, an event conceived and presented wholly in place. It is an event which could not be “staged” anywhere but at CERES. Each year, moreover, the “festival” comes closer to being a ceremonial event, with “audience” being invited to process along the creek, light tapers and perform other ritual actions in the context of the kingfisher story. Each year too the site joins in, adding cicada choirs and rainbows, for instance, with dazzling appositeness, at strategic junctures.

In so greatly expanding the meaning of its original environmental brief, so that it encompasses the mythopoetic in addition to the technological, and takes as its starting point the actual ground beneath our feet, CERES is perhaps pointing the way, not only for environmentalism but also for something larger than environmentalism. As churches are being closed down and sold off throughout the Western world, perhaps it is time to see “centers” like CERES, which answer to the increasingly ecological tenor of contemporary spiritual sensibilities, taking their place. In such centers people could come together to experiment collectively, both practically and poetically, with new, locally specific ways of being in the world, negotiating a new covenant with reality that would not only sustain “the environment” but would also reconnect us to the sources of meaning in life.

_Freya Mathews_

**Further Reading**


See also: Australia; Bioregionalism; Greece – Classical; Snyder, Gary.

**Utopian Communities**

Many religions around the world have an ancient myth that people once lived in harmony with nature, but sin expelled humanity from this Edenic environment. Simi-
larly, inhabitants of industrial societies have often longed to recapture the lost bliss they imagine that people enjoyed in traditional agricultural society, marked by brotherhood and communal sharing. On the basis of such myths, utopian experiments have sought to revive harmony between humans and between humanity and nature. These are worldwide phenomena, but the utopian communities of the United States have been especially well documented.

Sects and Cults
Some of the most successful communes have been Protestant sects in the German Anabaptist tradition that migrated to North America: notably Amana, Harmony, Zoar and the Hutterites. A sect is a religious movement that broke away via schism from a larger and less intense denomination, and that seeks to create a more perfect version of the religious tradition in which it arose. The members of such sects tend to have long-standing social bonds with each other, and their internal group cohesion is so strong they often lose bonds to the surrounding society and thus are well prepared to establish their community in a new land.

Because utopian sects try to return to ancient forms of agricultural community, they live close to the land. This means that in many respects they live in harmony with nature, but they also dominate and exploit nature, so their relation to the natural world is fundamentally ambivalent. This can be seen, for example, in the great variation in birth rates across these groups, Harmony producing no children and the Hutterites having among the highest fertility rates of any group in the world. Similarly, they tend to be ambivalent toward technology, often accepting innovations that improve agricultural productivity while resisting innovations that would increase their contacts with secular society.

Other communal groups are sometimes called cults, although this term has such negative connotations that many scholars call them “new religious movements” instead. Technically, a cult is a religious movement that departs significantly from the dominant religious tradition, and cults tend to be founded by individuals, couples, and very small groups of friends. Two extremely well documented examples are the Shakers and Oneida. Both of these have some affinities with conventional Protestantism, but they innovated significantly in both beliefs and practices. Oneida was born in America, whereas the Shakers developed their distinctive way of life in America from a loosely knit group of less than a dozen people that came from England. Because they tend to begin very small, cults must recruit rapidly if they are to survive, and most of them die out very quickly.

Because of their innovativeness, cults are culturally diverse and thus have many different relationships with nature. Some of them, including both the Shakers and Oneida, are very articulate about their philosophies and contradictions. In an 1823 Shaker treatise, A Summary View of the Millennial Church, Calvin Green and Seth Wells argued that communal life was “contrary to the partial, aspiring and selfish nature of man.” Thus, they believed, only actual divine intervention could overcome this sinful nature. John Humphrey Noyes, founder of Oneida, developed techniques for controlling natural erotic urges that would allow men to have sexual intercourse without ejaculating. While ambivalence about human nature runs throughout all major religious traditions, these communal cults take it to an extreme.

Principles of Religious Communes
Scholarly research on utopian societies, both modern and historical, has provided evidence to support a number of scientific hypotheses about these phenomena. First of all, Green and Wells seem to have been right, in a sense, because religious communes tend to last far longer than secular communes, although communes of all kinds tend to die within a generation or two after formation. Second, erotic relations between individual members challenge the social integrity of communes, so successful groups tend to regulate them strictly, sometimes going to the extremes either of celibacy or of organized multipartner sexuality. Sexual tensions among members, and the tension of separation from the surrounding society, may be among the strongest factors causing ambivalence toward nature in general.

During the twentieth century, the proportion of the general population involved in agriculture declined rapidly, and society became heavily urban. This profound shift may have reduced the opportunities for new communal sects that try to re-create essentially medieval agrarian communities, without necessarily reducing the opportunities for more radical communal cults. This suggests that utopian ambivalence toward nature is increasing, with some groups embracing the Earth while others try to escape it. The sect–cult distinction is only a matter of degree, however, and either kind of group can evolve back toward conventional society. For example, the Amana sect became a household appliance corporation, and the Oneida cult became a silverware corporation.

Acknowledging the instability that comes from their experimental character, we can learn much from utopian religious communes about building sustainable society in harmony with the environment. Their transcendent ideals and social cohesion allow them to work cooperatively for shared goals. The material lifestyle of successful communes tends to emphasize efficiency rather than luxury, and their need for social harmony causes many of them to develop effective means for controlling the birth rate. Humanity needs brotherhood and harmony with nature, so utopian religious communes can
provide valuable myths for the twenty-first century and beyond.

William Sims Bainbridge

Further Reading


See also: Ecotopia; Ecotopia – The European Experience; Ecotopian Reflections; Eden and Other Gardens; Hippies; New Religious Movements; New Age; Science Fiction.