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Sufi teacher explores spiritual ecology in new anthology

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Eco Catholic

When the Sufis and Muslims pray "La illaha il Allah," they are reaffirming, "There is no God but God." Both the Arabic word "Allah" and the Aramaic "Allaha" mean "unity" or "oneness."

For Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, a Sufi teacher and writer, the prayer must be unpacked and expanded to address our growing ecological crisis. The part of the prayer that talks of "no God"/ "not God" means no Canadian tar sands, no Keystone XL pipeline, no stripped rainforests, no fracking, no consumerism, no pesticides, no genetically modified organisms, no mountaintop coal removal mining and none of the other planet-destroying deities of profit.

The positive, reaffirming "but God" lovingly embraces rainforests, streams and oceans. It reverences robins, redwoods, butterflies, bumblebees, healthy food, babies, mothers, dads and the elders of every species. Unity is in all things; therefore, Earth is sacred.

"Earth is a living, spiritual being that has a soul -- the 'anima mundi,' " Vaughan-Lee told Eco Catholic during a recent phone interview from his Inverness, Calif., home.

This month, Vaughan-Lee has brought anima mundi and sacred unity into the environmental forum through his new anthology, *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*. Some months ago, he invited a group of spiritual teachers, scientists, and nature writers and guides from a variety of religious traditions to address our ecological crisis at its rock-bottom basic: Humanity has collective amnesia. It has forgotten about its formerly deep relationship with the soul of the world and itself.

Vaughan-Lee is the author of 19 books on Sufism (both the mystical side of Islam as well as the path of the heart present in all religions), spirituality, Sufi dream work and Jungian psychology. In 2011, he compared Sufi mysticism with that of St. Teresa of Avila's in *Prayer of the Heart in Christian and Sufi Mysticism*.

In 2000, Vaughan-Lee turned his focus to spiritual ecology, social responsibility, the role of women in contemporary society, and the anima mundi. He walks the path of Naqshbandi Sufism, a branch of Sufism brought from India by his teacher and predecessor, the late Irina Tweedie.

"We are the quiet Sufis," he said. While other branches use drumming, chanting or circle dancing as part of their prayer forms, Vaughan-Lee's group prays silently, meditating upon the prayer, and after their zikr (prayer of remembrance) session, they participate in dream work, he said.

Vaughan-Lee said he was moved to bring the path of the heart into the realm of spiritual activism after witnessing the growing and alarming mistreatment of the planet on every side. The politicians may talk about it, but he said they still support economic growth, which is the cause of so many environmental problems. Vaughan-Lee said he doesn't hold out much hope for change at the governance level. He said he believes the small grass-roots communities touched by the plight of the earth, "people of the heart," will turn the situation around.

Spiritual activism runs in his family. Last year, Vaughan-Lee's son, Emmanuel, a documentarian and musician, produced and directed "Elemental," a film about the damaging effects of the Canadian tar sands.

"Ecological devastation is the most pressing need of our time," Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee said. "The earth is dying. We have forgotten that the spark living in each of our souls is part of the world's soul, part of its spirit. We are part of its ecosystem, not something separate from it." And our separateness, our disregard for the sacred, has created a wasteland, a loss of soul inside ourselves, he said.

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Each of the essays in *Spiritual Ecology* addresses this loss of soul and what to do about it. The articles add up to a collective feast. Every reflection deserves a full review in its own right. The contributors include Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr, Thich Nhat Hanh, Dominican Sr. Miriam MacGillis, Joanna Macy, David Loy, Satish Kumar, Chief Oren Lyons, Fr. Thomas Berry, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Wendell Berry, Winona LaDuke, Vandana Shiva, Susan Murphy Roshi, Bill Plotkin, Sandra Ingerman, Jules Cashford, Geneen Marie Haugen, Chief Tamale Bwoya, Pir Zia Inayat Khan, John Stanley and Vaughan-Lee.

Similar threads run through several of the essays. Vaughan-Lee, Rohr and Haugen address the damage to the Earth begun thousands of years ago by the monotheistic religions.

Vaughan-Lee writes: "When (they) placed God in heaven they banished the many gods and goddesses of the earth, of its rivers and mountains. We forgot the ancient wisdom contained in our understanding of the sacred in creation, its rhythms, its meaningful magic. For example, early Christianity banished and then forgot about the nature devas, the powerful spirits and entities within nature, who understand the deeper patterns and properties of the natural world."

He asks: "How can we even begin the work of healing the natural world, of cleaning out its toxins and pollutants, of bringing it back into balance, if we do not consciously work with these forces, within

nature. Nature is not unfeeling matter; it is full of invisible forces with their own intelligence and deep knowing. We need to re-acknowledge the existence of the spiritual world within creation if we are even to begin the real work of bringing the world back into balance. Only then can we regain the wisdom of the shamans who understand how to communicate the work together with the spirit world."

Haugen, a naturalist, communicates with the spirit world by playing her flute, "greeting the world, offering melodies to rock, clouds, ponderosa, doves, lizards. I play as if there are listeners. I have been teaching myself this practice of offering small beauty in reciprocity to the world, a practice that is deepened each time I play as if creatures other than human beings might hear me."

She asks, "Would people who practiced reciprocity to an animate, intelligent Earth have invented fracking, strip mines, Three Mile Island, or the economies of weapons, massive warfare and destruction?"

She is grieved and angered by the way mainstream religions have participated in ecological destruction. "A creator may be ostensibly worshipped while the creation itself is dishonored; our Western political system and economy are rife with people who claim, for example, allegiance with Judeo Christian religions yet do not flinch at profiting from the destruction of Earth's life support systems. Reverence is reserved for a disembodied god, or for an afterlife, while the physical universe -- the creation itself -- is largely regarded as inanimate, dead, a warehouse of senseless objects for exploitation and consumption."

Haugen reminds us of the wonderful Mary Oliver poem, which confesses, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass."

One gets swept up in Rohr's righteous anger as he talks about our cosmic narcissism.

"For many Judeo-Christians, God has created a seemingly 'throw away-world.' The so-called stone age people, the ancient civilizations, the Persian, Greek, Aztec, Mayan, Roman empires, even the poor ones we called barbarians, were merely warm-up acts for us. None of them really mattered to God, neither woman, child, beast nor man. God was just biding his time, waiting for good Jews, Christians and Muslims to appear and most preferably Roman Catholics conservative Orthodox or Born-Again Evangelicals."

One of the most memorable and poignant takeaway lines of Rohr's essay: "Poor God must just cry." Yes.

The solution: Depth psychologist Plotkin advises us to become Earth Elders, to work wherever we can to recognize and comprehend the needs and desires of the world and to respond wisely. This can mean allowing one's heart to break open over the suffering of the world and to go to whatever lengths necessary to protect life, especially at the species and habitat levels. He urges us to care for the anima mundi by defending and nurturing the innocence and wonder of children, mentoring and initiating adolescents, guiding the evolutions or transformation of the culture, and doing what Macy calls "deep time work -- To project our present lives within much larger temporal contexts, nourishing a strong felt connection with both past and future generations, for saving the lives of all species."

And there is prayer. We can always pray, and we should, Vaughan-Lee writes in the closing chapter of his book. "We will have our own way of making this offering, for example a simple prayer for the earth, the act of placing the world as a living being within our hearts when we inwardly remember the Divine. We become aware in our hearts of the sorrow and suffering, of the world and ask that divine love and healing flow where needed ... that the Divine will help us and help the world bring the Earth back into balance."

Vaughan-Lee's Spiritual Ecology and Golden Sufi Center websites have a wealth of videos as well as

more of his deep reflections. One well worth mentioning: "If we take spiritual responsibility for what is happening in the world, we incarnate the Divine into ourselves and the world."

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