AOSIS

From spiritual ecology to balanced spiritual ecosystems

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This article suggests developing the concept of *spiritual ecology* into that of *balanced spiritual ecosystems*. Philosophies, theologies, education systems, political parties, and gender-based and ethnic identity politics need to be critiqued both from within and without so that they can finally contribute to the creation, maintenance and flourishing of balanced spiritual ecosystems.

Contribution: Spiritual ecology is a concept on which converge different worldviews. This article recommends using balanced spiritual ecosystems, instead. The new concept could provoke further reflection on how our (theo)-ontologies and communities co-exist and whether they do it organically and spiritually. This article befits HTS's interest in 'theology and nature'.

Keywords: Anthropocene; ecology; ethics; future; post-humanism; religion; spirituality; spiritual ecosystems.

Introduction

My thesis

In this article, I argue that it would be useful to speak of *balanced spiritual ecosystems* instead of *ecosophy*, *spiritual ecology* and the like. This new terminology could help our discourses to avoid sounding exotic, exoteric, shamanic or apocalyptic (as 'greenism' does to some, for example, Pinker 2018), on the one hand, and to allow both inclusiveness and pragmatism to come more forcefully to the fore, including in theo-ontological discourses and praxes, on the other hand.

Methodology

This is mostly a reflective article. I have attempted neither a diachronic nor a synchronic treatment of particular authors. I have sought to speak to the imagination and thus trigger more reflexion on religious, economic, technological and sociopolitical aspects of balanced spiritual ecosystems, should we choose this concept as a root metaphor for scenario thinking and community leadership.

Setting the scene

To me, it all starts with the fact that we are part of a mesh of entities, from the most minute to the massive, the most solid to the least. Entities are whatever they or we are; this is their or our *ontic* dimension. If we were able to definitively answer the most profound questions about the ontic dimension of entities (be they actual, possible or merely imaginary), we might also have answers to the question about what or who we ultimately are and whether our core (our souls) might exist beyond the disintegration of our bodies. In the words of Kohelet:

> [S]urely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth? (3:19–21, NIV)

As the ontic dimension of entities remains elusive, what we can do and many have done is to approach entities from an *ontological* perspective, that is, as *entities* (ὄντα, ᾽ónta) about which we *say* (λέγομεν, *légomen*) something (*ontologies*). Ontology refers to our *logos* (λόγος) – explanation, account, reason, proposition or discourse – about whatever exists in the physical, mental, digital or spiritual realm.

Widespread, shared ontologies become lifestyles. For example, ontologies that purport that human beings are essentially different from animals gave rise to lifestyles that do not make any robust attempts at preventing people from imprisoning, killing and eating (other) animals. If most of us were to embrace an ontology that makes killings of any kind abhorrent, our grills would char only vegetables.

If our cultural traditions replace 'biologically inherited instincts' (Levi 2009:76), the traditions that might emanate from new ontologies would plausibly create quasi-instinctive reactions to what their discourse (onto*logy*) deems laudable or abhorrent. Or, as Ben Okri (1995) suggested, as we become our stories, better stories might lead to better versions of us. Hence, no real change will come unless we change our ontologies.

Our ontologies and the traditions that have stemmed from them have either led us to some of our current crises or made it more difficult for us to respond to them responsibly and effectively. For example, climate change and COVID-19 do not have only geological, medical or financial dimensions; they are also rooted in ontologies, in discourses about and rationalisations of our relationship to others, our planet and the resources it affords us. They bear upon social stratification, the economy, and wealth and opportunities distribution. For as long as we accept the final balance between the blessings and the curses in our lives, and see it as (somewhat) fair, the dominant ontologies may continue to reign unchallenged. However, when the status quo stops being acceptable, the corresponding ontologies become questionable. Well, we have reached that turning point by now, and some new visions are being put forward, the late Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess's *ecosophy* being one of them.

Naess (1912–2009) proposed an ontology that does not posit humans and nature as two different realms. To him, the two are inseparable. The explanation of what makes human beings *human* includes nature, and this is ecosophy, namely:

> (…) the utilisation of basic concepts from the science of ecology – such as complexity, diversity and symbiosis – to clarify the place of our species within nature through the process of working out a total view. (Naess 1989:3)

Given that ontologies lead to epistemologies and ethics, if ecosophy, as an eco-ontology, were grasped, it would:

> [N]o longer be possible for us to injure nature wantonly, as this would mean injuring an integral part of ourselves. From this ontological beginning, ethics and practical action are to fall into place. (Naess 1989:2)

This approach leads to theoretical discourses about the relationship between humans and nature, as well as practical endeavours beyond technical 'quick fixes'. Deep ecology and spiritual ecology are two ways of naming these new ontologies that have resulted in neither a unified movement nor the same discourses. For example, while some may view nature as sacred, almost divine, theo-ecology among Muslims will avoid describing as sacred or holy anything or anyone other than God.

Theo-ontologies

Ontologies are manifestations not only of the human capabilities for meaning but also of the 'human fact' as such, which is both a *fact* and *human*, and whose sacraments are deeds that combine and symbolise consciousness, communication, imagination, freedom, agency and selfless kindness. As Urs Von Balthasar (2000) insightfully pointed out, in German, consciousness, or *Das Bewußtsein*, implies a *Sein* (a being) that is *bewußt* (conscious): '*being* appears' as an entity and 'being *appears*' unto itself. Human (inter) communication and imagination show that humankind is a collective phenomenon: the consciousness and imagination of the individual exist, unfold and grow within a mesh of similar individuals. Being able to foresee future possibilities, humans become agents. Selfless acts of kindness are among the freest acts as they reveal a force that may be called *love*, or sacrificially doing good for no apparent reason or gain, even against one's own interests.

Theo-ontologies, rather than onto-theologies (Buitendag 2022), can be described as ontologies, the discourses of which enact the grammar and vocabulary codified by and in holy scriptures and passed on by people who found them useful and versatile enough to name, conceptualise and narrate their experiences. Theo-ontologies are crystalised in founding events, myths and rituals. In fact, rituals embody determinant dimensions of theo-ontologies (Barnhill & Gottlieb 2001). For example, the Christian ritualised re-enactment of Jesus' Last Supper embodies ideas and feelings of openness (listening to the scriptures), togetherness (eating one bread), thanksgiving and love-driven self-sacrifice. In the Muslim community, the sharing of the meat from the sacrificial animal on *Eidu-l-Aḍḥa* among family, relatives and the needy and the payment of the poor tax (*zakāt*) ritualise the idea and feelings that God re-channelled the sacrificial mindset into solidarity (i.e. sharing the meat and one's wealth).

Theo-ontologies tend to see beings as expressions of a source that manifests itself through or explodes into the kaleidoscopic mosaic of all that exists. Even when the universe and nature are deemed to be radically distinct from their source and deemed not even close to being 'It' or 'It-like' (divine or holy), they are still sacramental and gifted, unable to fully explain and self-ground their own existence. In the Muhammadan tradition, this is beautifully worded in a prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth qudsī*): 'I [God] was a hidden treasure; I loved to be known. Hence I created the world so that I would be known'.

Spiritual ecology as a new integrative ontology

The word *ecology* combines the ideas of *house or home* (οἶκος, *oikos*) and *discourse or study* (λόγος, *logos*). *Eco-logy* refers loosely to the study of or discourse about the Earth as an *inhabited* planet, a habitat. Hence, ecology has always been related to life and biology, either as a branch or a dome. A narrower definition would view ecology as the study of organisms, or groups of organisms, in particular, and their relationship with each other and their environment in space and time (Sagoff 2017). This wording reflects Haeckel's 1866 definition of ecology as the entire science of the relations of the organism to the surrounding exterior world, to which relations we can count in the broader sense all the conditions of existence.

These are partly of organic, partly of inorganic nature (Friederichs 1958:154).

In a broader sense, ecology would be the 'science of nature' (Friederichs 1958:154) different from merely a natural science. It would be seen:

(…) as *the science of the super-individual complexes* or if you prefer: as *the science of the living beings as members of the whole of nature.* (…) A third possible aspect of the definition is: *The knowledge of the complexes of life and the other environment.* (Friederichs 1958:154)

Spiritual ecology refers to the beliefs, approaches, perceptions and/or sensitivities that go beyond both creation narratives and the study of habitats as blind systems. Spiritual ecology is a new ontology different from *creation spiritualities* that are religious (theo-ontologies) or broadly confessional (atheistic ontologies). Spiritual ecology may be nourished by religious sentiments, but it is not based on spiritual revelations, although faith communities do use religious ideas to reinforce their reappraisal of ecology. As a result, spiritual ecology functions as a hub of sorts whereupon converge people who are trying to speak:

[*A*] language towards nature that takes them beyond identification *of* and into identification *with*. A language that would help to perceive the Earth as not mine but me; that I am part of the earth, not apart from it. (O'Mahony 2005:152)

The new ecological movement goes beyond not only religions but also specific organisations such as Green Peace. It has also developed its own spirituality, not always based on religion or led by theologians as

[*I*]t is the physicists more than the theologians who first began to tell the story of the 'new' universe wherein the 'human person cannot be a detached observer, but is himself/herself a participator'. (O'Mahony 2005:155)

Most people are now aware that they were born into a reality that comprises movement, forces and energies, and that they themselves are multi-layered beings with atomic, biological and conscious dimensions, each following its own logic and the more complex being supported by the less complex, albeit not less wondrous. Although some people may, understandably, give the impression that nature is an organism, it is not. It is an *organic whole*, not a macro-organism. Therefore, 'Mother Earth' or *Pacha Mama*, as is called in parts of South America, or *Gaia*, as Lovelock (2000, 2009) would call it, is not one living being but a system of systems. Indeed, the 'ecosystem has another, a looser form of order than the organisms which is incomparably more integrated' (Friederichs 1958:155). What we have, is the *web of life*, or Holocene, within which are interdependent ecosystems.

Spiritual ecology is not a new religion worshipping nature or viewing it as a supra-human being. It is a new take on nature as nature, the Earth as earth, with the addition that we are now part of it. Without it, there is no us. Feelings of awe, gratefulness, respect and solidarity towards our planet are fully justified; however, they do not necessitate that one should anthropomorphise or divinise it.

Additionally, artificial intelligence and biotech are beginning to add completely new dimensions to the parts of nature that have been built by humans. In the not-so-distant future, we – who used to think of ourselves as the top of the pyramid – shall be surpassed by what or who started being our own technologies. Furthermore, if new life forms were to be found or emerge as a result of the impact of our activities in space (say, by 'contaminating' the surface of the Moon or Mars), the ecological discourses would become more complex, forcing our kind to further recalibrate its or our self-image. Hence, Pope John Paul II could still ask:

[*I*]s the community of world religions, including the Church, ready to enter into a more thorough-going dialogue with the scientific community? A dialogue in which the integrity of both religion and science is supported and the advance of each is fostered? ... For a simple neutrality is no longer acceptable. If the people of the world are to grow and mature, they cannot continue to live in separate compartments pursuing totally divergent interests from which they evaluate and judge their world ... Contemporary developments in science challenge theology far more deeply than did the introduction of Aristotle into Western Europe in the thirteenth century. (quoted by O'Mahony 2005:156)

In some cases, spiritual ecology is epiphany-driven, which could very loosely be dated back to the time of the first paintings in caves, whereby the early humans signalled their ability to transcend the necessary and functional survival-driven interrelationship with other entities within their habitat. The Buddha, Jesus, prophet Muhammad, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Anthony of Padua and many other mystics, spiritual leaders and healers on all continents are found to have had shamanic experiences using nature as a carrier of messages that surpassed their concrete functions within their ecosystems.

In other cases, people engage in reflective spiritual ecology. Thinkers like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Lynn White Jr, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Matthew Fox, Arne Naess, Zaheer Allam, Donald A. Crosby, Pope Francis and so on have made incursions into eco-(philo)sophy and eco-theology. According to Orr (2002), this type of spiritual ecology is one of the four necessary variables for an eventual sustainable future to be a moment of grace rather than a catastrophe: (1) better ways to measure human effects on the biosphere, (2) improved capacities for governance, (3) improved education and (4) *enhanced spiritual awareness*.

From spiritual ecology to balanced spiritual ecosystems

Given that spiritual ecology sounds somewhat esoteric, I would recommend speaking of *balanced spiritual ecosystems*, instead. I do not mean this in the sense of spiritual realms but in the sense of evolving ecosystems that include the elements of thought, volition and motivation. Additionally, by speaking

of *spiritual* ecosystems, spiritual dynamics, such as solidarity and kindness, would surmount other dynamics common in the biological realm, like the survival of the fittest. Furthermore, the inspiration provided by non-materialistic ontologies would reinforce these ecosystems' spiritual dimension. Finally, the word *balanced* further qualifies the expression as intent on respectful planetary co-existence, sound interrelations and concerted agency born from aspirations that transcend purely scientific, commercial or consumeristic concerns.

Similar to chemical pollution, there is also spiritual pollution. While the former damages the soil, air and water of our planet, the latter pollutes minds and hearts, thereby sickening our ecosystems. This is one more reason for expanding the concept of *spiritual ecology* to *balanced spiritual ecosystems*, that is, macro systems, systems of systems, within which different entities, worldviews and spiritualities co-exist as interrelated evolving realities. A spiritual ecosystem would be 'a vast, complex, diverse, and dynamic arena at the interfaces of religions and spiritualities with environments, ecologies, and environmentalisms including intellectual, spiritual, and practical components' (Sponsel 2020:2263). This new terminology would reflect a new ontology and hermeneutic paradigm, like the one beautifully worded by Moltmann (1997), the famous theologian:

> [T]o be alive means existing in relationship with other people and things. Life is communication in communion. (...) So if we want to understand what is real *as* real, and what is living *as* living, we have to know it in its own primal and individual community, in its relationships, interconnections and surroundings. (...) Our purpose is now to perceive in order to participate, and to enter into the mutual relationships of the living thing. (p. 3)

Consequently, we should seek to establish ecosystems of interrelated communities with ontologies focused on co-existing respectfully and thriving in a comprehensive equilibrium driven by self-definitions and codes of conduct that transcend self-centred and short-sighted commercial, consumeristic, political, or sectarian interests and concerns. Balanced ecosystems of spiritual communities would conjugate distance and closeness within a sense of togetherness that does not expect the others to change what or who they are before we can all collaborate on bringing about positive changes for humans and other species to survive and thrive.

Given that philosophies of life, education, creeds and political views would all be included within these spiritual ecosystems, philosophers, theologians, educators and politicians would have to learn to include otherness, climate change and ecological needs in their discourses. Borrowing Lizzola's words, '[w]ithin the "areas of respect" of this unprecedented distance-closeness, care for oneself is care for the other: here threads of meaning, good dreams, dignity, justice, fraternal gratuitousness resist' (Mele 2020; my translation).

Religious discourses for balanced spiritual ecosystems

One of the advantages of theological discourses on the ecology is that they could prove to be opportunities to surmount tribal, local and monetary concerns (Clifford 2010). In addition, theological discourses would place environmental sustainability at once within metaphysical, ontological and ethical frameworks. They would bring in considerations about authenticity, dignity, co-responsibility, global solidarity, (future-oriented) justice and virtue, not just ad-hoc needs or strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analyses.

However, for such theological investigations to be visionary and revolutionary, they ought not to limit themselves to pulling motivational elements out of the existing religious traditions. Instead, profoundly transformative discussions and debates ought to help the faithful to rethink and rearticulate their own faith traditions in ways that expand concepts, such as social management, the politics of place and ecology. With this, new and more organic forms of theological thinking could arise, leading to more congregation and less segregation. Such a dynamic would necessarily include self-criticism, for, as Merklinger (2008:199) put it, 'why must people who believe that they are right, also believe that everyone else is wrong?'

Social justice as a dimension of balanced spiritual ecosystems

As we think about spiritual ecology and ecosystems, we must forever leave behind the presumption that the way we treat one another is not an element of how we behave within our ecosystem and nature. Social justice and ecological justice are not separate issues. Reaching and maintaining the equilibrium in *intra*-species and *inter*-species relations are all part of an ecosystem's healthy or unhealthy state. Oppressing women, foreigners or people from other religious, political or gender communities is no less wrong than polluting the local river or mountain.

Within the balanced spiritual ecosystems, ecological justice goes hand in hand with social justice. In O'Mahony's (2005) words:

> [T]he present agony of the earth should alert us to the short-sightedness of solving difficulties by seeking only to alter the outer world. Yet, an ecological spirituality must of necessity make us more sensitive to social needs. Every time nature is wantonly destroyed; every time there is a situation of injustice; every time violence is used against others; every time the principle of 'relationality' is interrupted by attitudes of domination – for example, creditor countries over debtor countries, or rulers over peoples, or men over women, or humans over nature (...) then those living an ecological spirituality should be quick to experience the pain and will want to do something about it. (pp. 156–157)

Orthopraxes not just orthodoxies

For spiritual ecology to mean anything and bring about personal and social change, it needs to usher in a paradigm shift and work out its implications for lifestyles, legislation and economies. Balanced spiritual ecosystems may be flexible, but they cannot be 'snowflaky'. Adapting Gottlieb's words,

we could say that 'diffidence about metaphysical assertions is one of the hallmarks of progressive post-Enlightenment' mindsets but 'such a diffidence cannot be extended into the realm of morality'. Our narratives about reality 'may be evocative poetry or performative exhortation, but our assertions about right and wrong, good and evil, have to be a little more straightforward' (Gottlieb 2001:27–28).

Balanced spiritual ecosystems have to articulate and embody new ways of approaching life, social engineering and place management. While ideological and religious communities can develop new orthodoxies *ad intra*, they have to collaborate on visionary orthopraxes *ad extra* based on shared aspects of ontologies for the Anthropocene that combine 21st-century concerns and sensibilities (see Table 1).

Holistic planetary well-being shall have to be rhymed with *human* well-being. Respect for the planet does not mean that the fight against harmful viruses must be halted or that the landscape may no longer be altered to ward off natural catastrophes. Balanced spiritual ecosystems cannot ignore that the survival drive is a natural constant among all living beings, one species of which is the humankind. Once we have accepted that the ecosystem is an essential constituent of the definition of who we are and that it is an essential condition for our existence, we shall also understand that *human well-being* is impossible without *ecological well-being*. Human survival and flourishing include the survival and flourishing of the ecosystem. Moreover, given that the ecosystem within which we live profoundly affects how we live and what or who we become (be it on Earth or Mars), the defence of balanced ecosystems is not a mere utilitarian, survival-driven tactic; it is also an existential project. We may still be optimistic about the extraordinary capabilities of the humankind, also for eco-friendly technologies as solutions, but it needs to be '*conditional* optimism' rather than '*complacent* optimism' (Pinker 2018:154), as 'stewardship' or our part of our 'bond' (or *amâna*) with the Creator, according to Judeo-Christian and Muslim theo-ontologies.

In a balanced spiritual ecosystem, however, the economy cannot revolve around the idea of economic growth alone. The economy is not an end but a means. Even a very efficient economy might not be adequate or enough because 'economic efficiency does not necessarily embrace economic justice, human well-being, and social harmony' (Askari, Iqbal & Mirakhor 2015:16–17). Moreover:

> [R]egardless of whether resources are absolutely scarce, the safest route is to not consume beyond one's needs, as the welfare of others in society and those of future generations matters. (p. 105)

De-centring identity politics

Ecosystems are complex, diverse and symbiotic; and they are experienced immediately, not virtually. In the act of living – indeed, the very act of living –, the individual entities' self-interest is linked to the self-interest of the Whole, without

which it would be threatened, maybe annihilated. Without others, the individual runs the risk of becoming nothing (*nihil*). Hence, within balanced spiritual ecosystems, reciprocity and interdependence would be given primacy over identity politics. Instead of radical fragmentation based on survival-of-the-fittest or religiously sanctioned ghetto ontologies, the members of such an ecosystem would underscore radical *unity and non-identity*. As suggested by Tayob (2015) while writing about a new paradigm for Islamic education, Rumi's use of the image of the other as a mirror crystalises a dimension of this new ontology.

Balanced spiritual ecosystems are living networks and meshes wherein each individual and his or her community face the other and recognise 'themself' in their face *as both similar and different*, an actual presence with a past and the promise of futures. This is not the kind of mirroring consciousness that would allow one person to say to the other: 'I felt the same urge that you did, but I was strong. Why weren't you too? Shame on you!' The other shows us aspects of who we are or could be but cannot be reduced to a copy of us. We remain different entities, albeit not alien to one another.

In a balanced ecosystem, people do not highlight their own identity as the only way of being authentically themselves. Truthfulness and wellness do not cause the rejection of the other, bifurcating their presence or disappearing into an amorphous oneness. Instead, a healthy, well-adjusted individual self appears from and within a healthy, functional ecosystem. The members focus on reciprocity and values rather than getting fixated on identity (Tayob 2015).

Within a balanced spiritual ecosystem, different spiritual entities and currents – sometimes identifiable like particles and, other times, felt like waves – subsist and co-exist and cooperate in ways that those who partake in them do not feel as opposed, opposites or oppressive. The following quote from Spinoza (quoted in Naess 1989) may help us comprehend and understand such an experience:

> [I] do not know how the parts are interconnected, and how each part accords with the whole; for to know this it would be necessary to know the whole of nature and all of its parts…. By the connection of the parts, then, I mean nothing else than that the laws, or nature, of one part adapt themselves to the laws, or nature, of another part in such a way as to produce the least possible opposition. (p. 10)

TABLE 1: On-going paradigm shift.

The modern paradigm	→	The spiritual, ecological paradigm
Gender, ethnic, age-based groups come first.	→	Planetary equity and solidarity are necessary.
Growth must be endless.	→	Growth must be holistically justifiable.
Only human life is sacred.	→	The planet and all life forms deserve due consideration.
Humans are at the centre and above all else.	→	The ecosystem takes precedence over greed.
Individuals must be able to do what they want.	→	Holistic well-being comes before individual wishes.
The planet exists to serve humans more than anything else.	→	The planet, too, has rights, and they *may at times* come first.

In short

As we become increasingly aware of the Anthropocene (i.e. the geological era whose beginning has been inflicted by humans), we must also realise that the current dominant ontologies will not help us to make better futures for most of our species, present and yet to come. Moreover, if we do not adjust our ontologies and theo-ontologies, or even replace them with more holistic ones, non-human species will continue to become extinct because of our footprint on our shared habitat (our choices).

We should have grasped by now that (Gottlieb 2001):

> [I]f we ruin this Creation, I am not sure how any of us – deep ecologist or traditional religionists, secular or spiritual – will be able to look ourselves in the eye. And what will be left of religion, any religion, if that is the point to which we come? (pp. 31–32)

We need ontologies and praxes that can contribute to the creation, maintenance and flourishing of *balanced spiritual ecosystems*. In Boff's (2000) words:

> [W]hat has to be globalised today is not so much capital, the market, science and technology. What has to be fundamentally more global is solidarity with all beings starting with those most affected, the ardent appreciation of life in all its forms, participation as a response to the call of each human being and to the dynamics of the universe, the veneration of nature, of which we are a part, and a responsible part at that. Starting from this density of being, we can and must assimilate science and technology as means to guarantee that we can both have, maintain or reinforce ecological balances and equitably satisfy our own needs in ways that are sufficient but neither extravagant or profligate nor wasteful. (p. 46)

We know that we have finally taken steps in the right direction when our philosophies, theologies, and educational and legal systems start to inspire our individual and collective consciousness, imagination and agency with ideas and proposals that promote ecological and social justice on a planetary scale. Each one of us needs to become 'an ecological citizen', that is, someone who 'understands that the social problems we face are interconnected and must be met through transformative personal change and creative collective action in their home community' (viewed 14 September 2021, https://ecologicalcitizens.org). In order to create and maintain balanced spiritual ecosystems, our theo-ontologies will have to challenge their own orthodoxies *ad intra* and mutually cooperate on finding new orthopraxes *ad extra*. Unfortunately, such endeavours will currently not be made easier by the nationalistic radicalised discourses, fake news, anti-intellectualism, identity politics, materialism and hedonism.

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S.S.S.S is the sole author of this article.

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