



Guide to the Healing Earth Introduction

Part 4 Spirituality

Among the features of *HE's* approach to environmental science, 'spirituality' may strike you as the most challenging to address in your classroom.

Spirituality is certainly not among the subjects a person studies to become a science educator. Furthermore, spirituality is typically linked to religion--a topic that some people consider to be not only separate from the work of science, but also antithetical to science.



Laudato Si' 62: "I am well aware that in the areas of politics and philosophy there are those who firmly reject the idea of a Creator, or consider it irrelevant, and consequently dismiss as irrational the rich contribution which religions can make to an integral ecology . . . Nonetheless, science and religion . . . can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both."

Why discuss 'spirituality' with your students? From the perspective taken in *HE*, it is important to discuss spirituality with your environmental science students because it opens them up to three realities about human beings, society, and the natural world. The realities are

- a person's deepest beliefs about the meaning and value of the natural world.
- a person's experience of awe and wonder over the sacred beauty and intricacy of the natural world.

- the way people have, from time immemorial, understood and drawn on nature in the world's religions.

Exploring these realities is the way the discussion of spirituality is structured in each chapter of HE.

Spirituality as a Person's Deepest Beliefs and Identity

Spirituality encourages us to discern our **inner spirit** and direct it toward a love of the Earth and humanity, a love that also lies at the center of the great religious traditions of the world. *HE* offers the following definition of spirituality:



Spirituality: the energy and content of beliefs that lie at the core of a human being's personal identity.

The fundamental understanding of spirituality taken in *HE* is humanistic in the sense that all human beings have an operative spirituality--whether or not they are explicitly aware of it, and regardless of whether or not they connect it to the practice of a religion. From this point of view, spirituality is not primarily something exotic, esoteric, or other-worldly. Rather, as Roman Catholic author Fr. Ronald Rolheiser writes, spirituality "issues forth from the bread and butter of ordinary life." "We all have a spirituality," says Rolheiser, "whether we want one or not, whether we are religious or not" (Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999, pp. 6-7).



For some Christians, the word 'humanism' connotes an anti-religious philosophy of life, as in 'secular humanism' or 'atheistic humanism'. However, in the Roman Catholic tradition, the words 'humanism' and 'humanistic' refer positively to the God-created goodness that is inherent in human beings. It also refers to how humanity's inherent goodness can be expressed in everyday life, and in 'the Humanities' (i.e. in works of art, literature, history, and philosophy). Well-known Catholics who are also considered great 'Christian humanists' include G.K. Chesterton, Christopher Dawson, John Henry Newman, Jacques Maritain, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Pope John Paul II, Thomas Berry, and the present Pope Francis. The recent Vatican document on energy justice identifies "full-fledged humanism" as a great value (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Energy, Justice and Peace*, 2014).

It is true that the *content* of our spiritualities--the beliefs at the core of who we are--can be a relatively *integrated* set of beliefs, or a relatively *fragmented* collection of ideas. Our spiritualities can exist from 'healthy' perspectives that provide us with positive energy and inner balance, to 'unhealthy' perspectives that dispense negative energy and inner turmoil. As Fr. Rolheiser notes, if the purpose of a healthy spirituality is to give us "energy and integration",

an unhealthy spirituality draws down our zest for living and fails to keep us “glued together” (p. 11).

By asking your students what excites them and ‘glues them together’--and further, whether the natural world is among their inner values--you are not asking science or ethics questions. You are asking spiritual questions. In *HE*, these are very relevant questions for an education in environmental science.

There are many ways to conduct a discussion with your students about what they value in their lives and whether the natural world is included among their deep concerns. Questions such as these require careful handling because some students may be reluctant to share their deepest concerns. [This pdf](#) by Alicia L. Moore and Molly Deshaies offers several helpful tips on conducting discussions over sensitive issues.

Another way to introduce environmental spirituality to your students is through an 'Environmental Examen'. Following in the Jesuit spiritual tradition, you may invite you students to reflect on how they have treated some aspect of nature over the course of a single day. For example, you may invite you students to silently reflect at the end of the day on whether they wasted or conserved water over the course of the day? Did they ever feel any sense of gratitude for water, or did they simply approach it as something to be used and disposed of? Do they take water for granted? Each chapter of *HE* will invite you to introduce an Environmental Examen to your students that is relevant to the chapter topic. [Go here](#) to get an idea of how this might work in your classroom.

Spirituality as a Person’s Experience of Awe and Wonder over the Sacred Beauty and Intricacy of the Natural World.

In addition to looking at spirituality from the perspective of a person's core identity, *HE* also brings in the terms ‘sacred’ and ‘religion’. It is important to understand what these mean in *HE* so that you can examine these definitions in terms of your own understanding and the perspectives of your students. We begin here with the word 'sacred'.

Sacred: a quality in something or someone that is experienced by human beings as possessing a uniquely satisfying ‘wholeness’, or *holiness*, that goes beyond common human measurement.

When people encounter nature and feel a sense of awe, they sometimes say they have sensed something ‘sacred’ in nature. These experiences can be profound and life-changing. If a person’s inner energy and beliefs were previously disconnected from nature and now a

powerful experience of awe has changed that, then a person's spirituality has changed. Indeed, this is why many environmentalists wish more people would have experiences of the sacred in nature. It is an experience that can motivate a person to take more interest in knowing the Earth and caring for it.



***Laudato Si'* 11: "Such a conviction [St. Francis' bond of affection for creatures] cannot be written off as naïve romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behavior. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs."**



In the Christian religious tradition, nature is not God; nor is nature 'divine'. These claims would entail a belief in 'pantheism'--the idea that the universe (or 'nature' as the totality of everything that exists) is identical with and completely descriptive of God. Pantheism is not compatible with the Christian view of God. This does not mean, however, that nature is devoid of relationship with God. Nature is 'sacred' in its link to God's loving intentions for humanity and the world. In the Christian religious tradition, a spirituality in awe of the beauty and power of nature is a spirituality attuned to the 'sacred' quality of nature.

Many human beings today, especially in densely populated areas spend little time in nature. Urban lifestyles and technology draw people away from the countryside, mountains, and the sea. Without regular contact with nature, people lose the ability to recognize its 'language'. With dulled senses, people miss important distinctions and beautiful subtleties within nature's sights, sounds, smells, textures, and tastes.

This is why *HE* emphasizes the critical importance of students receiving guided, sensory experiences in nature. As environmental science teachers, you will surely agree that experience in nature helps your students understand the structures and processes of the natural world. *HE* takes the value of this experience one step further, by emphasizing its *spiritually transformative* potential.

[LS 5: "Saint John Paull II . . . [called for] a global ecological *conversion*."]

[LS 92: ". . . our indifference or cruelty to fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings."]

Drawing from the Ignatian spiritual tradition of the 'application of senses', discussed earlier in this Guide, you may want to discuss with your students what they think of when they hear the word 'sacred'. Ask them if they have any 'sacred' places in their lives, or whether there have

been any times or events in their lives that they consider 'sacred'. You may be surprised and intrigued at their responses!

You likely have methods for guiding students through experiences and experiments in nature. If you have not done this already, we encourage you to also look at guided sensory experiences that focus specifically on helping students **open their hearts to the natural world**. Each topic chapter will offer suggestions for such guided 'meditations' in nature. For now, you can familiarize yourself with this type of guided exercise by visiting [this website](http://www.meditationoasis.com/how-to-meditate/simple-meditations/nature-meditations/).
(<http://www.meditationoasis.com/how-to-meditate/simple-meditations/nature-meditations/>)



As science educators, you will appreciate the need for scientists to have vocabulary that is both wide ranging and precise. For example, think of how important a color wheel is for an ornithologist who is trying to differentiate as accurately as possible the colors on a bird's wing. But do you also appreciate the need for scientists to have a wide ranging and precise *emotional* vocabulary? When a scientist is in awe of nature and calls a sunset "beautiful", that is about as helpful as an ornithologist calling an oriole "yellow". In the matter of environmental science and the "sacred awe" that can be experienced in nature, we can assist our students by expanding their descriptive emotional vocabulary. There are many [emotional vocabulary lists](#) on the internet. Think of descriptive exercises you can do with your students that invites them to become more precise in their emotion descriptors.

Many appeals made by environmentalists insist that the Earth will not be adequately cared for until more people have an inner transformation of love toward the natural world. Similarly, the Jesuit document that inspired *HE* states we are in need of

. . . a change of heart. We need to confront our inner resistances and cast a grateful look on creation, letting our heart be touched by its wounded reality and making a strong personal and communal commitment to healing it.³

There is no guarantee that a guided sensory experience in nature will generate a 'change of heart' in our students. For some, it may; for others it may trigger a beginning.

***HE* believes it is helpful for students to be aware of the many ways in which human beings have experienced and expressed an 'ecological' spirituality.** One of these ways is in the sense of awe discussed above. Another way is through participation in an organized religion that encourages gratitude and love for nature.

Definitions of 'religion' abound. The remain consistent with the interfaith approach of *HE*, the definition of 'religion' given in the textbook is sociological:

Religion: the social expression of an experience of a God, gods, or spiritual power in the form of community organization, worship, shared beliefs, and moral practices.

As noted in the *HE* Introduction, approximately 80% of the people in the world identify themselves as members of a religion. *HE* emphasizes taking a global perspective on the environment. Students are doing that when they study how the major world religions approach the natural world. Each *HE* topic chapter makes brief reference to religious teachings and practices of Indigenous People, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity as they relate to the environmental challenges of our time.

[LS 201: “The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity.”]

Again, world religions may not be a topic you feel comfortable discussing with your students. On the other hand, brief introductions to each religion mentioned in *HE* are readily available on the internet. Possibly this is an opportunity to coordinate a presentation by a member from your Religion Department. Similarly, this may be a good topic for student reports: such as, a compare and contrast over how the natural world is understood and treated in various religions.

Two important points concerning religion in *HE*:



1. *HE* takes a respectful interreligious and interfaith approach to the topic of religion and the environment. Within that approach, *HE* gives particular attention to the traditions of Christianity, the inspiration of St. Ignatius Loyola, and the work of the Society of Jesus. You may be more familiar with these later traditions and elect to draw more examples from Roman Catholicism than from other religions. However, it would not be consistent with the vision and spirit of *HE* to neglect discussion of other faith traditions within Christianity and/or other religions. You may find it helpful to view this [short talk](#) by Pope Francis' on the importance of interfaith dialogue.

[LS 3: “. . . I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home.”]

[LS 7” “Outside the Catholic Church, other Churches and Christian communities--and other religions as well--have expressed deep concern and offered valuable reflections on issues which all of us find disturbing.”]

[LS 9: "As Christians, we are also called to 'accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbors on a grand scale'."]

[LS 75: “A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. This is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot. ”]

[LS 80: "Nature is nothing other than a certain kind of art, namely God's art . . . "]

[LS 216: "The rich heritage of Christian spirituality . . . has a precious contribution to make. "]



2. HE does not take a naïve approach to the topic of religion. Clearly, many people who count themselves as members of a particular religion have not and do not live up to that religion's ideal of respect for nature. But even more: not every teaching in a religion's history has respected the intrinsic value of nature. There is much work that needs to be done all around. Nevertheless, HE holds to the view that, despite failings, the religious traditions of the world's religions can be true resources for mobilizing a deep sense of gratitude and love of nature among human beings.

[LS 8: "' . . . to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God.'"]

[LS 200: "If a mistaken understanding of our own principles has at times led us to justify mistreating nature . . . we believers should acknowledge that by so doing we were not faithful to the treasures of wisdom which we have been called to protect and preserve."]

Concluding Remarks on Spirituality, the Sacred, and Religion

At the conclusion of an environmental science course that has drawn on *HE's* ecological spirituality, our hope is that students will understand that

- Paying attention to one's deepest beliefs about the natural world is an essential part of being an integral ecologist.
- Making a serious and sustained effort to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell the natural world increases one's opportunity to experience nature as sacred.
- Wisdom exists in ways world religions have understood and celebrated the spiritual dimension of nature.

This section explained how attention to spirituality helps us identify our core beliefs about the natural world, our experience of awe over the sacred quality of nature, and religious traditions of world religions that emphasize the value of the Earth. However, spirituality alone is not the action of healing the Earth and enhancing human life. The next section addresses the action dimension of *HE*.

Select Background Resources for This Section

Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*. New York: Bell Tower, 1999.

The Sacred Universe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Timothy Hessel-Robinson and Ray Maria McNamara, RSM, *Spirit and Nature: The Study of Christian Spirituality in a Time of Ecological Urgency*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011.

Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, series editors, *Religions of the World and Ecology series*. 10 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997-2001.

Bas Verschuuren et al., *Sacred Natural Sites: Conserving Nature & Culture*. London: Earthscan, 2010.