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Soil, Soul, Society: A new trinity – not for realists or pragmatists

In the wake of increasing global climate catastrophes, the global population is progressively being forced into reforming the way that it functions. The need to create a new consciousness, focusing on our important relationship with the environment has become apparent. As people look to complex and intricate solutions to immediate problems, there are people who suggest a more wholistic yet simpler response, considering three things, our environment, our selves, and our community.

The New Trinity

Historical movements have at times had their three key words or ideas to express the spirit of their movements¹. The French had “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” and the Americans have “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Though relevant at the time, for the French revolution and the American War of Independence, these ‘mottos’ are outdated. They represented a human-centred view of the world where the human being is at the centre of the universe and all other life forms at its service.

In his book, ***Soil, Soul, Society: A New Trinity of Our Time***, Satish Kumar refers to another trinity that reflects a comprehensive way of nonviolent living; soil represents the natural world; soul signifies the spiritual world, and society stands for the human world. This is a new trinity for our age of sustainability and nonviolent living by emphasising that we are all connected².

Kumar argues that the spiritual aspect of the environment is what has been lost in the great debate about the way we live; and that the broad environment movement has not understood the power of concepts such as love and reverence. He insists that love and reverence are not to be confused with religion, *‘The environment movement here is very logical and analytical. But it is driven by doom, gloom and disaster.’*

‘There are no unsacred places. There are only sacred places and desecrated places.’ Wendell Berry



People view nature from a very utilitarian point of view, and see what is good for them only, he says, and seek to manage it rather than protect it. ‘I want to move people to a more experiential philosophy of the natural world,’ he says. ‘That way you can protect it.’ He sees no reason why governments and authorities should not be driven by philosophies of reverence to nature rather than violence to nature.

Nonviolence

The basic principle for a harmonious relationship with creation, the spiritual world and the social world is nonviolence. This concept is not abstract but a guide for a new way of living. It informs how we live our everyday lives, how we work, and how we interact with others and our environment. It is important that we do not compartmentalise our relationship with the natural world, our personal spiritual world and our social world. This was the message of Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical ***Laudato si'***³, which coincided with the United Nations’ International Year of the Soil. We are all members of a one-earth society, and caring for

the earth and soul is interrelated. *Laudato si'* has been called a magna carta of integral ecology. It is a powerful reminder of the connections that we have, but do not always recognise, and a warning of humanity's self-destructive course. It has parallels to the nuclear weapons crisis as well as a paradigm shift from people being rulers of the environment to be participants in the universal sister and brotherhood in our common home.

There is a need to create a new consciousness that reveres nature and explores how, as a global society, we need to embrace diversity and become pilgrims on this earth not tourists. To bring about change in the world we must be the change we wish to see. This is nothing other than a call to conversion called for by both Popes Benedict and Francis.

The Lost Connection with Soil

In our modern world the innate connection of earth and people has been lost, and as a result we have seen devastating effects on people's spiritual and social health. For a majority of the community we receive food coated in plastic packaging, underneath artificial lights, at supermarkets. Never thinking about where they come from, we sit indoors talking to others through a screen, in our air-conditioned offices, while many even walk to work on concrete sidewalks. In essence we have lost our connection with nature, because it has become something not apparent in our day to day lives; which considering we live on earth is perplexing.

Earth is life; without it there is no food, no oxygen, no means of our society's existence. Our ancestors revered and lived by this. Australia's Indigenous peoples understood the land and their links to it formed their entire being. They lived out this 'new' trinity of soil, soul and society centuries before it was new, through their own connection to Land, The Dreaming and Kinship. There are many examples of how peoples of the past had a key understanding of the importance of soil, even down to the word human and its connection to the top layer of soil. "We are the earth. What we do to the soil, we do to ourselves. And it is no accident that the words "humus" and "humans" have the same roots."⁴ Both Catholic and Buddhist teachings refer to the way the land provides and creates. The biblical passage, "you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:19)⁵ is reciprocated in the Buddhist teaching as Satish Kumar exclaims "You are earth, air, fire, water, imagination, creativity, consciousness,

time and space – you have this all in your genes and in your cells. You are billions of years old. You have been recycled and recycled. You are a beautiful example of the total recycling principle of the universe."⁶

Nevertheless this message does not translate into any of our everyday being, rather than people feeling as part of the earth, we see ourselves as owners of it. Our policies, attitudes and actions speak of violence. "The trees have a right to exist. We have no right to cut them down without proper purpose."¹ We recognise our own rights yet not that of the creation around us, and this shows the way we have lost the connection our ancestors had recognised. "In our education systems, we have come to think that soil simply means dirt and that dirt means dirty. But dirt is not dirty; it is the source of life."

Real World Implementation

Soil, soul, society as a new trinity provides a guide for our global community establishing the need for a transformation in the way we approach our lives. Society, the environment and individuals are calling for it. We are so removed in our humancentric views that we only ever put into action environmental initiatives when we are directly affected by the environment's outcries for help. When our beaches suddenly disappear, and temperatures rises. Rather than this approach focusing on the impending catastrophe or inevitable doom and blame we need to look for solution⁷ Integrating the environment into our social, political and environmental structures is how we will be able to establish this trinity to positive effect. Kumar explains how this can be:

*'Social systems can be changed,' Kumar insists. 'The ones we have now are not very old. The trouble is we are driven by fear and so we take panic decisions, like opting for nuclear power. At the moment, our culture is of violence - to nature, animals, people, ourselves. We are not protecting nature these days so much as managing it without knowing it. If you want to protect it, go out in it.'*¹

People need to return to their innate connection with land to be able to coexist in harmony with creation. Recognising the trinity of soil, soul, society into our global vocabulary and cultures could be for the benefit of all life.

With thanks to Beth Hansen for her contribution



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