

**The MA in Ecology and Spirituality:
Background and Interview with Dr. Andy Letcher**

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The following transcript is from an interview that I recorded with Dr. Andy Letcher for the *One School One Planet* podcast in 2018,¹ long before I knew that I would become involved in the MA programme myself. The programme has evolved considerably since its first incarnation, not least because it is now a purely online course taught via The Sophia Centre, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, where originally it had been a residential course taught at Schumacher College in Dartington, Devon. The interview has been included here because it gives a good flavour of the kinds of conversations and debates that the MA seeks to engage. There is a link at the bottom of this article to find out more about the MA. In the meantime, I hope you find this snapshot of interest.

Schumacher College

Jack: Can you tell us a little about the Schumacher College itself, what it is, how it came about, and what the curriculum is like?

Andy: For people who don't know, Schumacher College is a small independent college down in the Southwest of England, and it was set up some twenty-five years ago as part of the Dartington Estate. Dartington is this experiment in alternative education, arts, right livelihood, agriculture, and so on, that was set up in the 1920s by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst. Schumacher College was later set up by Satish Kumar, who many people will know as a peace activist, ecologist and someone who is very interested in Permaculture, Education and Cultural Change alternative

¹ The interview was first broadcast on the One School One Planet podcast (<https://www.mixcloud.com/oneschooloneplanet/one-school-one-planet-podcast-episode-5/>), and was later published in Jones & Hunter (2019).

education. So it was a natural place for this college to be part of the Dartington experiment.

The college has a reputation for teaching ecology, green approaches to business and economics, to philosophy. It runs a whole load of short courses, and is run along the same principles as an Ashram, so that everyone who is here works to help the place function – and that involves cooking food, cleaning toilets, doing all that kind of stuff. We also run a series of Masters programmes, one of which, and the most recent addition, is the MA in Ecology and Spirituality. People have the option of coming here for six months and really diving into the debate on where ecology and spirituality meet and what the relationship between these two things might be.

The Programme

Jack: Great! Can you tell us about the MA programme?

Andy: I guess the rationale behind the programme is that a lot of people have the intuition that the ecological crisis has something to do with a crisis of spirituality. That it's something about how our worldview and our values have led us into this position of climate change and species loss, and so on and so forth – I don't need to repeat the litany of things that are going wrong at the moment. So we take that as a starting point, and really we generate far more questions than we answer.

There are many scholarly definitions of spirituality, but I see spirituality as a living inquiry into the sacred, the numinous, however that is beheld, and I guess I see what we are doing as some kind of living inquiry into what that has to do with ecology. For example, we look at what ecology is. We're not teaching the science of ecology here, even though that is one of my backgrounds, we're looking at it as a cultural phenomenon, as a thing that humans do in the West and what assumptions are implicit in that. Why have we come to the point that we have a culture that does ecology? We look, for example, at the founder of ecology, Ernst Haeckel, the biologist who gave us the term. He was a nineteenth century German zoologist, and he was very much a Darwinian, but he also felt that there was a spiritual knowing to be had through understanding the scientific laws of the universe. A very interesting guy!

So it's almost right from the foundations of ecology we find that spirituality is bound up with it. But then we expand our discussion to ask: what would happen if we were to extend Western philosophy to include ecological awareness, can we

do that? What happens if we look to Deep Ecology, or biocentric ethics, or eco-centric ethics? How far does that take us? And then, we go: OK, maybe Western ways of thinking are part of the problem, what happens if we start listening to indigenous voices (the most marginalised voices of all)? What happens if we start taking those voices seriously? Can we do that? Can we do it in a way that doesn't continue the imperialist, colonialist project? And then, the end of the course, which is called 'Sacred Activism,' is really asking people what are you going to do with this understanding? You've fortified your understanding of the world by studying spirituality and ecology, but now what are you going to do with it? Are you going to write some kind of amazing App that's going to change the world, or are you going to go and introduce mindfulness into your place of work, are you going to write a book, or what? How do we affect change in the world? Is it problematic when we do try to affect change in the world, because of the inevitable shadows we cast whenever we try to do anything?

Jack: Wow, that sounds like an incredible course.

Andy: It's a very rich course, and we mix traditional academic book learning, thinking and discussion with experiential learning and emergent learning that arises from the group. There's a certain amount of people like me giving lectures, but then we flip the classroom and we wait and see what emerges from the collective wisdom of the group, and that's always an exciting moment. Just as I defined spirituality as a living inquiry, that's what we're doing – we're trying to keep this alive. Because I don't have the answers, I'm in it as much as the students.

A Spiritual Response to the Ecological Crisis?

Jack: It's really interesting stuff! I've got one more question that we can use to round off our discussion, and that is: how can focusing on spirituality lead to practical, real world, solutions to problems?

Andy: That's a really really good question. Well, on a very pragmatic level, in spite of the dominant atheist worldview within the academy and in mainstream Western intellectual culture, there's an awful lot of religionists out there. So a very pragmatic answer would be that if you can get people of religion interested in ecology and the ecological crisis, then that's an awful lot of people that can affect change in the world. But I think you're asking something deeper...

Jack: Yes...

Andy: ...which is, what happens if we come at the world with a spiritual worldview? Is there some other kind of change that occurs? I'm a card carrying animist, by which I mean – for me, what is important is the interrelationships with all the other people in the world. By people I don't just mean human people, I mean tree-people, I mean weather-people, I mean plant-people.

Jack: Yeah.

Andy: It's a subtle shift, but if you start to try and think like an animist (and to be honest it has been the predominant worldview – the scientific worldview is a bit of an anomaly), then you are constantly in relationship with people, you are constantly in relationship with a community of people. Agency is no longer something that I possess, it is something we possess. The apple tree possesses agency when it tempts me to take its fruit and scatter its seeds. It is a subtle thing, but I think it starts to change the way we interact with the world by seeing it as radically alive, radically full of agency, and there's a possibility there for the emergence of new ways of being, which emerge kind of like a murmuration. If you watch a murmuration of starlings, these big flocks of starlings that you see on a winter's evening, there's no-one in control, and yet somehow this great flock of birds weaves these great complex shapes in the sky. Or maybe, if we started to behave as though the world is full of agency, we can find new ways of being in the world that we couldn't possibly have conceive of before.

Jack: Bringing it back to the school context, what methods are there to encourage young people to have at least an awareness that this other way of living in the world is possible?

Andy: Hmm, that's a huge question!

Jack: Yeah. Well, one of the things we do on our project is taking kids down to work in the community orchard and herb garden, getting them to feel the soil and to work with the trees, and build up a physical (and later maybe emotional and spiritual) relationship in that way.

Andy: Well, I think that's vital. There's a book that came out many years ago now called *Loving Nature* by an anthropologist Kay Milton, who was interested in why some people are motivated to become environmental activists. They generally say that they do so out of love, you know, they love nature, they love the outdoors and the wild. So she's interested in why some people express that love and other people don't, and her answer was that it is to do with exposure during childhood. So I think the difficulty is that we live in increasingly abstracted worlds. We live in urban worlds, but abstracted because everything is mediated through screens and devices. I think what you're doing is absolutely vital – sharing that passion for the soil, for trees, for the return of the chiff-chaff in spring, or the first fruiting in the autumn. But how we affect that change in a large way, I'm still looking for the answer. All we can do is what we can do, and I think that what you're doing is part of the answer.

Jack: And what you're doing is part of the answer too!

The Current Incarnation

Since October 2020 the MA has been taught fully online through the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, with Prof. Nicholas Campion as the Programme Director and me (Jack Hunter) as lead tutor. The core module for the MA - actually called 'Ecology and Spirituality' - is a ten week course that introduces key concepts, topics and debates in the study of the relationship between ecology and spirituality in all of its various forms. Themes for the ten weeks include: What is Ecology?, What is Spirituality?, Symptoms of and responses to the ecological crisis, Dark Green Religion and Nature Spirituality, The Ecological Self, The Non-Human, Greening the Paranormal, Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Sacred Activism. Other module options on the MA include: 'Sacred Geography,' 'Sacred Skies,' 'Researching Contemporary Cosmologies,' 'Environmental Philosophy,' 'Cosmology Magic and Divination' and 'Religious Experience Today.' To find out more about the MA visit:

<https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/ma-ecology-spirituality/>

Student Feedback for 2020-21 Core Module

"I really enjoyed this module and the way it was delivered...It was great. Thank you!"

"I...was impressed by the quality and enthusiasm of the lecturers."

"Awesome !!"

"I loved this module. There was a wealth of information and resources provided...I feel as if the new knowledge I gained during these 10 weeks applies to nearly every situation in life; I am constantly thinking of what I learned...I learned so much while completing our assignments, and I found the feedback extremely helpful and constructive. I feel so fortunate to be a part of this MA programme! That feeling was more than confirmed while taking this course."

"This was an excellent course, taught with enthusiasm and to a very high academic standard. All the tutors and course leader were very inspiring and clear communicators...This course surpassed my expectations...Overall, excellent!"

Guest Lectures

For those who might be interested in following up on some of the ideas explored on the MA, we are very pleased to be able to share a number of guest lecture videos on our YouTube channel. To date we have lectures from: Dr. Andy Letcher on 'Ecology and Spirituality,' Dr. Renee E. Mazinegiizhigoo-kwe Bedard presenting her paper from this issue, Dr. Patrick Curry on 'Ethical Responses to the Ecological Crisis,' and Dr. Julia Wright on the concept of 'Subtle Agroecologies.' There will be more guest lectures to come in the future. All videos can be watched at the following link:

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL7FSKERTYn-dQ8zJRamd37tEgfaVnXCSE>

References

Jones, S. & Hunter, J. (2019). *One School One Planet Vol. 2: Permaculture, Education and Cultural Change*. Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant: Psychoid Books.