Healing Ecological and Spiritual Connections through Learning to be Non-Subjects

Charlotte Šunde

Abstract: This paper discusses three responses of cultures on the margins of the System, with a focus on colonised and indigenous peoples. In the third response, that of non-subjects, colonised people continue to draw strength from their own spiritual traditions and cultural patterns, rather than reacting to the System. The paper challenges the scientific and technological approach to the global environmental crisis, seeing it instead in terms of a cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity. Non-subjects are affirmed as a source of inspiration for healing ecological and spiritual connections and for encouraging all peoples to relate to nature with a more profound ecology — an ecology of understanding.

Key Words: colonialism; indigenous peoples; cultural identity; cultural diversity; environmental ethics; ecology; eco-spirituality

Tena tātou.
Ko Ruapēhu te maunga
Ko Whanganui te awa
Ko Whanganui te rohe
Ko Aotearoa te whenua
Ko NgaTi Tarārā te iwi o toku matua tane
Ko Charlotte Šunde toku ingoa
Tena koutou tena koutou
tena tātou katoa.

My opening words are in the language of the indigenous Māori people of my country, Aotearoa New Zealand. They introduce me in relation to the river, the mountain, and the people of this land with whom I share a sense of connection and belonging. Growing up in New Zealand has instilled in me a deep respect for and love of nature; in particular, the solitude of the mountains, forests, untamed rivers, and wild coastlines. I believe that nature is the dwelling place for wisdom; where the soul can be reinvigorated with the life force that emanates from Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother. I also believe that in healing ecological and spiritual connections, relationships between cultures and within communities can be strengthened. Thus, nature has the saving power to bring about cross-cultural understanding and peace.

A Meeting with Raimon Panikkar

In August 2005 I was privileged to visit Professor Father Raimon Panikkar at his home in Tavertet, Catalonia. Raimon Panikkar is a Catholic priest, a Hindu and a Buddhist, with doctoral degrees in philosophy, theology and science. His numerous publications have addressed some of the most pressing issues of our times, including peace, pluralism and
intrareligious dialogue.\(^1\) I asked Panikkar about something he had written in a paper for \textit{INTERculture} (the journal of the Intercultural Institute of Montréal) titled “The Discovery of the Metapolitical.”\(^2\) In the article, he expressed three responses to the System: the monk and the hermit who seek to escape the System and save their own souls; those who seek a solution through reaction and become what they hate, for as Panikkar says, “if one does not rise to a superior level, one does nothing else but perpetuate the law of \textit{karma};”\(^3\) and those who are “in the System without belonging to the System.”\(^4\) I asked him what he meant by the third. He replied that you must immerse yourself in Life: live and love your neighbours, cry with them and rejoice with them, be fully human. Yet, remain true to yourself; stand up for what you believe in even if it means going against the grain of what your neighbours say and do. Live a true life and use your gifts to do so. His message is simple yet eloquent: “The mystery of life lies, as if hidden, in any human activity.”\(^5\)

**Good, Bad and Non-Subjects**

A similar distinction was made by two Native American authors, Yvonne Dion-Buffalo and John Mohawk, who proposed that indigenous cultures have three choices in response to cultural colonisation and economic development: they can become good subjects, bad subjects, or non-subjects.\(^6\) I welcome this illuminating distinction and would like to explore it a little further, particularly with respect to the impact of development on the environment and local communities, and the ecological response to the global environmental crisis.

According to Dion-Buffalo and Mohawk, to be treated as \textit{good subjects}, colonised peoples must accept and adopt the laws and social conduct of the colonising powers. The enforcement of colonial rule in North America, Australia and New Zealand, for example, was initially justified in beliefs and actions that supported Social Darwinist ideas of European cultural superiority. Those ‘survival of the fittest’ beliefs held that indigenous peoples would be better off the sooner they assimilated into Western civilisation. Witness here the ‘stolen generation’ of Australian Aboriginal children who were forcibly – often violently – removed from their tribal communities to be re-socialised in Western institutions.

In contrast, to be considered as \textit{bad subjects}, colonised peoples rebel against the colonial powers and their “...alien rules but always revolting within the precepts of those rules.”\(^7\) A risk for those who take on the reactionary stance of the bad subject is that they

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\(^3\) Ibid, 40.

\(^4\) Panikkar explains: “One must be at the same time in the System without belonging to the System, ‘in the world, but not of the world,’ in polar tension with it, seeking to transform it, to persuade or convince it (in spite of the ambivalence of these words). A universal reconciliation is required — not a unilateral shrinkage.” Ibid, 30.

\(^5\) Ibid, 44.


\(^7\) Ibid. 35.
may come to be defined only in relation to the System instead of affirming and supporting initiatives that stem from their own unique cultural traditions. When bad subjects react to development projects or institutional regulations, they are often discredited by the mainstream media as ‘radicals’ (perhaps even terrorists!) without fair consideration of the historical oppression that may have prompted those reactions.

However, I wish to distinguish between the extreme reactions of violent militants and the protests of those indigenous peoples whose concerns are blatantly overlooked when decisions are made that benefit developers and corporations at the expense of local communities and local ecologies. When sacred places, livelihoods, or cultural and spiritual values are threatened, indigenous peoples may feel forced to rebel and, if there are no opportunities for dialogue and cross-cultural understanding, the ensuing confrontations may well escalate to previously unexpected and sometimes violent proportions. That is indeed what happened at Oka, Kanehsatake (near Montréal, Canada) in 1990 when the Mohawk First Nations’ people felt forced to take up arms to defend a stand of sacred pine trees that developers had been granted permission to fell and replace with a golf course.

The third response, that of non-subjects, differs from the other two in that colonised peoples neither struggle against the colonial powers nor accept their imposing conditions of domination and hierarchy but, instead, re-centre themselves to: “...[act] and [think] around discourses far removed from and unintelligible to the West.”8 In this response, indigenous peoples make a collective choice to continue to act and think in patterns that stem from within their own cultural and spiritual centres, using their positions at the margins of the System to their own advantage. Panikkar would term this approach an ontonomic alternative – neither an imposition nor a reaction, but a re-centering that stems from being oneself more deeply and more consciously.9

In response to development pressures, non-subjects may initiate grassroots movements or local projects that affirm their sense of community and connection to the environment on which they depend. In this way, communities simply continue doing what they have always done: they live and celebrate their lives in a relational harmony with nature. However, the magnitude and the global complexity of today’s social and environmental problems call for a set of skills and awareness different from that of any previous epoch. Today the stakes are high, for there exists the very real threat that cultures and communities will simply be swallowed up in a universal monoculture and that economic globalisation will exploit nature beyond its capacity for renewal.

Can there be a Way out of the Global Environmental Crisis?

The exploitation of natural resources is no longer restricted to local ecosystems but has resulted in what is widely referred to as the global environmental crisis. There is now irrefutable evidence that entire planetary life support systems are at risk and that critical ecological thresholds are in danger of being irreversibly crossed. Not only have many large development projects destroyed local communities who stand in the way of progress (e.g., in India, millions of tribal people have been relocated as part of the Narmada dam project), but in many cases they have also radically altered the natural environments on which so many local communities directly depend for their livelihoods. Today, modern technocracy has the ability to destroy the very well-spring of natural renewal.

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8 Ibid.
One response to the global environmental crisis, typical of scientists and resource managers, is a fixation on measuring limits to growth and regulating for a slower rate of resource exploitation: an approach that Panikkar dismisses as merely an ‘ecological interlude.’ This response argues for more effective management of the environment based on a stricter regulatory legislative framework that embraces more efficient technology, tighter environmental accountability and more socially equitable business praxis, and greater control by government institutions over natural resources development. Apparently, all this amounts to sustainable development that is supposedly not business-as-usual. Yet what this approach appears to be promoting is more business than was usual! Typically, what is now being sustained is not a sense of ‘sustainable communities’ and interdependency with nature (i.e. non-subjects) but, instead, an economically-driven desire for ‘sustained development’ that demands all peoples become good subjects or, at least, good consumers.

Sustainable development’ seems to have been widely adopted as an appeasing answer to questions that appear to have been forgotten or simply never considered. But, perhaps the rational call for tighter ecological control and more humanist administration might not provide a solution to the global environmental crisis? Panikkar challenges: “Are we going to continue to blindly rush to find solutions before having grasped the nature and gravity of the problems?” Unless there is fundamental questioning of the ideology of progress, leading to an equally fundamental reorientation in praxis, attempts at sustainable development may remain another farcical detour that only prolongs the agony. As Panikkar so clearly outlines, the problem is the refusal to question a fundamental attitude toward what is real:

It is the mentality of progress, one which leads to not solving problems – i.e. dissolving them – but to postponing them. Instead of provoking their dissolution, one seeks an antidote, a neutraliser, a stronger adversary in an advancement, in progress – never backtracking, into a salutary reflection, never asking oneself whether one should not stop, change direction, repent.

As economic progress rapidly approaches finite ecological limits, the search for a way out of the global environmental crisis is becoming increasingly urgent. But, it may no longer be appropriate to think that a way out can be created by more development, i.e. development aid and eco-efficient technology to ‘save humanity’ and ‘change the world’. Instead, what must now be acknowledged is that the global environmental crisis is not a temporary glitch in the development agenda that the best technological expertise can manage our way out of. Indeed, there is growing realisation that the same expert knowledge systems that warn of this impending crisis are also the sources of knowledge which led to it and are failing to reverse it. Those responses are typically motivated by a compulsive sense of having to do something. But it is precisely this active mode – the restless drive to progress, develop, advance to a more desirable state – that has caused, and continues to accelerate, the environmental crisis.

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10 Panikkar asserts: “We are learning that the being of the Earth is finite. Ecological consciousness arises when Man begins to discover that Nature is not just infinite passivity and that this planet is a limited vessel. So Man decides to be a more humane manager of Mother Earth and tries to deal more rationally with Nature, but this really amounts to only a tactical change: ‘Now our exploitation must be milder and more reasonable.’” R. Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, ed. S.T. Eastham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 43.

11 Ibid, 39.

12 Ibid, 33.
Finding Our Way In: Learning to be Non-Subjects

Seen from another perspective, the obsession with doing, which is so typical of the over-active Western ego, appears as yet another way of not facing ourselves, of avoiding the real challenge of finding a ‘way in’ – of entering a more truthful relationship with the world. While a ‘way out’ may be sought in actions to restore and protect ecological systems, this is insufficient if we wish to come to terms with the crisis. The so-called environmental crisis is not simply a crisis of the environment as some sort of ecological state separate to human reality. Rather, the crisis may be understood better when seen from the perspective of different cultures’ relationships with nature. The diagnosis of the global environmental crisis in terms that only acknowledge ecological imbalance avoids the questioning of deeper and darker issues inherent in the crisis facing all humanity today – that of a culture in crisis. The cultural crisis of modernity is, at root, spiritual.

Perhaps the real way out is really another way in: back into our true selves, our full humanness. For, when we encounter the extremes of the crisis, our powerlessness forces us to recognise our predicament and accept our collective responsibility in creating it. Such a recognition is a mix of psychology (discovery of the self) and ecology (‘inter-independence’ of the self with other selves). For many moderns living in a metropolis, deeply estranged from natural surroundings, the connection between healing their psyches and healing the planet may appear so remote as to be irrelevant. Yet, the understanding that human health and well-being are interdependent with the restoration of the health of the planet is not simply a conclusion: it must be felt if it is to lead to a real and lasting impact. Ecological restoration is only one part of healing the whole. At an essential level, the challenge for non-subjects is one of survival. Yet what point has mere physical existence without the ability to continue to express and celebrate cultural authenticity as a people?

Today it’s not just indigenous peoples and those on the economic margins of the System who are struggling to retain their own way of life; their traditions and cultural values. Their challenge is not only one of survival but it’s also about conviviality – something all cultures need to keep alive and continue to celebrate. Many diverse communities throughout the world continue to ‘develop’, but they do so in endogenous ways that draw inspiration from their own cultural and spiritual roots. Worldwide, non-subjects already celebrate the passing of the era of development. Their very lives stand as testimony to the passing era – the error! – of economics. I think here of conscious and courageous steps taken to bring the economic sphere – which threatens to subsume every other human and natural relationship – back into line with bio-physical and socio-cultural limits to growth. Inevitably, the exploitation of nature and the global environmental crisis affects everyone: both the colonised and the colonisers. Faced with this crisis, it is essential that we all embrace and affirm our ‘non-subjecthood’.

By simply being themselves, non-subjects alert us to the most vital calling with respect to the global environmental crisis – that of healing ecological and spiritual connections – and, in so doing, making ourselves whole. A deeper – and more practical – understanding of ecology will entail a more profound ‘ecology of understanding’, in all its human, cosmic and divine dimensions. It is a way to be fully alive to those interconnections: to revere the place in which our being dwells. This is the indwelling wisdom that will help us endure – reverent, respectful, and fully appreciative of all we have been blessed with – it is the wisdom of humility. Panikkar cites a challenging passage

from the Kena Upanishad to underscore this kind of simple, unprepossessing, ‘un-self-conscious’ wisdom that he calls “the new innocence”:

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\begin{align*}
yasyamatam & \text{ tasya matam} \\
matam & \text{ yasya na veda sah} \\
avijnatam & \text{ vijanatam} \\
vijnatam & \text{ avijanatam} \quad (\text{sans diacritics})
\end{align*}
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By whom it is unthought, by him it is thought;  
By whom it is thought, he does not see.  
Not understood by whom it is known;  
Understood by whom it is not known.\(^\text{14}\)

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**Author:** Charlotte Šunde completed her doctoral studies at Massey University in Palmerston North, New Zealand. Her dissertation is titled: The Water or the Wave: Toward a Cross-Cultural Ecology of Understanding for Environmental Practice. Charlotte is interested in how indigenous peoples relate to nature and spirituality and how they respond to the pressures of an encroaching global modernity. She has taught on the International Honors Program (an American university study abroad program) and at Massey University on sustainable development, ecology and conservation, and environmental planning issues. This paper is based on her presentation to the symposium, “Peace, Prayer and Unconditioned Love: The Works of Raimon Panikkar,” hosted by the Somaiya Institute in Mumbai, India, 20-23 December 2005.

**Email:** chsunde@gmail.com

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