

Nature-based spirituality on rise, from Darwin to 'Avatar'

And a special Jewish holiday helps young people connect to
Earth.

Jeff Brumley

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Yes, Bobby Drashin says, he wanted to help those nine children learn how to properly plant pansies last Sunday.

"It was more than just 'here's the stuff, dig a hole,'" Drashin said about the gardening lesson he gave the kids at the Chabad house in Ponte Vedra Beach.

But it was much more than just planting.

"There's something mystical going on," said Drashin, 62, who's become passionate about growing trees and plants since retiring from a career in advertising and journalism. "I tried to communicate that awe and mystery to the kids."

Tu B'Shvat, the Jewish holiday celebrating trees, was the occasion. The kids at Chabad at the Beaches were being taught all about the festival, which begins at nightfall today.

Drashin said the holiday reminds him that "you really see God in it when you're growing things."

As societies around the world have become more Earth-conscious in recent decades, holidays like Tu B'Shvat have become vehicles for communicating the sacred aspects of nature.

Those keeping tabs on the trend say the box office success of "Avatar," in which an alien race is connected physically and spiritually to their planet, shows that society is embracing nature-based spiritualities. The development is being greeted warmly or with caution, depending on the perspective.

Nature-related spiritualities have become increasingly widespread and influential as environmental consciousness has spread worldwide, said Bron Taylor, professor of religion and nature at the University of Florida.

The movement began with Darwin's theory of evolution, which for some proves a link between human beings and other species, said Taylor, author of the newly released "Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future."

"What we are finding increasingly is a blending of spiritualities of belonging and connection to nature with contemporary science," Taylor said.

The trend, while welcomed by some, raises concern for others who see it as an erosion of orthodox faith, Taylor said.

The Jacksonville-based Florida Baptist Witness newspaper published a column recently urging Christians to be aware of the "Animistic world view" contained in "Avatar."

"Nature is not a living entity in the way that is pictured in this movie," guest columnist Freddy Davis wrote. "Man does not have the kind of integral and interactive connection with nature in the way that this film depicts."

Taylor said religious conservatives are right to feel threatened by the movement, which is also behind a rediscovery of environmentally friendly themes within world religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Taylor said.

"There has been a great deal of soul-searching in the major traditions about environmental responsibility," Taylor said. "Some are turning quite green."

‘Touching God’

Nature and spirituality go hand in hand, said Louise Hardman, director of the Center for Prayer and Spirituality at St. John’s Episcopal Cathedral in Jacksonville.

Nature provides a setting conducive to looking deeply and quietly into things. That’s why people are drawn to parks, oceans, rivers and nature trails. In the Bible, Jesus is often seen retreating into nature to pray, she said.

It’s the same idea behind the gardens in and around the cathedral grounds. The small plots feature benches, plants and trees. One includes a stone fountain and another features a walking meditation space.

All of them offer staff and visitors a place to meditate and pray.

“There’s just something about being in that setting that through the surroundings you are touching God and God is touching you.”

For Hindus, that touching is quite literal, said Panditji Kadambi Srinathan, spiritual leader of the Hindu Society of Northeast Florida.

Trees, mountains, oceans, rivers and other forms of nature are the focus of ancient scriptures, mantras and ritual.

“The Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio and St. Johns rivers — these rivers are holy for these people,” he said.

Nature is imbued with religious meaning because God is manifested in the environment, the priest explained. “In the Hindu religion, nature is a form of God, no doubt about it.”

‘Humanity’s responsibility’

Tu B’Shvat is growing in focus at a time when Jewish schools and environmental groups think about, celebrate and promote larger ecological consciousness and causes, said Rabbi Rafi Cohen, second rabbi at the Jacksonville Jewish Center.

“Synagogues have started to put Tu B’Shvat on their agendas because of the impact human beings have on the environment,” he said.

Some youth groups hold Tu B’Shvat seders and lesson plans have been developed to explore what Scripture and tradition have to say about humanity’s responsibility for the environment, Cohen said.

“In the story of creation, you have God telling Adam to take care of what is his and what is around him in the Garden of Eden,” Cohen said. “If you don’t take care of it, it’s not going to be there for anybody else.”

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