

Watchfulness as Spiritual Ecology [1]

- Five watchfulness parables of the Christian gospels invite analogous contributions from 9 world faiths

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The Christian Gospels' command to "keep watch" is more than an end-of-times warning. It is a call to awaken – to the earth, to responsibility, to divine presence in creation itself. This essay contributes the Watchfulness Parables to the faith-inspired environmental care dialogue, inviting analogous reflection from their own scriptures by persons of various faiths in interfaith dialogue on vigilance as spiritual ecology.

This essay explores how the Gospel parables of watchfulness – those in which Jesus cautions his listeners to "stay awake" or "keep watch" – can be reinterpreted within today's interfaith context as a call to environmental responsibility.

While the parables traditionally concern readiness for the coming of the Son of Man, their imagery of vigilance, stewardship, and accountability speaks compellingly to the spiritual dimension of ecological care. Each story – the watchful servants, the faithful steward, the wise virgins, the entrusted talents, and the vigilant householder – reveals a theology of attention: an insistence that true faith is expressed through sustained awareness and reverent guardianship of what has been entrusted to us.

New Series:

Ecospirituality and Interbeing

The blog series "*Ecospirituality and Interbeing*" explores how spiritual outlooks, practices, and understanding, as well as everyday tenderness can reshape our relationship with the wider web of reality to which we belong. It weaves Christian and interfaith wisdom into a shift of consciousness. The opening post of this series, "*1. Watchfulness as Spiritual Ecology*", invites us to slow down, notice the subtle aliveness around us, and discover how attentive presence becomes a quietly transformative act, a healing participation - for the Earth, our neighbours, and our restless hearts.



Placed within a dialogue among world faiths, these parables offer a shared spiritual grammar for the ecological age. Watchfulness becomes not only an end-of-times or eschatological posture but an ethical discipline – an alert, compassionate participation in the renewal of creation.

In the Gospels, Jesus' repeated exhortation to "watch" or "stay awake" is not merely an injunction to anticipate a distant-future apocalypse. It is an ethical and spiritual summons to presence – to a state of attentive readiness in which love, justice, and stewardship are sustained moment by moment. The parables of the watchful servants, the faithful steward, the wise virgins, the entrusted talents, and the vigilant householder form a tapestry of moral alertness. In today's world, where environmental degradation and climate instability threaten the continuity of life itself, these parables speak with renewed urgency. They invite us to awaken from complacency – to discern the divine trust inherent in creation and to act as faithful stewards within it.

1. The Watchful Servants: Readiness as Reverence

Luke 12:35–40. The story: Jesus tells servants to stay dressed, keep lamps lit, and wait like those expecting their master returning from a wedding. Blessed are servants found alert when he arrives; the master will serve them himself. Be ready – the Son of Man comes at an unexpected hour.

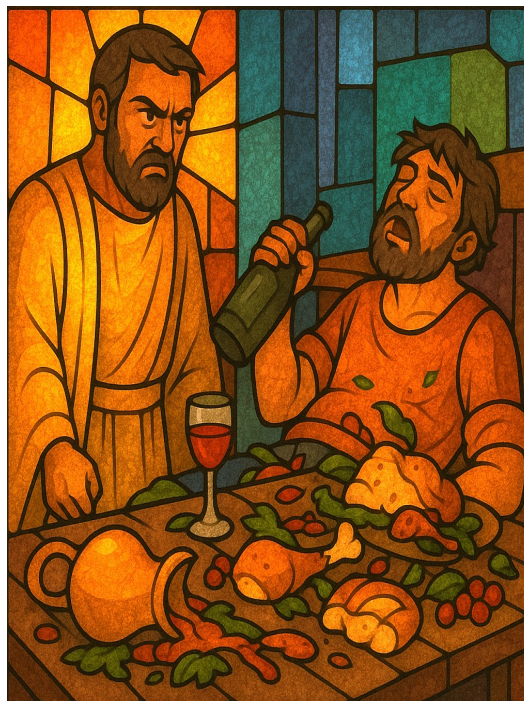
"Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning."
The image of servants waiting for their master's

return evokes readiness born of love, not fear. The lighted lamp is a symbol of consciousness – of a mind awake to divine presence.

In past popular Christian culture, many of us would have been tempted to continue this thought: “... the divine presence within our soul.” But more recently humanity has been painfully shocked into realising that only perspectives that are holistic enough can ever work. The lighted lamp is a symbol of consciousness – of a mind awake to divine presence within *everything*, within the unfolding of the ordinary. “Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made.” – *John 1:3*

In terms of environmental stewardship, this readiness can be understood as reverent attention to the living systems around us. This reverent attention is something we should recognise as native to a notion of *spiritual ecology*. The phrase spiritual ecology highlights the fact that the system we usually imagine when we speak of harmonious environmental relations is often incomplete. A truly holistic system – one that encompasses humanity, nature, and the practice of environmental management – must also include a dimension of reverent wakefulness within the human spirit.

To use a term borrowed from the venerable Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, such wakefulness might be called an aspect of *interbeing* – the interpenetrating inter-being of humans, animals, and the rest of all-that-is. There would likely be no serious objection from any major world faith, nor from indigenous spiritualities, to calling this addition a “spiritual” one. This is not arbitrary: it has become increasingly clear that without such factors, humanity risks sabotaging the very sustainability it now seeks to preserve.



The one who watches does not sleep through the subtle changes of season or the silent suffering of the earth. In many wisdom traditions – Buddhist *mindfulness*, Sufi remembrance (*dhikr*), or Hindu *darśan* – such wakefulness is the first step toward compassion. The watchful servant keeps the lamp burning not only for the absent master, but for the integrity of the household itself – the biosphere entrusted to human care.

2. The Faithful and Wise Servant: Accountability and Trust

Matthew 24:45–51. Jesus asks: Who is the faithful, wise servant a master puts in charge of his household to give them food? Blessed is that servant found doing so when the master returns; he'll be put over all possessions. But if an evil servant thinks his master delays, beats fellow servants, and feasts with drunkards, the master will come unexpectedly and severely punish him.

The servant “whom his master has set over his household” represents humanity’s delegated responsibility. The test is not ceremonial fidelity but ethical vigilance: to act with justice, thriftily, kindly – before being obliged to do so (that is, “in the master’s absence”). When the servant exploits the trust – beating others, eating and drinking like there’s no tomorrow – the trust collapses.

Environmental stewardship mirrors this dynamic. Nature, or creation, is not human property but divine trust (*amānah*, in Islamic thought). To abuse it for short-term gain is to act like the unfaithful servant, mistaking ownership for dominion. To serve faithfully means to care for soil, water, and air as

extensions of divine generosity. Every act of exploitation, every delay in repentance, becomes a form of spiritual sleep.

3. The Ten Virgins: Sustainable Readiness

Matthew 25:1–13. Ten virgins take lamps to meet a bridegroom at a wedding. Five wise virgins bring extra oil; five foolish ones don't. When the bridegroom delays, all sleep. At midnight, the bridegroom arrives. The foolish virgins' lamps go out; they seek oil. The wise virgins enter with the bridegroom; the door closes. The foolish return, but he says, "I don't know you."

Five wise bridesmaids bring extra oil; five do not. The parable contrasts foresight and negligence, long-term preparation versus impulsive, or obliged, immediacy. Oil, the fuel for the light of the oil-lamps, can stand as a metaphor for sustainable awareness – the interior resource that fuels ethical endurance and foresight.

Our planet has just passed the critical and feared 1.5 degree C of global warming, and humanity continues to muddle along, some, incredibly, even pushing in the wrong direction. In the meantime, the creaky door closes: rising sea levels, coastal flooding, extreme heatwaves, intense hurricanes and storms, mass species extinction, coral reef collapse, food insecurity, water scarcity, droughts, wildfires, crop failures, melting ice caps, permafrost melt, tropical disease spread, climate migration, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, economic devastation...

Applied to environmental care, the parable warns



against the illusion that last-minute solutions can offset decades of negligence. The wise ones practise sustainable watchfulness: conserving energy, anticipating crisis, and living within limits. Their lamp is both literal and moral – a symbol of ecological prudence grounded in inner discipline. “Watch therefore,” says Jesus, “for you know neither the day nor the hour.” In what we might call ecological time, that uncertainty is real: the threshold of irreversible loss is never precisely known.

4. The Talents and the Minas: Stewardship as Creative Fidelity

Matthew 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27. A master entrusts varying sums to his servants before leaving. Two servants invest and double their amounts; the third hides what he received. On return, the master rewards the investors and punishes the one who did nothing. In Luke, nobleman gives minas; servants trade, one hides it, and judgments are made based on results.

A mina was about three months' wages. In these parables, the master entrusts his property to servants before leaving. Faithfulness is measured not by passive preservation but by responsible creativity. The talents represent divine endowment – skills, resources, and ecosystems meant to be cultivated. Not buried, I am tempted to say, under concrete.

When viewed through a lens of spiritual ecology, this becomes a parable of creative sustainability. Humanity is called not to freeze nature in stasis but to nurture its fruitfulness in harmony with natural productivity. The one who buries his talent out of fear can symbolise a spirituality divorced from

the earth – pious yet unproductive. The faithful servants, by contrast, integrate prayer with enterprise, reverence with restoration. In them, divine trust expands into abundance for all.

5. The Watchful Homeowner: The Thief and the Climate Crisis

Matthew 24:42–44. Jesus warns to stay alert because no one knows when the Son of Man comes. If a homeowner knew when a thief would break in, he'd stay awake and prevent it. Since you don't know the hour, be ready always.

“If the householder had known at what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched.” This terse image speaks to the vulnerability of unguarded life. The thief may be taken as representing, for our generations, the suddenness of loss – the collapse that comes when attention lapses.

For our generation, the “thief in the night” may be the accelerating consequences of ecological neglect: flood, famine, extinction, the silent theft of the future. Watchfulness here implies systemic vigilance – scientific, ethical, and spiritual. It demands collective alertness across nations and faiths. The parable insists that the time to act is always now.

In Christianity, the arrival of the Son of Man is often taken as the flourishing of the divine in a person. It is a time of joyful fulfilment, but in a sense it is also a time of reckoning, since at that time the person will see more clearly, so it would make sense to get one's house in order before being faced with the truth about what we have been doing with ourselves and to ourselves.



Interfaith Resonances: A Shared Watchfulness

Across religions, the motif of wakefulness links spiritual awareness to environmental care, revealing a shared grammar of vigilance that transcends doctrinal boundaries. [2][3]

Buddhism

Buddhism offers perhaps the most explicit articulation of ecological watchfulness through its core practices. The awakened one (Buddha) embodies compassion grounded in perception of interdependence – the recognition that all phenomena arise in mutual causation. Buddhist “mindfulness” (“*sati*”) cultivates moment-by-moment awareness of one's actions and their ripple effects through the web of life, making environmental care inseparable from spiritual practice. The concept of “*pratītyasamutpāda*” (dependent origination) teaches that no being exists in isolation; thus harm to any part of the ecosystem reverberates through the whole.

The practice of “*mettā*” (loving-kindness) extends compassion not only to sentient beings but to forests, rivers, and the climate itself – what contemporary teachers call “*eco-dharma*”. This vigilant compassion transforms sustainability from obligation into reverent participation in the balance Buddha himself taught was essential to natural harmony. [2][4][5]

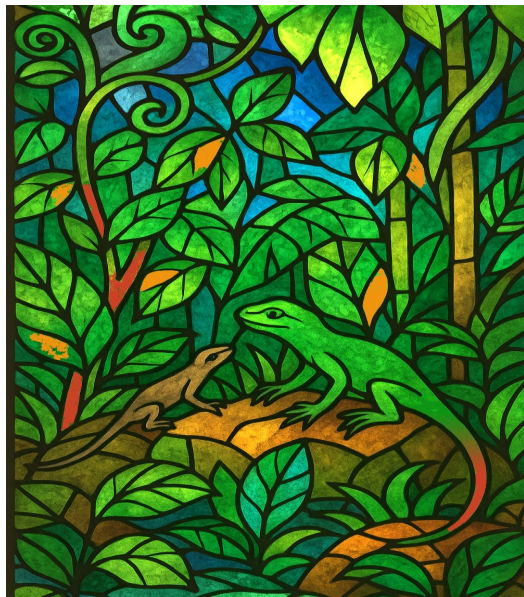
Islam

Islam provides a theological framework of watchfulness through the concept of “*khalifah*” – humanity as trustees of creation entrusted with divine “*amānah*” (trust). The Qur’anic command to “look to what you have sent ahead for tomorrow” (59:18) parallels Jesus’ summons to vigilance, explicitly linking present action to future consequences across generations. In Sufi mysticism, the practice of “*dhikr*” (remembrance) cultivates constant awareness of divine presence within all creation, awakening the heart from the sleep of the egoic “*nafs*”.

This remembrance becomes ecological when it recognizes that every tree, river, and creature glorifies the Creator – as the Qur’an declares, “There is not a thing but celebrates His praise” (17:44). To remain awake in “*dhikr*” is to hear this cosmic liturgy and to serve as its guardian. The Sufi path of “*muraqaba*” (vigilant self-observation) trains the spiritual practitioner to discern which impulses arise from separation and which from unity with the divine order – a watchfulness that extends naturally to caring for the earth as sacred trust.

Judaism

Judaism grounds environmental vigilance in the ancient role of “*shomer*” – the watchman who guards what is precious. The concept of “*shomer adamah*” (guardian of the earth) extends this vigilance to creation itself, recognizing humanity’s covenantal responsibility to protect what God has made. The practice of “*shmirat ha-guf*” (guarding the body) and “*bal tashchit*” (the prohibition



against wanton destruction) reflect a spirituality of attentive care that sees waste and exploitation as violations of divine trust. Jewish mysticism speaks of “*tikkun olam*” (repairing the world) as the sacred work of partnering with the Creator in sustaining creation – a task requiring constant watchfulness to the brokenness that needs mending.

The Sabbath itself can be understood as a weekly practice of environmental mindfulness: ceasing from extraction and production to simply “be” with creation in reverent rest, remembering that the earth belongs ultimately to God.

Hinduism

Hinduism offers multiple dimensions of ecological watchfulness. The discipline of “*seva*” (selfless service) transforms awareness into active care for creation, recognizing the divine presence (“*Brahman*”) permeating all existence. The practice of “*darśan*” – reverential seeing of the sacred – trains the devotee to perceive divinity not only in temple icons but in rivers (like the sacred Ganga), mountains (like Kailash), and the earth itself (*Bhumi Devi*, the Earth Goddess). The concept of “*ahimsa*” (non-violence, harmlessness), shared with Jainism, extends watchful compassion to all living beings, recognizing their intrinsic worth beyond human utility. The ecological implications of “*dharma*” (righteous duty) include responsibility for maintaining cosmic order (“*rita*”) – a task requiring vigilant attention to how one’s actions affect the delicate balance of natural systems. Hindu contemplative practice cultivates witness consciousness – the ability to observe without grasping, to participate without exploiting – a quality essential for sustainable relationship with the earth.

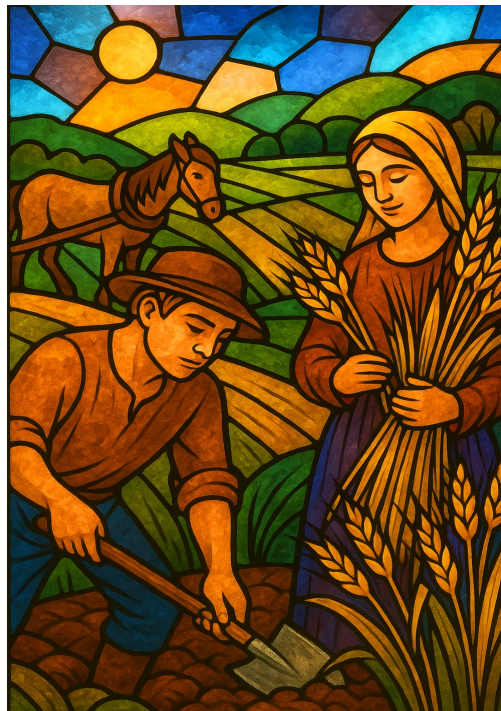
Sikhism

Sikhism articulates environmental watchfulness through the principle of “*Ik Onkar*” (the unity of all creation in the one Creator). In resonance, we might say, with Francis of Assisi, Guru Nanak’s teaching that “Air is Guru, Water is father, and the great Earth our mother” establishes nature itself as sacred family, deserving reverent protection. The Sikh concept of “*Hukam*” (divine order) calls believers to align their lives with the natural law woven into creation, recognizing that violation of ecological balance disrupts spiritual harmony.

The practice of “*seva*” (selfless service) in Sikhism extends explicitly to environmental stewardship – caring for the earth without expectation of personal benefit, as an expression of devotion to *Waheguru* (the Wonderful Lord). The principle of “*Sarbat da Bhala*” (working for the well-being of all) encompasses not only human welfare but the flourishing of all life forms and ecosystems. Sikh vigilance includes the practice of simple living and minimizing one’s ecological footprint – a form of spiritual discipline that recognizes excess consumption as a form of spiritual sleep in the sense of non-watchfulness. [3][6][7][8]

Jainism

Jainism elevates environmental watchfulness to an extraordinary degree through its principle of “*ahimsa*” (non-violence) extended to all living beings, including microorganisms. This radical compassion requires constant vigilance (“*apramāda*”) in daily life to avoid causing harm – a spiritual discipline that naturally produces minimal ecological



impact. The Jain concept of “*aparigraha*” (non-possession and non-attachment) directly addresses overconsumption, teaching that spiritual freedom comes through limiting one’s material footprint.

Jain monks practice extreme forms of ecological mindfulness, filtering water to avoid harming microbes and sweeping paths to avoid stepping on insects – acts that, while symbolic in their intensity, point to a profound recognition of life’s interconnectedness. The Jain doctrine of “*anekāntavāda*” (many-sidedness) encourages epistemological humility, recognizing that reality is complex and that human understanding is partial – an antidote to the hubris that drives environmental exploitation. This tradition demonstrates how sustained spiritual vigilance naturally produces ecological virtue. [9][10][11][12]

Taoism

Taoism approaches watchfulness through “*wu wei*” – action that flows spontaneously from alignment with the *Tao* (the Way) rather than from grasping will. This practice of effortless action requires deep attention to natural patterns and cycles, allowing one to work “with” rather than “against” the grain of reality. Taoist ecological ethics emphasize observing and learning from nature’s own wisdom rather than imposing human designs upon it – an approach with profound implications for sustainable development. The concept of “*pu*” (the uncarved block) celebrates simplicity and naturalness, warning against the complications that arise when humans interfere excessively with natural systems.

Taoist practice cultivates a form of vigilance that is simultaneously relaxed and alert – aware of the subtle movements of “qi” (life force) through landscape and season, responsive without forcing, protective without controlling. This paradoxical watchfulness of “non-doing” offers a counterpoint to the frantic activism that sometimes characterizes environmental movements, suggesting that effective care emerges from deep attunement to what the earth itself requires. [13][14][15]

Bahá’í Faith

The Bahá’í Faith grounds environmental watchfulness in the principle of the oneness of humanity and the interconnectedness of all creation. Bahá’í scriptures describe nature as an emanation of God’s will and a reflection of divine attributes, commanding reverence and care. The teaching that “the earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” establishes a theological foundation for global environmental cooperation, recognizing that ecological degradation respects no borders. Bahá’í environmental ethics emphasize “moderation” in all things – a form of disciplined watchfulness that avoids both exploitation and romantic primitivism, seeking instead a balanced relationship between human development and ecological integrity.

The faith teaches that humanity serves as trustee of the planet’s resources and biological diversity on behalf of future generations – a form of intergenerational vigilance that extends moral concern across time. Bahá’í practice integrates scientific understanding with spiritual values, recognizing that sustainable stewardship requires both empirical knowledge and ethical transformation rooted in



recognition of humanity’s spiritual purpose. [16][17][18][19][20]

Indigenous spiritualities

Indigenous spiritualities worldwide embody perhaps the most sustained tradition of environmental watchfulness, grounded in direct relationship with particular landscapes as sacred kin. Many indigenous worldviews do not distinguish between the spiritual and the ecological; land, water, and creatures are understood as relatives deserving respect and reciprocity. The Haudenosaunee concept of the Seventh Generation Principle exemplifies indigenous temporal vigilance – making decisions with awareness of their impact seven generations into the future. This intergenerational ethic parallels and extends the biblical notion of caring for what will nourish descendants yet unborn. Indigenous practices of “*kaitiakitanga*” (Māori guardianship) establish humans not as owners but as caretakers responsible for protecting ancestral lands for future generations.

Indigenous understanding approaches the earth as inherently sacred – not as resource or potential factory waiting to be used, but as holy ground to be honoured for its own sake. This perspective produces sustainability not as calculated strategy but as natural expression of reverence. Indigenous ecological knowledge, accumulated through millennia of attentive observation, demonstrates what sustained watchfulness yields: intimate understanding of seasonal patterns, species relationships, and the subtle indicators of ecosystem health. Sacred groves protected by communities like the Yoruba for thousands of years show measurably higher biodiversity than formal re-

serves – evidence that spiritual vigilance produces tangible ecological benefits. [21][22][23][24]

Such convergence across traditions suggests that watchfulness is a universal spiritual posture: the capacity to remain awake to both divine or transcendental presence and worldly responsibility. Whether articulated as Buddhist mindfulness, Islamic “dhikr”, Jewish “shemirah”, Hindu “*darśan*”, Sikh “*Hukam*”, Jain “*apramāda*”, Taoist attunement to the *Tao*, Bahá’í recognition of nature’s sacred character, or indigenous reciprocity with land-as-kin, this vigilant awareness forms the contemplative foundation for authentic environmental care. Each tradition offers its own vocabulary and practices, yet all converge in recognizing that healing the earth begins with awakening the human spirit from its sleep of separation. [4][5][6][22][2][3][9][13][16].[5][6][10][22][17][18][24][2][4][3][9][13][21][16]

The Inner Ecology: Awakening from the Sleep of the Ego

Yet the call to “keep watch” opens to a dimension broader than we usually think of as “ecological,” broader even than “human ecology.” One might call it spiritual ecology. The same blindness that exhausts the soil begins in the human soul or spirit. We must therefore include this interior dimension alongside the biological and physical concepts that usually shape our understanding of sustainability-based environmental stewardship, care, and management. What wounds the earth arises from the unexamined patterns of the small self – greed, grasping, and forgetfulness of interdependence. In the language of contemplative Christiani-



ty, this is the ego, small self, or the false self – the small self that mistakes itself for the whole. It is the centre of possessiveness, manipulation, and fear that obscures the divine likeness within the person, who was “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14) in “the secret place” (Psalm 139:15), the “image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26–27).

In Hindu philosophy, this same distortion is known as *ahamkāra* – the “I-maker” that mistakes transient identity for ultimate reality. In Buddhism, the very notion of a fixed self is seen as illusory; clinging to it generates the ignorance and craving that perpetuate suffering. In mainstream Islam, human beings are seen as *khalifah* – trustees of creation – responsible for acting with balance and justice within the divine order. In Sufi Islam, the egoic self is called the *nafs*, which must be disciplined and purified so that the heart may mirror divine light. Jewish mysticism speaks of the tension between *yetzer hara* (the impulse toward self-centredness) and *yetzer hatov* (the impulse toward good), a polarity calling for inner vigilance. In the Taoist vision, harmony flows through *wu-wei* – action that arises spontaneously from alignment with the *Tao* rather than from grasping will.

Each of these perspectives converges in the recognition that human awareness must awaken from the “sleep” of identification with the isolated self toward the “wakefulness” of participation in a greater Whole. The vigilance that Jesus is promoting can therefore be seen as twofold: it is ethical attention to the world and spiritual attention to the movements of the heart.

At this contemplative level, the teaching about watchfulness reaches beyond an end-of-times

perspective. It becomes a summons to presence – the realisation that the “coming of the Son of Man” also occurs in the here and now. To be spiritually asleep is to act without awareness of which impulses arise from the ego and which from the genuine self that abides in God. Such sleep blocks the channel through which grace flows. Grace flows within the person. Grace flows through humanity into creation – and, I believe, vice-versa.

Watchfulness, then, is the practice of inner discernment: a moment-by-moment noticing of whether one’s thoughts and actions spring from separation or communion. It is an interior vigilance that sustains an outer ecology. In other words, it is a component of “spiritual ecology”. When the human consciousness awakens from its dream of separateness, the earth itself begins to heal, for the same divine breath animates both soul and soil.

To be awake is to live in the radiant *now* where the true self and the living world meet – in the still transparency through which moves the ground of being, the Buddha-nature, the Shekhinah or Ein Sof, the Brahman or Ātman, or the Breath of God. Here, environmental care and spiritual awakening converge: both are acts of watchfully and reverently remembering who we are within the wholeness of creation and all-that-is.

Conclusion: Vigilance as Sacred Participation

The summons to 'watch' in the Christian Gospels is not just a distant-future expectation but participatory readiness in the present moment. To watch



is to notice and to tend. The vigilance that awaits the coming of the Lord is the same attentiveness that sustains forests, rivers, and the climate of the planet. The final judgment scenes that follow these parables – especially in Matthew 25 – link readiness directly with mercy: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the least of these.

In our century, the “least of these” includes the voiceless species, also those species that are highly emotional and intelligent; the impoverished ecosystems; and the generations yet unborn. Christian discipleship, reinterpreted through the ecological lens, becomes *an act of spiritual ecology*: to remain awake to God’s “return” in our selves and our timeline by remaining awake to the world that bears God’s breath. Across all wisdom traditions, spiritual practice reinterpreted through the ecological lens becomes this same act: to remain awake to ultimate reality—whether known as Brahman, Buddha-nature, the Tao, the Shekhinah, or Waheguru—by remaining awake to the living world that emanates from and embodies that sacred presence.

This recognition transcends doctrinal boundaries: spiritual vigilance, by whatever name and in whatever tradition, unites inner awakening with care for the living world as a single, indivisible practice.

To keep watch, then, is to live as if the lamp of creation were burning in our hands – and the oil of love were ours to conserve.

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References

[1] The term “spiritual ecology” is used here with awareness of its semantic stretch. In scientific usage, ecology denotes the study of relationships within biophysical systems; in human ecology, sociocultural factors and the dynamics of environmental management and stewardship are added. This essay extends the concept of ecosystem, ecology, and human ecology. It does so by including – together with the biophysical elements, the study, and the management – the dimension of wakefulness within human consciousness, all as part of one holistic system. Anything less, it seems to me, risks sabotaging sustainable environmental management. It is difficult to find an existing term that adequately encompasses such a system, so, for want of a better phrase, I use “spiritual ecology,” acknowledging that it considerably stretches the semantics – T.M, imagnetony@gmail.com

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