

# The Word on Edge

by Nate Downey

People are attracted to permaculture for many reasons. Sometimes it's the practical applications. Other times it's the search for cooperative community—a rare find today. Often it's a new or revived spiritual connection to the Earth that animates souls, stimulates thoughts and energizes actions. Usually it's all of the above. Rarely does someone cite *The Bible* as his/her inspiration to practice permaculture, *per se*. If we wish to dramatically reform the lifestyles, ethical beliefs and patterns of design that permeate modern culture, however, we might have more success in spreading the word, if we explore beneficial connections between our belief system and those of religions both large and small.

In addition to attracting more diverse people to the movement, this kind of exploration could strengthen our faith in permaculture's ethics, principles, and patterns as we see them recur in other traditions. It could also make us better teachers by opening our minds to belief systems that often seem antithetical to our goals—imagine the ecological and social functions served if every place of worship in New Mexico harvested water off its roof for gardens and orchards that would feed and instruct the homeless (not to mention the people with homes)! The possibilities are infinite.

The Christian concept of "the Word" and the permaculture concept of "the edge" serve as succinct philosophical foundations for their respective systems. If the Word is fiction, then Christianity is gibberish. If the concept of edge is useless, then permaculture is a lame joke.

One of the most commonly quoted renderings of *The Bible*, the King James Version, translates the opening verses of "The Gospel According to St. John (John)" as follows:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made. In him was life and the life was the light of men."

In the original Greek text, the word for "Word" is *logos* (and it is not capitalized). *Logos*, which is directly related to "logic", is often translated as "relationship". Since "John" is about God's relationship to humanity, (i.e., it is about Christ—the Son of God and a woman), it seems appropriate to translate *logos* as "relationship".

The translation's use of "him" is also open to question. In fact, in the Greek, it is *autou*, the neuter form of the third person pronoun; "it" would be a more exact translation for all three references to "him" in the text above.

Finally, the Greek word used for "men" is the plural of *anthropon*. Just as anthropology is the study male and female people, *autou* could easily be "humanity" rather than "men" in this case.

With these roots in mind, another way to read this opening verse is:

"In the beginning was the Relationship, and the Relationship was with God, and the Relationship was God.... All things were made by it; and without it nothing was made. In it was life and the life was the light of humanity."

Now, what is an "edge" but the manifestation of the relationship between two (or more) media<sup>1</sup>? It is the place where sky meets sea, slope meets stream, or starry night meets "rosy-fingered dawn" (Homer's *Iliad*). An edge, then, was created when "God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis ch.1, v.1). No matter what context, edge is always a place of great activity—where diverse life forms come to feed, to breed, to find shelter, and ultimately to help create the kind of productive stability that inspires healthy and efficient design. In "John", the relationship—the edge—is the place where humanity meets God. It is the primary relationship that makes everything. It is the cause of life, of consciousness and of morality—the light of humanity, (i.e., Jesus [hence, the validity of "him" in the King James Version]).

Like any edge, Jesus is always of the media that create him and somehow different from the media. He is always of God and of Mary, but he is always a being in his own right. Just as a coral reef is Earth and water—and, simultaneously, neither Earth nor water, but coral reef, provider of life, of strength and regenerative stability—Jesus provides strength and life-everlasting for Christians.

As a primary principle for life, edge could be as powerful in any "natural" system as any savior, or prophet, or guru might be in any religious system. Edge, then, is a powerful concept for permaculture, as a system for designing regenerative systems, but does it lack something that saviors, prophets and

gurus often have—namely, a sense of right and wrong?

Not at all. Permaculture's ethics, like Jesus' mission, are about saving the world by caring for the Earth (that gives us our daily bread), and by caring for people (perhaps, by giving them room in a manger?). But what does it mean to care? Care is about loving. Care is about nurturing.

Later in "John", Jesus tells his disciples to "love each other as I have loved you." This is God's "word" (hence, the validity of *logos* as "Word"; [perhaps the King James Version's capitalization effectively underscores the significance and complexity of *logos*]). Well, how did Jesus love people? He gave people a kind of permanence (in heaven). And he fed the multitudes with very few resources. It seems Jesus was quite the permaculturalist all along.

But what might God think of all this? Well, if God is "everything", It would not only be all things, but It would also be all of the edges of things, all the communities of edges—all of those healthy places where nature cycles, where extremes mingle, where guilds spill over into the future forever. It would be an infinitely stable God, but it would seem that Its job satisfaction might hinge on Its self-conscious creations' various abilities to know what is necessary for survival and, even more so, to understand the importance of directing as much energy as possible toward building healthy communities every step of the way—from soil, to street corner, to the affairs of state.

By doing our part to benefit life in all Its forms, we rise up out of the medium we call humanity and give something back to that which is ultimately and infinitely giving. In this way, we may even nurture God by practicing permaculture.

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<sup>1</sup> Here, "media" refers to states of being—not the news media.